



Silicon Valley
BILLIONAIRE
SERIES

TRUSTING
the
BILLIONAIRE

MACIE ST. JAMES

TRUSTING THE BILLIONAIRE

MACIE ST. JAMES

A Silicon Valley Billionaires Novella

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Brooke Alexander could always tell when she was about to be fired.

First, there was a certain tension in the air that she couldn't quite define. Second, they gradually cut you out of meetings and communications until soon you felt like you were just occupying a space for forty hours a week. But none of it was confirmed until the day you actually showed up for work and nobody would look you in the eye.

Brooke stood and grabbed her way-too-colorful planner and matching purple ink pen. She'd gotten into planning on paper as a way to control the world around her, but it wouldn't help today. Nope, not at all. She had just been summoned to the small conference room for her nine-a.m. firing.

"Confidence," she whispered to herself as she exited her work area and headed down the aisle toward the big glass room. That was where Bob or Mike or James was sitting. She didn't know the exact name of the person they'd brought in to handle this whole downsizing project, but she suspected it was someone with a spoiled Ivy League-graduate name like that.

As she headed toward her termination, she remembered the final indication. Nobody made eye contact with her. Even the guy from accounting who was rushing back to his desk from the restroom averted his gaze as he passed. Any other day, he'd look at her and give a bored smile. Today, everyone knew she was on the chopping block.

She saw him before she got to the door. That was the problem with these offices that had no walls or windows. You could see everything. Bob-Mike-James was seated at the table in a quarter-zip sweater. She'd expected a suit. Firing consultants usually wore suits on downsizing day.

She pulled open the door with her free hand and confidently strode inside. Whatever Bob-Mike-James was about to say, she wanted him to know from the jump that she was not afraid. She'd been fired four—count 'em, *four*—times since moving to Silicon Valley two years ago. Granted, the first two times she'd only been working there a few months. The last two firings had been tough, though, because she'd thought she'd become a valuable part of the team.

“Brooke Alexander?” Bob-Mike-James asked.

Brooke nodded, pulled back the chair across from him, and sat down on it. She set her planner on the table, opened it up, and positioned her pen just above the page like she was prepared to jot down notes.

Yeah, it made no sense. It made her feel better, though, so she was going with it.

He cleared his throat. “As you know, TravTech is going through some changes.”

Brooke dared to look up at him then, and immediately regretted it. Bob-Mike-James was what most of her friends would easily call *hot*. As a group. As in, if he walked into their favorite bar at happy hour, they'd turn watching him into a sport. It seemed like a cruel joke that the person who was about to take away her only means of paying her rent was so distractingly gorgeous, but that was apparently the way this was going to go.

“Long overdue changes,” she blurted.

Wait. Where had that come from? She'd certainly been thinking it, but had she actually let those words spill from her mouth? In front of Bob-Mike-James?

He cocked his head, flashing her a curious expression. “What was that?”

Now it was her turn to clear her throat. “Nothing. Carry on.”

He shook his head. “No. It sounded like you had some important observations. I’d love to hear your thoughts.”

Was he actually asking her to give her thoughts during her termination meeting? Like, free advice or something? Then he’d no doubt take her observations to Justin Travers, Chief Dudebro around these parts, and pass them off as his own?

No. She shouldn’t do it. She shouldn’t give him ammunition. Her plan had been to walk in here, tell him he could skip the formalities and just tell her about her severance, and quickly pack her box up so she could be back at her apartment in time to take a nap. The sooner she could get all that out of the way, the sooner she’d be on her computer that afternoon, scouring the job boards for any openings for a semi-entry-level marketing associate.

“Private helicopters to CES, really?” she asked. “And the private suite at Oracle Park was a bit much. I know Justin Travers has to wine and dine clients, but we all know it’s just a way to show he’s better than his douchebag friends.”

She punctuated that statement with a roll of her eyes. Wow, did it feel good to get all that off her chest. She hadn’t realized just how much she’d been holding in until now.

The guy across from her arched his eyebrows, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. He seemed to be fighting that smile, but it didn’t escape her notice. She was no fool. She knew exactly how to read that.

He agreed with her!

Brooke set her pen down on top of her planner and leaned forward, clasping her hands in front of her. “This company was given four million in seed funding,” she said. “Justin and his ‘management team’ blew through that in, what, a year? And what do they have to show for it? He’s supposed to be this well-educated guy with a super high I.Q., so explain that one.”

Now he leaned forward. “So, you don’t think Mr. Travers is very smart?”

Brooke bit her lip. Had she gone too far? She hadn’t meant to completely trash the guy. She’d never even met him.

