



Zoë Beck
Paradise City
Thriller

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[...]

‘That says Arendt,’ Liina says and points at the handwritten note.

Özlem shrugs her shoulders.

‘Arendt?’ repeats Liina. ‘Well?’

She hesitates, shaking her head. ‘Department of Health? You reckon?’

‘Can you think of anyone else?’

Özlem takes her time. She walks over to the south-facing window. The sunlight is dulled by the tinted panes. The heat raging outside can’t be felt inside the hospital; the ban on air conditioning systems doesn’t apply here. ‘He didn’t say a word about it to me. Did he say anything to you?’

‘I really don’t know anything.’ Liina is lost in thought. The conversation that led to the argument, the conversations in the days before. Did they ever mention the Department of Health? Or Health Secretary Arendt?

Özlem brings her back to the present. ‘What is it? What are you thinking about? You remembered something, didn’t you?’

‘Hang on.’ She lifts a finger, thinking hard.

She went to his office, he had asked to talk to her. ‘Is it starting?’, she said, happy. You’ll go to the Uckermark tomorrow, I’ve sent you the details, you’ll need today to prepare and you can send the material to Ethan, he’ll do the article, okay? She looked up the material he had sent on her Smartcase: Jackals, dead woman, injured man. And then she started to shout.

He endured it, then matter-of-fact but as loud as her, he announced that he had his reasons. Cryptic and vague, like everything else he had said about the matter previously.

‘I know Arendt,’ Liina says. ‘We were in the same class, in school. We used to be friends.’

‘Oh. I didn’t know that.’

‘We haven’t had any contact in over ten years.’

Liina continues to flip through the notebook but can’t find any more references to Yassin or Simona Arendt. ‘I know her, so why didn’t he want me there?’

‘Maybe *because* you know her,’ says Özlem.

‘Yeah, maybe.’ She thinks about it. Yassin and Simona never really got along, that’s why they never met up, they only crossed paths at parties or events. But Yassin wouldn’t have forgotten who Simona was and who she is today. Was he planning on researching a story on the Department of Health? Did he think it would be too obvious if Liina went to see Simone after so many years, and started to ask questions?

Had he sensed that it would become dangerous and so he sent her away just in time?

But if he had suspected it, he should have protected himself. What wasn’t adding up here?

‘I don’t understand it,’ Liina says eventually. ‘Are there any stories on the topic at the moment?’

‘Not really.’ Özlem is hesitant. ‘Mandatory chip implants for everyone, not a big issue, but the most current one they have at the Department.’

‘Surely he would have said something if he was planning to work on something about that?’ Liina points out. ‘Is there anything that seems unremarkable, that’s overshadowed by the big issues?’

Özlem turns back to face her, leans against the windowsill, crosses her arms in front of her chest. ‘What if he didn’t actually respond to a message from the Department of Health but was investigating off his own bat, like he did in the good old times?’

In the good old times, when they still pursued investigative journalism. That’s how Özlem and Yassin’s agency got started. They uncovered scandals and intrigues. Now, first and foremost, they uncover fake news spread by the Government. Reacting instead of acting.

The private donations that Gallus receives for its work are usually anonymous and barely enough to maintain financing. Still, Özlem and Yassin don’t want to give up. It’s possible that Yassin had been looking for a major scoop because of that.

‘Health data,’ Liina says. ‘It’s being collected from everyone.’

‘That’s not news, and if you’re trying to get at the fact that they don’t comply with data protection directives, forget it. No one cares about that.’

‘Well, but once people understand the consequences, that could have ...’

‘There were rumours that the information gathered was sold by the Government to private research institutes abroad, but no one even batted an eyelid. No one. Believe me. Do you remember the campaign where people’s medical files were projected onto highrises to show what’s being collected and how it’s used? The consequences that could have?’

Liina shakes her head. ‘When was that?’

‘Two, three years ago?’

‘I was still in Finland at the time.’

Özlem leans back, shuffles around in her chair. ‘It was organised by students, they hacked into the healthcare system with our help – but that’s not official knowledge. Our name was never mentioned. Anyway, they picked out a few files as examples to show that the allocation of jobs and housing is based on medical records and that certain people are discriminated against because of it. There were barely any reactions to that either.’

