

THE ARCHITECTURE OF TRUST

When your life burns down, you tend to build the next one
out of concrete and tempered glass.

by Avi Virabean

A Note from the Author

*Thank you for opening these first chapters of **The Architecture of Trust**.*

The story ahead is about boundaries, second chances, and the quiet bravery it takes to let down your guard after being hurt. Whether you are reading this with your morning coffee or late at night with a glass of wine, I hope Mark and Leah's journey finds a small place in your heart.

Please note: This is an unedited advance preview. As the manuscript goes through final editing, minor details and scenes may evolve before the official release.

Warmly, Avi

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Chapter 1 - The Clean Architecture - Mark

I watched her from the hallway for a minute before saying anything. She was standing at the kitchen island, aggressively stirring some kind of green powder into a glass of water. What is she doing?

"Is that some sort of green healthy shake?" I asked.

She stopped stirring. She looked me up and down, her eyes settling on my plain gray t-shirt. "You're definitely older than you look," she said. "It's a matcha."

I walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge. I looked at her face under the bright overhead lights. How old is she? I tried to guess. Definitely a 23-24.

"If you stay longer I can make you a proper breakfast." I tapped a carton of eggs on the shelf.

She picked up her phone, glanced at a notification, then looked back at me and wrinkled her nose. "Ew, that sound so cringe, like you're my dad or something. I'm not into that. And anyway I should get going, I have to get to the university in one hour."

She grabbed her coat, threw it over her shoulder, and walked down the hall without waiting for me.

The front door slammed shut. The smart lock clicked once, twice, and then nothing.

Alina... or was it Adina? She had left her half-drunk matcha on the kitchen island. It looked like a poison of sorts. I picked up the glass, dumped the thick green sludge down the sink, and rinsed the glass twice before putting it into the washing machine. Just to be safe. I grabbed a rag from under the sink and wiped the wooden counter until the green powder was completely gone.

I liked things clean.

My therapist said I'm in my "sterile phase." She wasn't wrong I guess. When your life burns down, you tend to build the next one out of concrete and tempered glass.

Six months ago, my life was a chaotic, gaslit mess. The setup was a total cliché. I came back earlier from a business trip, like in those movies about the stupid husband, and found my girlfriend on my own sofa with a guy I used to call a friend. I confronted Sophie. She cried. Then some more crying. Then she twisted the entire reality of the situation. By the end it was my fault. Her cheating on me was actually

my fault. I worked too much. I was emotionally absent. She was just feeling lonely and wanted some attention. I bet my unemployed so-called friend had plenty of time and attention to spare.

I spent months trying to save that sinking ship. I was convinced that if I just applied enough patience, enough logic, I could somehow fix the damage. For a moment I thought I could engineer forgiveness. Instead the toxicity just infected me and clouded my judgment. We just dragged each other down, until the whole thing collapsed under the weight of our lies and a two-year relationship was thrown directly out the window.

A total, catastrophic system failure.

That mess taught me one core lesson: letting someone inside your system gives them root access to destroy it. If you control every single variable, nobody can ever blindside or humiliate you again.

Sophie had made our shared rental feel entirely hers. After we broke up, I moved out and rented this top-floor penthouse. The new architecture was therapy when I needed it. And occasional "dates" from matches on the dating apps that ended up with casual sex and awkward mornings, at least when they stayed the night.

After the breakup, my friends at the office kept telling me I was the ultimate trophy bachelor now. A lead architect with a high-income bracket, a high-rise view, and no baggage. They kept talking about how I was "the prize" in the local dating market, like I had won some kind of lottery.

It certainly didn't feel like a win. The apartment was dead quiet, save for the hum of the RoboRock vacuum making its rounds along the baseboards and the occasional meow from the corner.

A soft thump broke the quiet. Cheddar, a massive orange tomcat I adopted because his shelter file described him as "unimpressed by anything," jumped onto the counter. He walked over and sniffed the wet spot in the sink.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and stared at the home screen. I pressed and held the dating app icon until the delete option appeared. I tapped delete, and the app disappeared from the screen.

"No more guests," I said to him and scratched his ears. "Just us."

Cheddar didn't care. He sat on the edge of the island and started cleaning his front paw.