Taking a deep breath, she decided to go in a different direction. “Look, I’ve been in this valley since graduation. I’ve seen some things. A lot of those things have been mistakes. It’s like watching someone heading straight for a big brick wall on a thousand-dollar electric scooter. You want to tell him to, ‘Watch out!’ but you know he won’t listen anyway, right?”

The man didn’t respond, but she had his rapt attention. Those big brown eyes were trained on her, and his expression was completely neutral. Not a hint of those dimples she’d glimpsed beneath all that stubble a few minutes ago.

“So...you feel like your boss made some mistakes.”

“He’s not really my boss,” she clarified. “I work for marketing. My boss is Alyssa.”

He looked down at the sheet of paper in front of him. “I see. Alyssa Kennedy?”

“Yes.”

“She’s your boss.”

“Yes. My immediate supervisor.”

Brooke felt the odd urge to point out that Alyssa *was* her boss because, let’s face it, everyone knew Brooke was history here. Why pretty it up? Speaking of which—

“I know why you brought me here,” Brooke said. “So, I’m going to make it easy for you.”

The consultant-dude held up his hand to stop her, which immediately put Brooke in fighting mode. Just who did this dude think he was?

“Actually, I’m going to stop you there,” he said. “You’re not on the list to be fired.”

Brooke’s eyes widened. What was going on here? He was joking, right? Because if he wasn’t joking, she wasn’t fired,

and she'd just called the head of the company...

Oh, no.

The consultant-dude continued, seemingly oblivious to the internal meltdown happening to the woman seated just a few feet away. "As I said at the start of this meeting, we're doing some restructuring. Part of that restructuring means slashing entire departments. Marketing is at the top of that list."

"You're slashing the entire marketing department?" Brooke asked.

Immediately, she pictured her team. The team she'd spent countless hours with over the past nine months. Alyssa had been her mentor, but there were twelve other people. Unlucky thirteen. Huh. Maybe that's why they were all getting the ax.

"Technically, yes." The guy's voice pulled Brooke back to the present. "We won't have departments anymore as much as people. You're the only person we're keeping from marketing."

"Me?"

She had to have misheard. Why would they keep Brooke, the most junior member of the team? She'd been top of her class at Sacramento State, granted, but that was nothing compared to the impressive resumes of everyone who sat around her every day.

"You sound surprised."

The consultant, who was even more attractive now that he was delivering good news, leaned back in his chair and looked at her. He had a kind face, which was odd. She would think a guy who made his living destroying people's lives would have a rough, hardened demeanor about him, but this guy looked like the person you rooted for in an action-adventure movie.

"Well, you're telling me my entire team is about to be unemployed," Brooke said. "It's a bit...surprising, yes. That's a good word for it."

She gave herself marks for turning the situation around. She really was surprised that they would keep her versus all

those kick-butt people out there. In fact, she would have been far less surprised if literally any of the other twelve people had been the chosen ones. But if she wanted to succeed in her career, she knew she couldn't let that show.

“You've been doing our social media,” the guy said. “It's gotten a little notice.”

Yes. She'd been handling the social media for TravTech, which had rolled out a new feature for its peer-to-peer tutoring app. Tutoring was TravTech's specialty, and Brooke had found a way to make their social media accounts fun and personable, rather than bland and spammy as they'd been. It was interesting this consultant-dude had noticed and was talking about it as though—

“Did you say ‘our’ social media?” she asked.

The guy's eyes widened. He looked off to the side thoughtfully for a second, then moved his intense gaze right back to her face. She saw no drop in confidence as he seemed to realize he'd given something away. Instead, he nodded.

“*Our* social media. I'm Justin Travers.”

Justin had been waiting for just the right moment to give away his real identity. He had no idea who Brooke Alexander thought he was, but apparently, she hadn't the slightest clue that he was the CEO of the company that had issued her paycheck for the past nine months.

He could wait for her reaction, but he really didn't like to make people uncomfortable. He was already having a hard enough time ignoring the bright green eyes and cheery, optimistic demeanor. Honestly, his first thought as she'd walked toward the room was that she was the one bright spot in what was becoming the worst month of his life. Just looking at her seemed to pull him out of his slump somehow.

"Sorry about that," he said. "I really thought you knew who I was at first. And then...well, let's say I deserve every single piece of negative feedback I get today."

Anyone else would probably immediately backtrack and apologize for blasting the company CEO's business choices right in front of him. Not Brooke. Instead, she eyed him with her head tilted slightly and her eyes squinted. Like she was *studying* him.

"You're firing everyone today," she said.

