

# ARCHITECT OF COURAGE

by Victoria Weisfeld

## EXCERPT

### Chapter 1

When Manhattan architect Archer Landis let himself into Julia's apartment, he was surprised to find it dark. He strode down the short entry hall to the living room and felt for the light switch. The heavy draperies were closed, and thick blackness pressed in on him. A trace of her perfume teased the air, along with another smell—elemental, evoking . . . something.

"Julia? I'm here."

For Landis, this second-floor apartment was a treasure-house, its sangria-colored walls crowded with portraits and huge mirrors with carved, gold-painted frames. Deeply fringed paisley shawls draped chaises upholstered in carmine velvet. It would require all his French curves and a full palette of rose and violet pigments to reproduce the effect.

His glance traveled the room, skipping past something he didn't want to see, something his brain didn't at first accept that he *had* seen, until it reached the farthest corner and unwillingly returned to settle on the room's one discordant object: Julia sprawled on a chaise, the white lace ruffle of her shirtfront soaked with blood.

For a moment, Landis's heart stopped. He stood frozen at the edge of the room, yet he saw himself rushing to her, kissing her hands, grabbing her shoulders and shaking her, soothing her, calling her. She didn't move, and neither did he. He choked before he could create a single word.

Now he identified the strange smell. Blood. Blood that had oozed from a huge wound in her chest. Blood that drenched the crocheted lace of her shirt and darkened the crimson velvet of the chaise. A stray drop, spattering upward, had left a dot on her chin. He took two halting steps toward her.

Shouldn't he wipe off that spot? Couldn't he put all the blood back? Couldn't he press his hands on her ravaged chest and seal life inside? Her dark eyes, wide open and fixed, gazed blankly toward him and told him he could not.

He stepped backward to sag against the wall and slowly collapsed to the floor. His head drooped. He sobbed into the hands that had held her hands, caressed her face. Hands that should be holding her now. When he raised his head, tears blurred the contours of her pale face, the empty black pools of her eyes. All else washed by a tide of red.

He couldn't bear to think about the terror of her final moments. What was the last thing she did? What did she see? *Who did she see? Who?* A dark cloud of vengeance rose in him like smoke from a bonfire. He had to call the police, make them come immediately. Set the hounds of the law on the scent of her killer.

*Yet.*

Yet he shouldn't—he couldn't—be found in her apartment. His presence would damage his reputation and ruin Julia's. The lie he'd told his wife Marjorie about his evening dinner plans rolled like a boulder through his tumbling thoughts. His associates, his team, the people he spent every day with, considered Julia a colleague, and they'd never trust him again. He wasn't on easy terms with betrayal—not enough practice. Nor was he clever with lies and excuses. He couldn't conjure up a plausible reason for being in her apartment when he was so clearly supposed to be elsewhere.

He had to leave, to escape the awful sight of Julia's body, the awful reality of it. *What did I touch?* He scanned the room. At one time or another, he'd touched furniture, switches, faucets, dishes, glassware, books, and more. He'd have to explain those fingerprints, eventually.

Evidence of *this* visit, though, could disappear. If only he'd never come tonight; if only he'd never made this awful discovery. He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his presence away, scrubbing around the light switch. His back was to her, his eyes were squeezed shut, and still he saw Julia's broken body.

With a final look at the face he loved, Landis promised her she wouldn't be alone and in the dark for long and retreated down the hall. He wrapped his hand in the handkerchief, quietly opened the apartment door, wiped the outside knob, and hurried downstairs to the lobby.

He hadn't seen any of her neighbors when he came in, would one of them be there now and see him leave? He ran his hand through his long and distinctive white hair, straightened the collar of his suit, and paused to compose his face. No, the lobby was clear. He exhaled.

He'd walk east to Eighth Avenue to hail an uptown cab. A few cars were parked on the opposite side of the street, and he didn't see any pedestrians. *Except there.* Up ahead, across the street, an elderly woman turned the corner, heading his way, led by yappy wirehaired terrier. Tall as he was, Landis was hard to miss. The dog looked straight at him, barking furiously.

"Toby!" the woman admonished in her brittle voice. Her arm strained forward with the pull of the leash. Her attention was on the dog, and Landis still hoped he could slip away.

"Toby!" she screamed. "Come back!" Dragging his leash, Toby darted between parked cars. An SUV hissed toward them from the next corner.

Landis stepped into the street and waved both arms. The SUV squealed to a stop. He scooped Toby up and handed him to his quivering mistress. "No harm done."

She hugged the rambunctious terrier, a little plastic bag of poop flapping in her hand. "Toby, you naughty boy. You mustn't run from Mama like that."

Landis edged away, but she wasn't finished thanking him. She opened her handbag.

*Was she fumbling for a tip, for Christ's sake?* No, she pulled out a tissue and wiped her eyes. He put a few feet between them. "Now, Toby, you be good," and to her, "Are you all right now?"

"We're fine. You go on. You've done your good deed for this evening."