I walked into the bathroom and turned the shower on. I made the water as hot as it would go and stood under it for a while. Standing under the steaming spray helped wash off the hollow exhaustion of the morning.

I turned off the water and grabbed a towel from the rack. The bathroom mirror was covered in steam. I wiped it away with my bare hand. I looked at my stomach. The investment in the home gym was definitely paying off. My abs showed clearly. I was in very good shape.

Then I looked higher up. My hairline is going back. It is definitely receding. I am thirty-four years old and I just tried to cook eggs for a girl who used the word cringe.

I went into the bedroom and opened the top drawer. A fresh navy polo from the drawer fit perfectly across the shoulders. Work was always there as a pillar when everything else collapsed.

Seven years at a major US tech enterprise had paid off. The company had a large office downtown. The windows overlooked the central cemetery. We always joked it gave us a direct view to the future. I usually decided to work from home anyway.

My official title was lead software architect. That meant I was supposed to design the high-level system blueprints and let the developers actually build them. I hated being a hands-off manager. I still liked getting my hands dirty. I routinely picked up regular coding tickets. I built backend microservices. I optimized slow database queries. I stayed in the trenches with my team.

The job came with a paycheck big enough to cover a penthouse in central Cluj. The work was demanding. Code was predictable though. Systems followed rules. If something broke, there was always a reason in the logs.

The standing desk sat in the corner of the living area, facing floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over Iulius Park. Below, the lake stretched out toward the glass facade of Iulius Mall, its smooth water catching the cold gray light of the autumn morning. The view alone made the exorbitant rent worth every single euro. I hit the memory button on the desk frame, and the dual motors raised the tabletop up to my elbows.

Tapping the spacebar woke up three large monitors at once. The screens were full of code, terminal windows, and red database logs. Cheddar trotted over from the kitchen and hopped onto his bed right next to the keyboard. I put on my headset and checked the bottom corner of the left screen.

It was nine fifty-five. My morning meeting starts in five minutes. Safe territory.

I had engineered the perfect, unbreakable life. Nobody could hurt me here, and nobody could touch me. But as the notification chime rang in my headset, the silence of the empty rooms behind me felt less like safety and a lot more like being buried alive.

Chapter 2 - The Fortress - Leah

I caught myself staring at the tissue box sitting on the glass coffee table. It was a plain square box with a grey geometric pattern, resting right next to Dr. Albu's white porcelain tea mug. I hated crying in front of people, and the time for crying was over anyway.

I crossed my legs and smoothed a tiny wrinkle out of my black tailored blazer. Black suits me. No, I'm not grieving. Or am I?

"You look very put together today, Leah," Dr. Albu said from her armchair. She looked over her reading glasses, tapping a mechanical pencil against the margin of her pad. Click. Click. The plastic sound was starting to get on my nerves.

"I have to be," I said, keeping my posture straight against the leather sofa. "The packaging suppliers in France are falling behind schedule, and Nicholas wants to push our launch to January. He says it would make the year-end financial reports look cleaner and give Legal time to tidy up a few things. I don't like the sound of that. He holds the capital, so he thinks he dictates the timeline. But the brand curation is entirely mine. I spent three months negotiating exclusive distribution rights with niche European skincare lines, skipping all the overhyped, synthetic mass-market garbage. A January launch means missing the entire holiday retail cycle."

Dr. Albu took a slow sip of her tea and set the mug down on a cork coaster. She stopped tapping the pencil.

"He puts up a lot of the upfront capital," I added, looking at the polished edge of the glass table instead of her eyes. "He backed the lease agreement for the commercial space on Eroilor. But lately I can feel him trying to shift the dynamic into something beyond a business partnership."

Dr. Albu leaned back slightly. "And are you interested in shifting it?"

"No. Absolutely not. It is strictly professional. But it is a lot of pressure." I let out a slow breath and adjusted the leather strap of my bag. "Walking away from ten years of managing corporate retail boards to build my own beauty boutique sounds brave on paper. I have my savings and a few solid investments to fall back on, but this space is supposed to be my clean slate. I spent a decade helping David build his real estate empire while he took all the credit. Now it is my turn. It has to work."

Dr. Albu nodded slowly. "How is your support system outside of work, Leah? Have you spoken to your parents recently?"