"Laying off," he corrected. "Everyone here will be given six months' severance and a reference letter, as well as referrals. I have a lot of friends in Silicon Valley—"

He stopped short, remembering her reference to him being a "dudebro." *Dudebro*. Interesting term for it, but it summed

up the worst of entrepreneur culture pretty well. He'd tried his best not to become one of *those* people, but it sounded like he'd failed. Miserably.

“Just how many people are getting that severance?” Brooke asked, sounding afraid of the answer. He couldn't say he blamed her. He wasn't really ready to face that answer himself just yet. But the investors had their consultants review everything, and this was how it had to go if he wanted to keep the doors open.

“We'll be a small team of thirty-five.”

Her expression didn't change. She just stared at him, her mouth seemingly stuck in some permanent state of almost-smiling. He wondered if she would have looked anything but bright and cheery if he'd fired her. How did she always look so happy?

“This company has more than two hundred people.”

“Almost three hundred when you count contractors and interns. We have to take drastic measures. I'm sure that's no surprise.”

“Not many startups succeed.” She shrugged. “I guess nothing surprises me at this point.”

“You've had some other positions.”

He looked down at her resume. He'd chosen her because she was the lowest-paid person in marketing, and at first glance, her resume was pretty impressive. But studying it closer, he saw that she'd had very short tenures at each of those places.

“Sometimes it's a few months, sometimes a year,” she said, seeming to notice his sudden scrutiny. “They're either ‘going in a different direction,’ merging, being bought out for billions, or frantically scooping water out of the boat before it sinks.”

Ouch. In this case, he knew exactly where his company fell.

“We’re in a sinking boat.” He realized, hearing himself say that, just how weary he sounded. He didn’t want to give up. He’d fight all the way to the end. But Brooke was right—this was a sinking boat, and he was just trying to slow down the inevitable.

“I didn’t mean... Ugh.” Now she sounded weary. That cheery expression wasn’t quite as cheery anymore. He’d managed to crush her spirit somehow.

“No, you’re right,” he rushed to say. “I knew when I founded this company that the odds were against me. For a while there, it looked like we were going to be one of the few that made it. But...I got greedy.”

Brooke’s eyebrows arched. She was looking at him differently now, and he liked it. It even seemed like she might have a newfound respect for him for a second. They’d just met, but she’d worked here long enough to apparently have formed an opinion about him based on what she’d heard.

“So, you’re broke.”

Her comment took him by complete surprise, although he tried not to show it. Never show weakness. That was how his father had raised him. But he was having a hard time not smiling since she’d arrived in the room. Her chipper disposition seemed to be contagious.

“No.”

Did he need to say more? His personal finances weren’t connected to this business. Sure, he’d invested a big chunk of change from his own account to get this sucker going, but his father’s legal team had helped him structure everything so that if this venture tanked, his own bank account wouldn’t be affected.

“I started my first business when I was twelve,” he found himself saying. Was he trying to impress her? Probably. “It was a lemonade stand. By fourteen, I was mowing lawns for money, then turning that into a landscaping business and employing all my buddies who needed jobs. Travers Landscaping became a six-figure annual business. We even

had a winter spin-off business where we hung lights for people at Christmas. I sold it when I went off to college and used that money to hire a development team to build my first app.”

It seemed to be working. He was impressing her. He gave himself a mental pat on the back and was all ready to seal this business deal when he saw her staring off to the side, finger and thumb pressed to her lips. She was thinking hard about something.

“That’s it!” She looked at him, pointing briefly before leaning forward.

That always-sunny expression of hers was more animated than ever, he was intrigued to see. She appeared to have had the most brilliant thought ever. Or maybe it was a revelation. He had no idea what was happening here.

“You don’t even see it, do you?” she asked.

Justin shook his head. He was hoping she’d clue him in so they could wrap this meeting up. He had at least twenty people to fire before lunch.

“It’s not what you say. It’s the way you say it. All that stuff you just said about your businesses? Very impressive. But you’re missing a crucial element that would make you so much more likable than all the other scarf-wearing, cappuccino-guzzling tech geniuses in this town.”

Okay, *now* she had his interest. If there was one thing that got his blood pumping, it was finding ways to one-up all the other founders around here. It was part of working in Silicon Valley, he’d learned. You’d never be the next Mark Zuckerberg or Jeff Bezos without a hefty dose of competitive spirit.

“Humility, ” she said, then sat back in her chair, a smug smile on her face. She seemed pretty darn proud of herself for figuring that out. He wasn’t humble enough. But being humble wouldn’t earn an entrepreneur four million bucks in seed funding. It also wouldn’t pull this company out of the hole it was in.

“Name a single successful entrepreneur who’s humble,” he said.