‘So, we can’t suspect a scandal.’

‘I don’t know what Yassin thinks about it, but as far as I can see there’s nothing there. Maybe it doesn’t say Arendt but something else after all.’

Liina chucks the notebook to Özlem. It falls to the floor, Özlem picks it up. She flips through it, sighing, looks at the last page again. ‘You’re right, it does say Arendt. But we could both be wrong. Maybe there’s someone else with that name.’

‘Could his wife know anything?’

‘No.’ The reply comes so fast that Liina pricks up her ears.

‘No?’

‘I wouldn’t think so.’

‘But it’s a possibility.’

Özlem doesn’t say anything.

‘You have to talk to her, we won’t get anywhere here if you don’t.’ Since Özlem still doesn’t answer and keeps looking stubbornly out the window, Liina carries on talking. ‘Have you heard anything new about Kaya Erden?’

She receives a suspicious look from Özlem, who is obviously thinking about whether the change of subject is a trap. Eventually, she replies: ‘According to everything I’ve gathered from my sources she died around the same time that Yassin was pushed in front of the train.’

Nothing is making sense. Yassin hadn't even got started with his research properly. And who could have known whom he had hired? Unless he had been onto something for a while and had, without realising it, rocked the boat, left behind traces. In which case there should be evidence ...

'Have you looked at his cloud? Is there anything in there?' she asks Özlem.

'Encrypted. We can't get to it, but I put someone on it. Could be a while, though, before we get access.'

There is a knock on the door, a nurse enters. 'Miss Järvinen,' he pauses when he sees that she isn't alone.

'It's okay,' Liina says.

He approaches her bed and talks in a muffled voice. 'Your results are normal, looks like everything is fine.' He indicates her lower belly discreetly with his gaze.

'Does that mean I can discharge myself?'

'We recommend you stay another night, but it is only a recommendation. If you really wish to leave today, you have to leave KOS switched on and allow us direct access to your data, not just in case of an emergency.' He even lifts his index finger admonishingly. 'Otherwise, Dr. Mahjoub wishes me to inform you, you'll lose your insurance cover.'

'I'll do that.' Liina flips back her duvet. 'How do I give you access?'

'All you have to do is...' He points at her Smartcase. 'Could you open the feature in KOS...? I'll show you.' She hands him the Smartcase, he swipes and taps expertly and shows her where to confirm. Liina takes the device, allows the face recognition to scan her, and with that she has enabled the hospital to access her data.

'Well then.' She climbs off the bed carefully. 'Thanks a lot, and hopefully I won't see you again any time soon.'

The nurse laughs and leaves.

Liina adjusts her top and shorts, picks up the bag with yesterday's clothes.

'You're seriously leaving?' asks Özlem.

'Why not? You heard him.'

'To be honest, I thought that you'd get rid of it, seeing as you're already here.'

Liina opens the door to the bathroom to see if she has left anything behind.

'Hello?! I'm talking to you?'

She doesn't answer, closes the bathroom door, puts on her Bodybag and puts away the Smartcase.

'You're crazy.'

‘Possibly. The doctor said that I most likely won’t survive the birth.’ She doesn’t dare face Özlem when she gets out. ‘And now calm down. There’s still time. I don’t have to decide today.’

‘Why are you doing this to yourself? The earlier you get rid of it the better it is for your body.’ When Liina doesn’t react, she says: ‘You can’t seriously want this.’

‘Until yesterday, I didn’t.’

‘I see. And what has changed now?’

‘Yassin.’

Özlem doesn’t understand. ‘Alright, there’s a trend towards biological families at the moment, but do you actually think that you can do this? You’re not really the motherly type.’

Liina has been rummaging around in her Bodybag this whole time, pretending to look for something, or to check if everything is there. Of course everything is there. But it distracts her. It pushes away the tears. She turns her back to face Özlem. ‘What if he dies?’ she says as matter-of-factly as she can manage.

‘Wouldn’t that be one more reason to get rid of it?’

‘No, it wouldn’t!’

‘That’s a very biological point of view.’

‘Özlem!’ she cries and hits her hand against the wall. ‘Will you shut up!’

Özlem arches her eyebrows in surprise. ‘Hormones,’ is all she says.