I shifted my weight on the sofa. "My mother called on Sunday, like she does every week. They are doing fine."

"Still in Germany?"

"Bielefeld," I said. "It's a small, quiet town in North Rhine-Westphalia. My stepfather retired from corporate accounting three years ago, and he and my mother built a very predictable, peaceful life there. Clean streets, good healthcare, zero drama. He was the one who took care of me when I was little. That's what a father does. My mother asks me every single phone call when I am flying over for a visit."

"When was the last time you saw them?"

"Last Easter," I admitted, tracing the inner seam of my jacket cuff. "My mother wants me to come over for a couple of weeks just to sit in their garden and rest, but I can't leave Cluj right now. If I take my eyes off the store for three days, Nicholas will try to restructure our agreement or alter the floor plans. I told her I'll visit after the Black Friday launch. Once the boutique is open and running smoothly."

"You keep moving that target, Leah," Dr. Albu noted softly. "First it was after the divorce papers were signed. Then it was after you found a space for the boutique. Now it is after the launch."

"Because right now, I don't have the luxury of sitting in Bielefeld drinking coffee," I said, a sharp edge leaking into my voice before I could pull it back. "I don't have a safety net. I have to protect what I am building."

Dr. Albu let the silence sit in the room for a moment. The faint hum of street traffic drifted up through the window frame.

"And how are you sleeping?" she asked.

"Not good. I wake up around four in the morning and my eyes just snap open. Then I lie there staring at the ceiling until seven."

"Since you brought up your ex-husband," Dr. Albu said, her voice completely neutral. "Is David the one keeping you awake?"

I dug my fingernails into the soft leather of my purse. It had been six months since the divorce papers were finalized. Eight years of marriage wiped out because he decided a twenty-two-year-old girl from his gym was a better fit for his ego.

"David took enough of my time. He doesn't get my sleep anymore."

I caught my reflection in the window behind her chair. My image was layered over the grey street traffic moving through the autumn drizzle. I spend a small fortune on clinical skincare routines and high-end serums. It works. People constantly tell me I look twenty-nine or thirty, and they mean it as a compliment.

I am thirty-nine. I am tired in a way that hyaluronic acid cannot fix. I just do not have the energy to go out and play the dating game again.

"Marina keeps trying to set me up," I murmured.

"Anyone interesting?" Dr. Albu asked.

"Some corporate lawyer she knows. She wanted to show me his profile yesterday over lunch, but I told her I wasn't interested. I don't have the time or energy for dinner dates and fake charm. I just need my business running, and I need a full night of sleep. I don't need more lies under my roof."

"Not all men lie, Leah."

"Not all men," I said. "But men."

Dr. Albu picked up her tea mug again. "There is a difference between protecting your peace and building a fortress, Leah."

"I prefer the fortress," I said flatly. "It keeps the liars on the outside."

The digital timer on the bookshelf gave a soft, high-pitched beep.

Dr. Albu pressed the top button to silence it and closed her notepad. "We are out of time for today. Please try to get more than five hours of sleep, Leah. The stress is going to catch up with you if you don't slow down."

"I'll try," I said, standing up and pulling my bag over my shoulder.

I walked out of the clinic and took the concrete stairs down to the underground parking garage. The air was cold, smelling of damp concrete and exhaust fumes.

My car was parked under a dim fluorescent light tube. I got in, pulled the heavy door shut, and sat in the freezing interior before starting the engine. I pulled the sun visor down and checked my reflection. My foundation was smooth, my lipstick intact, and there was zero redness around my eyes. The armor was completely in place.

My phone screen lit up on the console - text from Marina asking if I wanted to grab a late drink, and an automated tracking notification for a shipment of perfume samples. I ignored the text, put the car in drive, and pulled out into the afternoon traffic.

I needed to head down to Eroilor Boulevard and talk to Nicholas about the launch timeline before he made any decisions without me.

Chapter 3 - Unplanned Variables - Mark

"The deployment pipeline is failing on the staging server," Andreea said.

Her voice came through my headset. It sounded compressed.

"Roll it back to the previous stable build," I told her. I watched the terminal lines scroll on my left monitor. "I will check the configuration files after lunch."

"Sure. Talk later." She disconnected.