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All the way up Eighth Avenue Landis huddled in a corner of the sour-smelling cab, breathing hard. The swarthy driver stared at him in the rearview mirror. Under the man's suspicious gaze, he returned his phone to his pocket instead of calling 911.

The sticky breath of the early June night blew in through the cab's half-open window. This ride felt completely different from the one he'd taken—what? forty minutes before?—when he'd slipped out of the Plaza Hotel, past the line of malodorous horse-drawn carriages waiting for tourists, and toward the honking melee of Fifth Avenue. There, he hailed a bright yellow cab and climbed inside, full of thoughts of Julia. A buzzing energy had him drumming the leather seats, willing the traffic lights ahead to turn green.

Off the rails, heading straight into the abyss.

Before that earlier ride, Landis believed himself securely moving forward, on track and at speed, in full control of his considerable professional talents and personal powers. He'd worked the room at the Plaza, a reception for his peers, the city's most talented magicians in glass and steel and stone.

They sought him out, and he laughed with them, shook hands and patted backs, accompanying his good cheer with the convivial clink of ice in a glass of single malt. He bear-hugged the evening's honoree, Phil Prinz. He brushed off praise and bestowed it on others. Accomplishment haloed him, and because he was generous in his success, it did not breed resentment, but drew the light to him.

He made sure everyone would remember greeting him, touching him. When the noisy crowd became sufficiently dense, he'd made his discreet escape. Now his reentry into that world had to be just as smooth.

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The dinner was under way when he arrived, and he had to find his seat, leaving no time to place the call right then. He'd missed the salad.

"What's wrong, Arch? Where've you been?" a colleague asked. "You look awful."

Landis adjusted the knot of his tie. "Touch of a bug. Killed my appetite." He cringed at how easily the lie came. It was what he'd planned to say if anyone asked why he didn't appear at dinner. At least now they wouldn't question it if he jumped up later and went out for a few minutes. He'd call the police from a hotel phone, not his cell. Much better. He'd do it between the main course and dessert.

The men at the table commiserated. "It's going around," one said. "Three of my people are out."

As his tablemates ate and shared shoptalk, Landis frowned at his plate. *Who would kill Julia? What possible reason could there be?* Nothing in her world explained it. Her working life was his office, and her social life was him. He was confident of that, of her. *Was it a random, senseless, act? Or did some secret peril lurk close by?* If so, it could be as close as his own skin.

When the servers came to clear, the food on his plate was rearranged but uneaten. The evening's introductions and accolades began. The words of the welcoming speeches jumbled meaninglessly. He rested his head on his hand and mapped out what he'd say to the police. Dial 911, give the address, disconnect. *Don't answer questions. Don't give them time to ask anything. How long does it take to trace a call?* He'd stay on the phone for seconds. Only the facts, no context. Hang up.

Here came dessert. He'd lost another chance to make his call. The server set a collapsing strawberry pavlova in front of him. Frothy white meringue shell, a lake of red juice. Landis's stomach turned over. He pushed the dish away and took a great gulp from his water glass.

Now he was stuck. It would be too awkward to step out during the commendations, especially since Landis's long-time friend and fellow Yale alumnus, Phil Prinz, was receiving the main prize—the 2011 Calder Award for Integrity in Architectural Practice. Called to the lectern, Phil's first words were to ask the award's previous recipients to stand. Landis wobbled to his feet, waved—*my God, did I just smile?* His other hand gripped the rim of the table so tightly he could hardly pry his fingers loose.

Prinz's high-minded theme was courage: physical, mental, emotional, and moral. He might have been speaking directly to Landis, chiding him.

Physical courage, Prinz said, is the kind people think of most often, the kind that lets us ski black diamond runs, compete in marathons, and drive the Jersey Turnpike. A misstep can end with a trip to the emergency department, but any physical damage is visible, treatable, and often heals completely.

*Not when a hole has been blown through your chest.* Landis fingered the stem of his water glass.

Mental courage—being brave enough to rally your mental faculties, make critical decisions, and not be paralyzed into inaction—demands more, Prinz said, citing race car drivers and soldiers in battle. Landis saw himself in Julia's apartment, stunned, panicked, choking on tears. *Direct hit.*

“Emotional courage is when you put your inner self, your core being, in harm's way, when you risk sustaining wounds people may never see and that may never heal, when you face truths you'd rather ignore. It's when you risk the very essence of yourself.”

Of course Landis had initial reservations about an affair with one of his employees; of course he'd worried his wife Marjorie might discover it. But he'd left those concerns behind. Instead, he'd followed the single shiny track that appeared in front of him: he fell in love. Unexpected, unlikely, unwise. Julia had opened his heart, revealed to him his true self.

Finally, Prinz said, there's moral courage—when you stick your neck out for some cause not your own simply because it's the right thing to do.

The white noise inside Landis's head drowned out the rest. Although the speech wasn't especially profound, it earned a standing ovation that precipitated a rush for the doors. Clamoring colleagues swarmed the lobby. A discreet telephone call was impossible.