Liina feels ashamed for her outburst. ‘I’m sorry. I can’t decide anything right now. Alright? I...’ She is at her wit’s end. ‘I’m leaving now. Ethan is waiting for input. I’ve got stuff to do.’

[...]

Just before the train pulls into Lahnstadt East and she has to change onto the tram, she pre-orders some pasta. It arrives at her flat the same time she does. Her parents aren’t there. It’s afternoon, they will probably come home in the evening, as they usually do, they like to stick to the day shift schedule of the Industrial Age. She sends them a voice message to let them know she is back and feeling well. She puts the pasta down on the kitchen counter. She gets her computer, reads through Ethan’s questions about her research, gathers the information he needs. Ethan wants to know: What is the dead woman’s name? What does the medical examiner say? Is it possible to interview the paramedics who attended the scene?

Even though she already told him that she hasn't gotten anywhere on these matters. But obviously he wants to make the story a bigger deal than it is. Liina decides to call him. On the one hand, it sounds exactly like the kind of boring work that could distract her from thinking about Yassin and about what is growing inside of her, at least for a while. On the other hand, she still doesn't feel up for this farce with the jackals.

Ethan picks up and says: 'Yes, I know. But I'm only forwarding you Yassin's notes on this. Speaking of which, you went to hospital too, didn't you? How are you doing?'

'And how come everyone already knows about this too?'

'Özlem said you had to go in for a check-up. I was getting impatient because you hadn't replied yet. Is everything alright?'

'Yes, couldn't be better. KOS was just acting up.'

'Ah, I see, and of course, someone comes to check on you right away. Not bad, really...'

'Not you too.'

Ethan laughs. 'I'm a big fan of our healthcare system! The Health Secretary is a lying bitch, just like everyone else, but in principle I think our medical care is great.'

He is right. About everything. It is a dilemma.

'Well, thanks for checking in, but as I said, I'm doing great. It just took forever. Any news on Yassin?'

'Özlem went to see him, but no chance, they're not letting her access to him. She talked to his wife. He's not conscious anyway. Artificial coma, I think.' The way he talks about it makes it clear that he doesn't have the faintest idea that Liina was at the same hospital and had already talked to Özlem.

'Let's keep our fingers crossed, then. Poor guy. I hope he makes it.' She manages to sound as though Yassin was a colleague just like any other. 'Fine, I'll ask around at the medical examiner's office. Potsdam or Rostock?'

Ethan exhales audibly. 'Rostock should be on the case. Berlin only does Berlin, Potsdam has a lot more area to cover in the south and west since the zoning reform... Yes, Rostock. Try there first.'

She wants to get the story over and done with quickly. So she calls the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Rostock, assumes the role of the zoologist once more, tells them the homepage address that was created specifically for the purpose of enabling her to feign competence on the fly for whoever she was talking to, and learns something she does not want to know.

‘A female body with bite marks?’ asks the voice at the other end of the line. The person who answers her call doesn’t give their name, only the department.

‘Presumed to be jackal bites, does that help?’

The voice laughs. ‘We’ve never had jackal bites here. When is this supposed to have happened?’

‘Three days ago.’

‘And the body is here already?’

‘I was told that it had been taken to the medical examiner’s office immediately. You are responsible for the area of Prenzlau and Uckermark, aren’t you?’

‘Yes... erm... But nothing arrived here.’

‘You mean, no jackal bites?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Oh. Well, thank you very much anyway for your...’

‘But if you’re asking me about animal bites in general, we get some of those every once in a while.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Bodies, badly bitten by animals. Don’t ask me about the details, I’d have to look them up. Probably wolves or dogs. Might be interesting for your research?’

Liina wasn’t expecting that. She gives them her e-mail address quickly. Thanks them once more and ends the conversation, baffled.

She had hoped for an uncomplicated conclusion but now all she has are new questions. Maybe none of this is relevant, she should leave it up to Ethan. Liina senses the fatigue in her body, notices her heart having to work harder. Right at that very moment, KOS beeps with an alert: ‘Please rest,’ suggests breathing exercises and shows the dosage for her next intake of medication.

[...]

