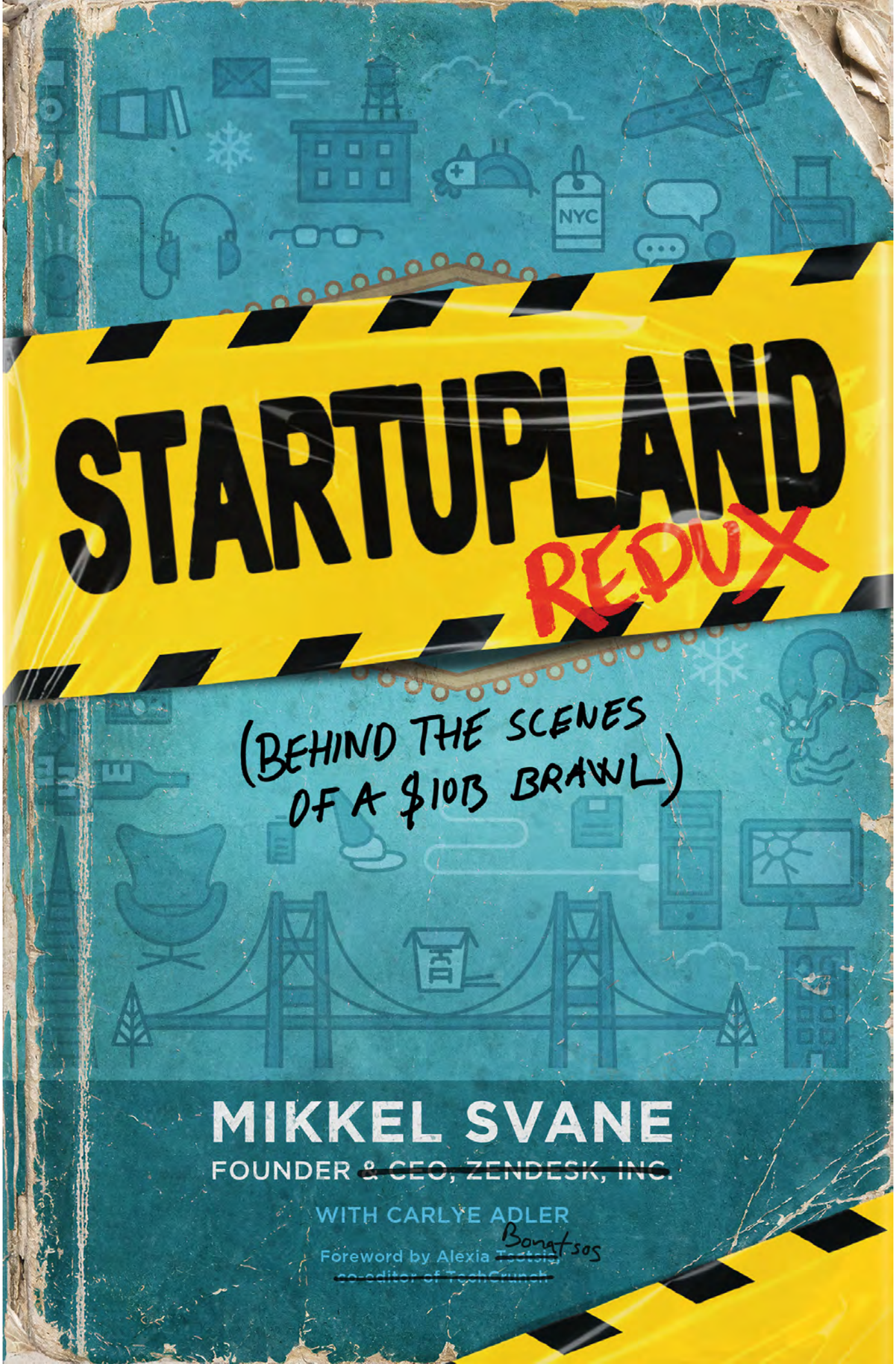

NYC
STARTUPLAND
REDUX
(BEHIND THE SCENES OF A $10B BRAWL)
MIKKEL SVANE
FOUNDER & CEO, ZENDESK, INC.
WITH CARLYE ADLER
Foreword by Alexia Tsotsis, co-editor of TechCrunch
Bonatsos

PROLOGUE

How It Ended

"People like you don't like working for people like us."

THOSE WERE THE TEN words that ended my Zendesk career and my almost fifteen-year journey in Startupland. I was talking to two of the private equity partners who'd led the Zendesk acquisition. The transaction had just closed and we were having a beer (which was so unusual, but we tried to make it super caj and not awkward at all). It was sobering hearing the words out loud. Had I even given it any real thought until now? Probably. Did it matter? Probably not.