Moment after moment, he put off calling the police until not calling became inevitable. He simply could not speak the words that would make Julia's death real, that would pierce his chest like arrows. His life had a hole in the middle of it, and he felt its razor edges. Unless he grabbed onto something, he would fall through. What he clutched tight was his shameful secret.

## Chapter 2

Landis's penthouse with its dramatic window walls was an aerie of straight lines and right angles. The sparsely furnished interior was gray and white—his wife's taste a stark contrast to Julia's. Only the Miró hanging on a far wall provided a restrained confetti of color. He was too drained to appreciate the apartment's muted comforts, however; wherever he looked, he saw the red blur of Julia's apartment.

His son lay in wait. At age 28, Hawkins Landis was bent on living in comfort while he launched his own architectural career at his own leisurely pace. After spending a couple of years knocking around Europe's capitals, he'd returned to the States in March, three long months ago. He manipulated his father into hiring him and took up residence in his old room. Tonight, Landis was hardly in the door when Hawk resumed an argument from earlier that evening.

"While you were at Phil's dinner, I thought more about my situation, and all I can say is you don't get it, Dad. No matter what I do at Landis + Porter, people will knock me down. They'll say I'm nothing without your help. It doesn't matter how good I am."

"That's baloney, and you know it." Landis desperately wanted not to have this conversation. Not tonight. His head was pounding. "The projects will speak for themselves. Eventually."

"I'm not designing real buildings. I'm doing scut work. The other associates have real projects."

Hawk's whining tone hit the sensitized spot in Landis's brain like a dentist's drill. "For Christ's sake, you're starting out. My lead people—Ty, Charleston, Julia"—he caught his breath—"have been with me for years. Always up for any assignment. Pay your dues, Hawk." His throat tightened; he needed air. He reached up to loosen his tie.

"Not Julia. She's new." When Landis didn't answer, Hawk said, "You think they're so perfect. Well, they're not. They get special treatment. I've seen it. You're not giving me a chance."

Landis glared. "I'm confused. You say people will criticize you because they'll think I gave you unfair advantages, and now you're asking for one?" With a grunt, he pulled off the tie and flung it on the sofa.

"That's so like you. You make everything my fault. I'm not important to you."

"Now, hold on—" His voice logjammed with jostling emotions, but Hawk cut him off.

“I need to be where I have friends.”

Marjorie walked into the living room. A long knit skirt and tunic in some pale color draped her thin frame. “What’s going on? Archer? What did you say to him?” She walked to Hawk’s side and put her arm around their son’s waist. “What’s happening here?”

Landis waited for Hawk to explain himself, knowing his own version of the argument would make matters worse. Hawk jerked away from her and left the room. At the end of the hall, the bathroom door slammed. Landis winced.

Throat aching, he said, “Don’t ask me.”

“Is he unhappy? At work?”

“He wants bigger projects, but he’s a neophyte.”

“Well, of course he’s ambitious, he’s your son.” It didn’t sound like a compliment.

“But he doesn’t want people to think he’s had any special breaks. He gets the same treatment all the associates do.” All except Julia, exceptional Julia.

“But he’s your son. That *should* be special.”

“Marjorie, think about it. That would be the worst thing for him.” He put his hand to his forehead. “To tell you the truth, I wish he’d move out. When is he ever in a good mood?”

“How can you say that? I like having him here. We talk. We have good conversations. The minute you come home, an argument starts.”

“His constant hostility is my fault?”

“Anyway, he can’t afford a decent place. This is where he belongs. I’d worry about him if he weren’t here.”

“That was a long time ago, Marjorie. He’s had a lot of help since then.” *Since his teenage rebellion. His suicide attempts. His acting out.* Landis had never taken any of that as seriously as she had.

“He’s right, you know—you shouldn’t treat the others better than you do him.”

“What others? What the hell—”

“Hawk says they’re out to get him, that they’re nothing but back-stabbing sycophants.” Her voice rose, betraying her anxiety the way it did every time she had to defend Hawk.

“That’s not true, Marjorie. They’ve been nothing but helpful to him. They’ve never said a word—not one hint of criticism.”



“They’re not stupid. There’s more than one way for them—and you—to undermine a young person with talent and chip away at his confidence.”

“I don’t know what he’s told you, but neither of you knows what you’re talking about.”

“Hawk knows, and that’s why he’s threatening to leave you.”

“That’s what he meant by being somewhere he has friends? He would leave Landis + Porter?”

“That’s right,” said Hawk, strolling back into the room. “Starting Monday, I’ll be working at BLK. Ivan Karsch made me a very generous offer.”

“Oh.” Marjorie slumped to the sofa, stunned.

“BLK?” Landis snorted. “According to reputation, they eat their young. And Ivan Karsch, who sued L + P a couple years ago? Great role model.” He stood behind Marjorie and grabbed the back of the sofa. “So this is decided? And tonight’s the first I hear about it?”