Liina wakes up in the middle of the night feeling exhausted. She has slept longer than she wanted to. KOS shows no abnormalities. To be safe, she pricks her finger so that the Smartcase can analyse her blood. While she waits for the results, she gets up and quietly walks into the kitchen to get a drink. Her parents have left the windows and balcony doors open but the air hasn't cooled down much. Liina stands on the balcony, looks at the starry night sky, the quiet, dark city, the river flowing idly past the houses, the lake behind it, capturing the moonlight silently and calmly.

She thinks about Yassin, about the tubes and machines that ensure he stays alive, if he stays alive. The images that show him falling in front of the train are back in her head, as if she has only just seen them. And then she sees Kaya Erden's limp, dangling arm in her mind's eye. Both have been attacked on the same day, at the same time. One of them is dead, the other got pretty close. What connects them is that they were both working on the same story and no one knows what that story is about. No one but the people who want to see both of them dead. How did they learn about it? Liina looks at the clock: not even midnight yet. She goes back into the kitchen, puts down her glass, gets her Bodybag and Smartcase from her room and leaves the flat quietly.

Ethan and Özlem are in the office and they are not the only ones. Knowing what happened to Yassin and Kaya Erden is keeping everyone awake. All of them are either working on their current reports, or looking for clues.

'Would have been nice if someone had told me about this,' Liina says sulkily.

'Özlem told us you have to take it easy!' Ethan defends himself. Annoyed, Özlem avoids her gaze.

'Any idea yet?'

'We've got access to his cloud, at least to parts of it,' Ethan says. He is sitting at Özlem's desk, she's next to him. 'A few areas have additional encryption. We have a profile of his movements, not complete but better than nothing. We have nothing on Kaya, we've got two people working on it, trying to get access to her data somehow. Could be a while yet.'

'Someone like her knows what the police can do, what we can do and what the secret services can do. She knows it better than Yassin and all of us together.' Özlem gets up and stands behind Ethan as though she wants to emphasise, unnecessarily: She is the boss. He just carries out tasks.

Tonight all the doors stay open, even Özlem's office door is left ajar. Liina has never seen the agency's office like this. Normally, people here prevent anything from getting out. Or the wrong things from coming in. Twenty other people work here, and she thinks that all of them are here now. Twenty of the most tight-lipped people in the country, whose families, their loved ones, all think that their job consists of something else entirely.

'What can I do?' Liina asks.

Ethan turns around, exchanges a glance with Özlem. She nods. He turns back to address Liina. 'Maybe you could take a look at the movement profile with fresh eyes?'

She walks around the desk and stands next to her boss. The screens show the day before his accident (she's still calling it an accident). His Smartcase signal moved from his residence in Frankfurt-Wiesbaden to the agency at Theaterplatz and back. There was another, smaller loop in Wiesbaden. His jogging route, Liina assumes. If you exercise, you get bonus points for patient care and nicer housing.

'Can you superimpose the whole week?'

Ethan complies and reveals a shocking monotony. The individual days differ only slightly in the routes covered and the times. Even the jogging route is nearly identical. There are a few minor deviations, but the general structure remains the same.

'Another week.'

No surprises there. The life of a structured, disciplined, boring person.

'Did he program this? If he did, he really lacks any kind of imaginative power,' says Ethan and adds a third week.

'Or maybe not. It's the details that make every day different,' says Özlem.

'Okay. But he's having us on. This is not his real data.'

'He's not having *us* on.'

'You know what I mean.' He gets to work.

Finally, Liina manages to catch Özlem's gaze, but not for long. Özlem is clearly uncomfortable being in the same room as her.

'Liina, we'll keep trying to get to his real profile and the relevant data in his cloud. You could take a look at the reports surrounding the Department of Health. Olga has already started on that.'

'Olga is here?'

'Arrived this morning.'

Liina can't believe that Olga arrived in the morning. She usually sleeps in because she works through the night. She had probably been out all night, said hello and then went straight to bed. 'Where's she sitting?'

'In Yassin's office.'

She nods and goes over.

Even before she gets to the office thoughts of her and Yassin having sex, talking, arguing are flashing through her mind. Just like the day before yesterday. Has it really only been two days?