I took off the headset and dropped it on the desk. Andreea was twenty-nine and a highly competent senior developer. She was also a terrible life raft.

I stared at the blank screen for a minute. In February, I slept with her. It was a massive calculation error on my part. My relationship with Sophie was already sinking. I was suffocating under constant gaslighting and lies. The winter team-building retreat was at a high-end ski resort in the mountains. Andreea and I shared a few drinks at the hotel bar. We danced. I always thought she had a crush on me. My ego was bruised and I felt vulnerable. I thought she could be a boat to jump onto, a clean exit from a toxic relationship.

Andreea disappeared from the bar around midnight. Ten minutes later my phone buzzed. She texted me her room number so the other colleagues wouldn't see us walk the halls together. I went upstairs.

She was just a desperate mistake. Afterwards, she simply got out of bed, threw her clothes on, and told me it was nice. That was it.

We agreed to keep things strictly professional. It still left a sour taste in my mouth every time her name popped up on the screen.

Two weeks after the retreat, she brought cakes to the office kitchen and announced her engagement. She had been dating her boyfriend for six months.

Sophie and I finally broke up in March, six months ago. The company required ten counseling sessions for management. I treated them like a compliance check at first, but after the breakup, I needed the help. When the required sessions ended, Dr. Albu said I could book another whenever I needed help sorting something out. I didn't keep a standing appointment. This week, I booked a session because my personal life had become hard to untangle.

I grabbed my keys and headed out for my appointment with Dr. Albu.

Her office was one of the few places where I could talk openly.

I sat in the leather chair. The material squeaked slightly under my weight.

Dr. Albu glanced at her notepad. "It's been almost two months, Mark. What's new? How's your personal life? Last time we spoke, you were seeing Diane, the redhead." "Diane and I broke up about a month ago," I said. "I deleted Tinder yesterday." "What happened with Diane?"

"At first, I thought we clicked. The initial coffee date turned into a four-hour dinner. A week later, she asked if I wanted to spend a weekend in Milan. She came with a list of boutiques and shopped like the world was ending. I spent most of the day carrying her bags while my savings account took a serious hit. She had serious daddy issues, I was sure of it, and apparently my role was to pay and keep up. A month in, sitting on her couch, I mentioned my app profile was paused. She got very quiet."

Dr. Albu shifted in her chair. "She wasn't ready to commit?"

"She told me she didn't want to limit herself," I said. "According to her, when she said she was single, she meant not in an active relationship, not that she was going to stop sleeping with other people. Expecting exclusivity was apparently just an old patriarchy pattern."

Dr. Albu stopped writing. "When Diane called exclusivity patriarchal, did you feel she was dismissing what you wanted from her?"

"She said she wasn't ready to commit yet, but I wasn't asking for a contract. All I was asking for was her attention, enough focus to see if there was something real between us or nothing at all. Isn't that the whole point of dating? To limit yourself to one person?"

"It gets better. She admitted a rich restaurant owner was currently her primary backup. They already had a vacation to Greece booked together. Her pitch was to keep seeing me until she left."

"How did you handle that?"

"I grabbed my jacket, put my shoes on, and headed for the door. She got visibly upset and followed me into the hallway. A whole speech followed about how we could still be friends. She claimed she liked talking to me, that I was smart, and she didn't want us to become strangers."

"And your response?"

"I told her it was all or nothing. At thirty-four years old, soon to be on an airplane to Turkey for a hair transplant, having the patience to be a backup option or a part-time friend just isn't in my system anymore. Walking out, her number got immediately deleted from my phone. A week later, a visit to a private clinic for a full STD panel felt mandatory. With these modern definitions of being single, taking blind risks is bad math. The bloodwork came back completely clean, but the lesson stuck."

"After Diane and I broke up, I went on two more dates in the last few weeks. One woman I met in a bar asked me to pay her rent in exchange for being friends with benefits. I politely declined."

Dr. Albu didn't write anything down. She just watched me.

"The other was a twenty-something girl. She drank matcha and called my scrambled eggs cringe. I deleted the app right after she left my apartment."

Dr. Albu uncrossed her legs. "You are approaching dating like a corporate recruitment process. You look for red flags and immediately terminate the contract." "I look for predictable patterns."