And it was true. People like me didn't like working for people like them. They knew it. And before I got back into my car, I knew it too. We said goodbye, and as I pulled out, I came to peace knowing this was the end.

Soon after, we told the team. Made it official. And that day I completely logged out. Deleted all my social profiles. Got off all our systems. Stopped taking calls. Ignored my emails. And within a few days it was as if *Startupland* had never happened. That long and all-encompassing journey that I had been on since founding Zendesk with Morten and Alex, taking it public and building an organization with more than $1 billion in revenues and thousands of employees, was over. What had been the entirety of my life for so many years.

My days easily filled up. Three dogs. Five kids. Laura, my partner and soon-to-be wife. Bicoastal households. A small foundation. A family office. My health and sanity. Art. Cocktails. A big world to explore outside of conference rooms. Plenty of areas to invest my time and money. I wore a lot of denim and started playing tennis like an old fart.

I think I enjoyed my time off the map. Under the radar. Of course, financial security makes that chillaxed lifestyle easier. But as my Zendesk cofounder Alexander likes to say, "Money is mostly in your head." Wealth is relative. It's true. But also a lot easier to say when you have money (that is mostly in your head).

To be totally honest, I think I was a little shell-shocked too. The last couple of years had been intense. So much of my time had been consumed by managing the company as a financial asset with very little time for people, product, or customers. Not exactly where I had my strengths or enjoyed spending my time. I was tired. And I felt defeated. For a while I had been a lame-duck CEO, and everybody and their mother had an

opinion on how I had performed as CEO and how I was responsible for bringing us into this mess. I felt like I needed a pause from all of that. Or to hide from it, maybe.

The process had also surfaced some not-so-pretty truths. When things don't go according to plan, some people prefer to have somebody to blame. And not always to their (read: your) face. And people go behind your back. That was a tough realization. Those kinds of shenanigans were not on my bingo card. And I think it kind of messed with me and made me a little paranoid.

I'm pretty sure you can find many people in Silicon Valley who can explain to you exactly where it all went wrong with Zendesk. A lot of smart people. But only one guy gets to write the book. And he's the hero here.

There's a huge mental gap between being a public company CEO and then suddenly not being *anything*.

It's so hard to imagine leaving a big CEO job. While in the job, I never, ever thought of leaving as an option. Why, when in high-profile positions—whether it's in business, politics, sports, or entertainment—do we have such a tough time fathoming quitting? Despite being financially independent and knowing that spending more time on health, family, and personal interests would be pretty sweet? The answer is easy. Because we're druggies. We're addicts. Whatever we do is our heroin. Once we've had the rush of conducting that big orchestra, steering that rocket ship, and winning the day, it's hard to give up.

Or is it just all we know? As Saul Zabar, the always-working ninety-seven-year-old smoked-fish czar of NYC's Upper East

Side, said before his death, "Money is not why we do this, not why we're here seven days a week. It's a way of life for us. It's kind of old-fashioned."

We tell ourselves we have an obligation to continue. That we owe it to the employees, the customers, the shareholders, the board, blah blah. But the truth is nobody cares and it doesn't matter. We're just junkies.

A good friend recently asked me if I look back at the journey and regret spending so many years being a public company CEO with all the quarterly pressure, the intense work hours, the constant travel, the complex dynamics to manage, and the many, many conflicts. I don't. Not even when things were the worst. Because it was all still so exciting and new. A once-in-a-lifetime experience. As the protagonist in the movie version of Nick Hornby's *About a Boy* says after trying to save a suicide patient: "It was horrible! Horrible! But driving fast behind the ambulance was fantastic!"

Morbid kidding aside, in some interviews I compared the startup life to cycling the Tour de France. Every day there's a new mountain, and then another one beyond it. And next month a different race, more mountains, until you're back in France and cycling the same mountains over and over again. (I also said you have to be a little crazy to want to do that.) Public company CEO life is different—more like a dance marathon. Except you're very alone on the floor. And the beat is punching through your body. There's no way to explain why you keep at it other than addiction.

And running a $10 billion public company is one thing. I can't imagine what it's like when stakes are even higher. You know the joke about the secret to outrunning a bear: It's not about running faster than the bear, but about running faster than the guy next to you. Being the CEO of a $10 billion company in the San Francisco Bay Area is small potatoes. Which is fantastic. It's not that you're *not* interesting. But there are still hundreds of companies bigger than yours. And some are worth hundreds of billions or trillions. In my old country, Denmark, there are about a dozen companies worth more than $10 billion. I don't think I would have enjoyed that. The bear would have caught me very quickly in that group. The bear hardly acknowledged me in San Francisco.

A different predator did acknowledge me, though. And finished me off. Some people would argue I brought that on myself.

But before we get to that, let's take a few steps back.



Excerpt from **STARTUPLAND REDUX**.
Coming out on Dec. 8, 2026.

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