Then she stops in the doorway and sees Olga, who is staring at a screen and doesn't notice her or doesn't want to break her concentration. Liina watches her for a moment. Olga's hair has become greyer, she wears it shaved close to her head on the right side, on the other she has long dreadlocks. The short hair lets the tattoos shimmer through, a stylised reindeer, a snow crystal. Her right ear sports thirteen rings. She is wearing a short black linen dress, her bare feet in black linen sneakers, the laces untied. Olga, a woman in her mid-forties, data journalist, hacker, master of recognising patterns. And occasionally documentary filmmaker.

'Arrived tonight for the special occasion, I hear?' Liina asks.

Olga raises a hand briefly, wanting to finish something, then she looks up. 'Ah!' She smiles, gets up and hugs Liina. 'Of course, how could I not.'

'Got wet feet yet?'

At the beginning of the year, the North Sea coastline between Oldenburg and Bremen was evacuated completely because the winter storms, which had been starting in autumn for years, destroyed vast stretches of the countryside with their severe storm tides, and the damage couldn't be repaired for a long time.

'Rostock is far from going under. At the Baltic Sea it's harmless in comparison. You should come and visit me!'

'Sure!' They both know that she is lying. They smile anyway.

'Take a seat next to me,' Olga says. 'You can help me.'

'That's why I'm here.'

Olga summarises what she has done so far. 'I've analysed the social media activity of everyone who works for the Department of Health. Both their private accounts as well as their official ones. Also, all press releases and other announcements from the Department as well as the subject areas of the lobby groups. Learned some funny things – the trend for bicycles in April and May, for example, can be traced back to meetings with these lobbyists.' She quickly shows Liina a few photos. 'And funnily enough, when you look at the private activities of the

employees, you won't see that anyone there used their bike more than usual, or even uses it at all.' She laughs. 'But that's not what we're looking for, is it?'

'Keep going,' Liina says and tries in vain to understand the data sets Olga is zooming through.

'Okay, the current topics are: Revising the points system. Blood alcohol tests three times a day, urine tests every morning, and if everything comes out clean the amount of points you can gain is limitless. Single rooms for everyone!' She laughs again. 'Seriously, there are a few gnarly decisions in here. There'll be complete control of your diet because your shopping is compared to KOS.'

'I'm more surprised that they're not doing that already.'

'Well, it takes time to program it and make it run smoothly. And then there's this top priority: Creating a genetic database. That would go far beyond the blood and tissue databases.'

Liina nods. 'All these topics that are accepted rather phlegmatically.'

'Which is the real scandal. I don't see a point of attack there. Even if Yassin had found out anything, passing on data to other countries, for example, selling data to international pharmaceutical companies – the Department wouldn't have cared, because about two thirds of the population don't care.'

Liina nods. 'Well, what would the people care about then?'

Olga shrugs her shoulders and leans back in Yassin's chair. 'We have everything. We really don't have to care about most things.'

For a second, Liina almost believes her. Then she has to laugh. She realises that she hasn't laughed this freely in a long time. And how much she has missed Olga. 'Go on, tell me.'

'Having children is still a sensitive subject.' The fact that abortions are a legal procedure and can be carried out without any restrictions, could only be pushed through with the threat of a one-child policy. The population in Europe had decreased by almost forty percent due to measles outbreaks and a resistance to antibiotics, but in order to keep the ecosystem stable the birth rates weren't allowed to increase too much since effective antibiotics were developed and the measles was eradicated with a strict policy of mandatory vaccinations. 'Most people still care to burden themselves with their offspring voluntarily and limit their personal freedom even more.' Olga doesn't notice that Liina isn't laughing with her this time. 'And then there is cloning. Still causes a lot of fear. Cloned people are a horror scenario and science has nothing calming to counteract that. What else? Genetic engineering in cases of *in vitro* fertilization, that's as emotionally charged as cloning, on the one hand, and on the other, it's becoming more and more popular.'

‘And is there anything that Yassin could have stumbled upon?’

‘No idea. I haven’t found anything concrete yet.’

‘Nothing concrete, but...?’

‘I need a bite to eat.’ Olga gets up and looks at Liina expectantly. ‘Want to come?’

‘Where to?’

‘You tell me, it’s your city.’

[...]