a novel by Hannah Graham

# A TALE OF TWO SMART CITIES

Published 2026
by Books Inspire

ISBN: 9781067304997

© Copyright Christine Wardle 2026

All rights reserved.

Hannah Graham asserts her moral right to be identified as the author of this work under the terms of Section 96 of the Copyright Act of 1994 (New Zealand) All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be produced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Cover design Terry Dickinson

Edited by Terry Dickinson

*This book is dedicated to Terry, Talia, Ian, Elysia and Joely*

# CHAPTER 1

JAKE HAD NEVER known such darkness. The chamber had the thickness of a dungeon yet the heat of the Sahara. Hands restrained behind his back, he couldn't wipe away the beads of sweat streaming down his face. A pool must have formed on the concrete floor beneath him. His prison scrubs were soaked and clinging to his chest.

The silence was shattered by a loud metallic clank. Confinement, however long it had been, had sharpened every sense in his weakening body. A mechanical whir came, followed by the rumble of moving pulleys. Pale blue light crept through what he could now see was a huge metal door, slowly rising. The light made him squint.

He still had no clue where he was, but the room beyond looked like something out of an apocalyptic space film. Embedded in the walls were strips of cyan panel lighting, cutting through the darkness. A shove from the carbon hands of the bot guard thrust him forward. Unable to shield his eyes, he kept his head bowed.

The click of heels on concrete announced a slight woman, face powdered pale, hair scraped back, lips drawn in crimson that looked almost black in this light. Everything about her was immaculate, controlled, and dark. Her black skirt clung to her legs as she crossed the room, pivoted, then faced him. She tilted her head, pressed her lips together, and sighed.

"Ah, Jake."

He recognised the voice immediately. Andrea Cardijn, Secretary-General of the United Nations. His rebellion must have cut deeper than he'd realised for her to judge his fate in person.

Andrea's softened Southern Hemisphere accent filled the chamber. "Let me apologise for your prolonged confinement. There were just so many of you to process."

Jake's memory cast back months, maybe a year, he couldn't tell, he'd been in confinement so long. Tens of thousands flooded the streets to protest the implementation of the Global Federation. Placards waved high. *Fight for Democracy. Say No to Smart Cities.* There was a simple solution. If everyone shut down their smartphones, TVs and computers, the

entire system would collapse in less than a week. But people were too weak, too addicted to the bloody things.

The memory of the Solar Flare of 2028 entered his mind. It had fried Silicon Valley and plunged the world into chaos. People stumbled, fought, and looted retailers for the very technology the sun had rendered useless. When everything came back online, there was celebration. Life back to normal, or so they thought. He should have read the signs.

Andrea's voice brought him back to the present. "You know, Jake, I don't understand you or your followers."

He flared his nostrils. "You've kept the world under siege. We know the pandemic was a fake."

"Oh, Jake," she murmured, flattening her lips again. "We tire of this. It disheartens me to think our efforts to save humanity are met with such … disdain."

A bot emerged from the shadows and whispered something in her ear. She nodded slowly.

"We have come to a verdict," she said. "We've built a smart city in Northumberland, especially for people just like you. You and your fellow militants can live out your days there."

The thought of it filled him with dread. He'd heard of this. Aurelia-3. Permanent confinement inside what the Global Federation called a 'smart city', ruled by bots, stripped of freedom. Resisting from within was impossible. He knew what the plans were. These smart cities were springing up all over the world. But there were smart cities and 'smart cities', and where you were put depended entirely on how much you pretended to support the regime.

"I'd rather be abandoned in Polesia," he muttered.

Andrea snorted, then snickered. The nearby bot mirrored her reaction before speaking in a neutral, half-male, half-female tone. "My prediction is that you would not survive more than a week in that region."

Jake said nothing. Bots had no concept of nature. Their algorithms couldn't fathom the innate connection between human biology and greenery. His mind drifted to his university mentor, Kayla Greenwich, a

neurologist who once told him that every human response began in mitochondria, locked in constant battle against the stresses of a mismatched technological world.

The bot resumed, "My calculations show he would pose no additional threat. No human lifeforms have been detected in that area for over a year."

Odd. How could a bot be so sure? Polesia lay in the neutral zone established under the *Polesia Accord of 2031,* a peace pact signed in Vienna between the Russian Federation and the Global Territory. Officially, it was designated for ecological rewilding, but as Jake remembered from his geography classes, nature had already reclaimed it long before diplomacy caught up.

Andrea's face twisted briefly, then she regained composure. "Jake, the premise of our government has always been compassion. You'll own nothing and be happy." She hesitated. "It's bizarre that you'd reject a world where want no longer exists. Do you recall what I said at the World Health Summit, at the start of the pandemic? *Not one life, not one global citizen.*"

How did that go? The memory flashed. Bodies on stretchers, paramedics in full PPE, makeshift morgues in car parks, mass graves carved into scrubland. Eighty percent of the world gone in a year.

"One more won't hurt," he said through clenched teeth.

The bot interjected. "Actually, his reasoning is statistically sound. His release would have a negligible impact compared with pandemic fatalities. Furthermore, your credibility rating, currently fifty-four percent, would remain stable."

Andrea glared at the bot. It tilted its head. "Ma'am, I detect an irregularity in your usual demeanour. Under the *Human Stability Protocol*, defendants whose proposed circumstances present no threat to the Global Regime must have their wishes honoured. In fact, you authored that clause."

Andrea rolled her eyes. "I did indeed."