"Getting to know someone takes time, Mark. You don't have to decide what they mean to you right away." She let the silence stretch for a moment. "How is the new cat settling in?"

"Cheddar is fine. He sleeps on the internet router." I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my knees. "I wanted a ginger cat for years. Sophie always vetoed the idea."

"She worked at a vet clinic."

"Yes. And she claimed she was completely fed up with animals by the time she got home. She refused to have a pet in the house. I never understood that. Why do people work jobs they hate?"

"People can stay in work that makes them unhappy because the familiar feels safer than starting over," Dr. Albu said. She closed her notebook. The hour was up. "You wanted a cat for years, and now Cheddar is yours. That was something you chose because you wanted it. Try making room for more of those choices, Mark. You don't have to know where every new connection will lead before you let yourself enjoy it."

I drove back to the penthouse. The apartment was completely silent.

"Google, I'm home," I said to the empty room.

The smart home system woke up. Dim amber lights flickered on along the hallway baseboards. Low lo-fi beats started playing from the ceiling speakers. It was a perfectly programmed welcome routine.

I took off my jacket and walked into the kitchen. I opened a can of premium wet food for Cheddar. I set the metal bowl on the floor. He walked over and smelled the food. Then he looked up at me, turned around, and walked away.

Even the cat refused to follow the script.

My phone vibrated on the kitchen island. It was a message from Marina. She was the head sommelier at Dosage, a high-end restaurant in the center of Cluj.

We are testing the new autumn menu tonight. Come by. I need an honest opinion on the pairings.

I stared at the text. I was tired. But the walls of the penthouse felt a bit too tight tonight. I replied with a thumbs up. I needed to get out of the apartment anyway.

Dosage was busy. The usual tech crowds and awkward first dates filled the tables. I took a seat at a small table near the wine racks.

Marina spotted me right away. She wore her dark hair pulled back tightly.

"You look tired," she said. She placed an empty glass on my table.

"Good to see you too, Marina."

She poured a pale gold liquid into the glass. "Try this. It is a 2015 vintage champagne. Small vineyard."

I took a sip. It was crisp and very dry. "I like it. What is the food pairing?"

A woman in a white chef's coat walked up to the table and set a small, perfectly plated dish in front of me.

"Tuna tartare," she said. "With a wasabi mayonnaise. The fat from the tuna needs the acidity of the champagne."

Her accent was thick. Unmistakably French. I looked up at her face. She was maybe thirty-five, confident, and objectively attractive. A brief spark of curiosity hit me, so my eyes dropped automatically to her left hand. A simple gold band sat on her ring finger.

Married. Maybe once, I would have taken that ring as a challenge. Not anymore. Whatever thrill I might get wasn't worth the damage.

"Chef Celine," Marina introduced us.

"It looks incredible," I told her, and picked up my fork.

Chef Celine smiled and wiped her hands on her apron. "Let Marina know what you think. I have to get back to the line."

She walked away. I ate a bite of the tartare. The wasabi kick was sharp and clean. I took another sip of the champagne and let my eyes wander across the dining room.

Then I saw her.

She was sitting two tables away, framed against the large glass window looking out at the street. Blonde, wearing a sleek black turtleneck paired with a sharp blazer, she looked like someone who treated every room she entered as a boardroom meeting. I put her somewhere in her early thirties, though the immaculate, expensive upkeep of her skin made it hard to tell. Her glasses caught the low restaurant lighting, and her posture carried a heavy aura of absolute seriousness. A bottle of champagne on the table and one glass.

I put my fork down. She looked completely out of place among the loud tables, sitting with her back perfectly straight and holding her glass close to her chest like a shield.

I wanted to know her name.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

You've just reached the end of the preview for **The Architecture of Trust**.

Mark has just spotted Leah across the room at *Dosage* - two people who have built impenetrable fortresses around their lives, completely unaware that their quiet worlds are about to collide.

If these opening pages resonated with you, I would love for you to stay connected and be part of their story as it unfolds.

LET'S STAY IN TOUCH



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Did Mark's cynical logic or Leah's fierce independence resonate with you? Send me your thoughts directly. I read and reply to every single note from readers.

Thank you for being here at the very beginning of this journey.

— *Avi Virabean*