"Then may I suggest you grant the defendant's request?"

Her jaw tightened. "Will this go public?"

"Yes. The verdict is of public interest. Suppression would violate my compliance algorithm."

"Alright, alright," she snapped.

Jake's pulse hammered. His hands trembled in their restraints.

Andrea stepped closer, her voice low and venomously calm. "Do as you think best." She held his gaze, then smirked. "You'll own nothing and be happy." With a flick of her hand, she turned and left.

The bot signalled to its counterpart, whose metallic fingers clamped around Jake's shoulder. "The helicopter is awaiting you on the landing pad."

The seat at the back of the helicopter was luxury compared to the prison cell Jake had endured. Rotors thrummed through the metal frame, sending vibrations through his body. His wrists and ankles were clamped in shackles. A blindfold was pulled taut, plunging him back into black.

The rotors picked up speed, their whirling vibration tightening into rhythm. With a low, mechanical growl, the helicopter lifted clean from the pad. His stomach lurched from the sudden ascent. The pressure pushed him into the seat. Who was flying this thing, bot or human? Odds pointed to the former. The Global Federation had long since purged human pilots. The logic was bots didn't fatigue, didn't fear. Yet most crashes were algorithmic. Machines were predictable. Life was not. The smallest data conflict could send a craft spiralling out of the air. At least humans had instinct, fast, the gut-deep cognition, so ancient, it outran thought itself and cut in before reason even blinked.

He leaned his head back and became accustomed to the steady rhythm of the engines, enough to let his mind go back to before the uprising. *Kayla.* White light. The faint chemical sting of the research lab. As she looked up from the microscope, her skin looked pale under the fluorescent glare. Faint lines were beginning to edge the corners of her eyes, marks of someone who had already seen too much.

Jake had been twenty-two then, the youngest postgrad in the department with a head full of code and conviction. Together they'd been studying metabolic profiles, how cellular immunity shifted under electromagnetic stress. He'd written software that could map *Human*

*Interference Factors*, quantifying how urban frequencies, 6G channels, and subsonic fields altered biological resilience.

Kayla watched slide after slide. The patterns they saw were nothing short of impossible. Certain frequencies weakened immune response, while others were protective. When one particular sample collapsed under exposure, the cell membrane visibly disintegrated under the microscope. She'd froze mid-breath. Her eyes flicked up to the corners of the lab. Cameras were everywhere. She kept her thoughts behind perturbed eyes and powered down the scope.

Later, under a purple sky, she'd asked him to walk. They'd left the compound perimeter for dirt tracks edged with long grass. The city lights pulsed on the horizon. Kayla kept glancing over her shoulder, scanning the air for drones. When she spoke, her voice was low and taut.

"Jake, we can't publish that data."

"But it's verified," he said. "It's solid."

"That's the problem. If the Global Health Advancement Trust sees what we've found, it stops being medical. It becomes weaponry."

Kayla looked down the track, her breath unsteady. "They'll turn it on the people and call it a disease."

Her lips quivered, shallow and thin. "I'll alter the paper, misreport the frequencies, bury the connection."

That was the last he saw of her, but the memory still haunted him.

Hours flew by. Finally, a rhythmic jolt brought him back from his thoughts. The rotors deepened in tone. Wind pressed harder against the fuselage. A flat, genderless voice came from the cockpit.

"Prepare to disembark."

The restraints around his wrists snapped open. He revelled at the sudden freedom and tore the blindfold away. The helicopter tilted slightly as the rear hatch unlocked and lowered. Cold air knifed through the cabin. Grey light spilled in. Everything blurred for a second, then his vision took in the shifting mist and forest canopy stretching to the horizon. The sky above was pewter. He stood, shaky from confinement. His muscles trembled with the effort of standing. The wind swallowed all sound as the ladder uncoiled from the hatch. It swayed against the air.

"Exit now," the voice commanded.

The blast of outside air hit him full in the face, cold stabbed through his jeans, and his puffer jacket inflated in the wind, flapping violently behind him. He gripped the side rails, palms numbed by metal. One foot down. The helicopter lurched. Another step. His leg shook under its own weight. A crosswind slammed against the machine's flank, and his boot slipped on the rung. He dropped an inch before catching himself. His fingers burned from the sudden pull. He gasped then forced the next step. The climb stretched forever. Every rung cut the cold deeper into his hands. He gritted his teeth and kept lowering himself, feeling the sway of the craft above.

His boots finally hit mossy earth and his knees buckled. He steadied himself on the cool, damp ground. The smell of wet foliage, pine and fern, filled his nostrils. After months of being surrounded by concrete, metal and processed air, the real earth was overwhelming. He looked up. The helicopter was now high above him.

Suddenly a burst of white cleaved the overcast sky. Then came a loud boom. Fire ballooned and shards of debris scattered through the air. The shockwave thudded in his chest, forcing him backward. Heat flashed across his face, then vanished into wind and ash. He stared upward. The fireball disintegrated into a cloud of black smoke streaking the pale sky.

The silence that followed was intense. He sank slowly to the ground, cool moss beneath his fingertips. Smoke drifted lazily, and embers faded like dying stars. Polesia was supposed to be neutral. No weapons. No causes for vengeance. So, who would shoot down a Global Federation craft here? He lay back.

Somewhere distant, a bird called into the silence. Jake exhaled slowly. His breath turned to mist above him, then vanished. He closed his eyes, feeling the moss cradle his spine through his puffer jacket. If this was his last night on Earth, at least he would sleep under open sky.