“I’m not talking about how you feel. I’m talking about how you come across. You’re an expert in founding companies, but my expertise is in image. Branding. We need to rebrand *you*.”

This was starting to get a little annoying. He called her in here to tell her she was one of the few he was keeping on, and she was attacking his character? Insulting him?

Telling him things he knew were true but didn’t want to hear?

She leaned forward. “Silicon Valley is like a big fishbowl. One business fails, everyone knows about it, especially when there are massive layoffs.”

As much as he hated to admit it, she was one hundred percent right about that. He was laying off hundreds of people. How could he expect word not to get around? They were heading into the weekend, too, when friends would be getting together. Word would spread, and the uphill battle he was already facing would get even tougher.

“Everyone’s looking at the guy who took the private jet to a conference.”

“It was a helicopter—”

She nodded. “Yes, well, a helicopter becomes a private jet from one retelling to the next.”

Oh. Yeah. He supposed he could see that.

“People who haven’t even met you will see you as I did until I walked in here. A pompous, spoiled, tech billionaire who blew all his investors’ money on personal indulgences. You aren’t that way, though, are you?”

“No!” The word came out much more forcefully than he’d intended.

Every word Brooke was saying was right, but it seemed absurd to him that people would picture him as the type to show off to friends. He’d been carefully crafting an image of a

guy who had it all together. The helicopter had belonged to one of his investors, and the suite at the sports stadium had been a client's. It was all done in the name of showing off TravTech as a company that had its act together.

“What you need right now is to eat a big slice of humble pie.” Brooke picked up her pen and started frantically writing something in bright purple ink on the page in front of her. “We have to get you on a press tour. Some interviews, maybe a profile in a few publications.”

“I thought you were marketing, not PR.”

“I’m a branding expert,” she said. “That’s why your company hired me. Which brings me to the next task.”

She wrote something else down on the page. He strained to read it, but the print was too small and, from his perspective, upside-down.

Finally, after writing two full paragraphs of notes in tiny lettering, she looked up at him again. “*You* need to get to know your team. It’s no longer acceptable for you not to be face to face with every single member of your staff. You said there will be thirty-five of us?”

He nodded, feeling more than a little numb at this point.

“Then we need a staff meeting. Next week. I’ll work with HR to arrange it. Wait.” She’d pushed her seat back and was on her way to standing when something ran through her head that seemed to stop her. Now those bright green eyes were trained directly on him. “Is there still an HR department?”

Justin shook his head. “One person. By the end of the day, anyway. Charlie McLaughlin will be your HR contact. I’m going to start calling people in one at a time to deliver the bad news, so you might want to...”

She nodded. “Got it. I’ll work from home, getting all this information together. See you Monday morning!”

And with that, she was out. She turned, planner pressed tightly to her chest, and strode confidently from the room. He was left watching her go, that long mane of dark curls bouncing against her back as she headed straight to her desk,

he presumed to gather her laptop and head to wherever it was she lived.

He hated himself for thinking it, but it was going to be a heck of a lot of fun working with her.

By Monday morning, Brooke had a full schedule made out for Justin. She'd waited until late afternoon to email Charlie, who surprisingly responded immediately. They agreed to set up a Monday-morning meeting with Justin to discuss the next steps.

Brooke took a deep breath as she rode in the elevator to the top floor, where Justin's office was located. He'd rarely occupied that office before the layoffs. From what she always understood, he was too busy running all over the country, promoting the business and lining up clients. A tutoring app required networking with educators, so he spoke at every conference he could. Brooke couldn't believe she'd never even taken the time to research what the man running her company looked like.

As she entered his office, he was sitting behind his all-glass desk, a big picture window with a view of the Santa Cruz Mountains behind him. What a waste. He had this amazing office and spent very little time in it, while she and the marketing team had toiled away fifty-plus hours a week on the side of the building that overlooked the parking lot.

"Good morning," Justin called out as Brooke entered.

There was a statuesque, stunning blond seated in the guest chair opposite him, and they both stood as she walked in. Was this his assistant? If so, shouldn't he have laid her off with the rest of them?

"I'm Charlie," the woman said, extending her hand.

Brooke mentally smacked herself for her assumptions. First, “Charlie” had been a woman, not the man she’d been picturing. Charlie was the head of HR—the woman behind the urgent emails they occasionally received. Second, Brooke had assumed she was Justin’s assistant...why? Because she was a woman? She really needed to get her misogyny in check.

“Brooke.” She returned the handshake.

As a petite brunette with a terminally optimistic disposition, Brooke always felt insecure around women like Charlie. Charlie was the type of woman who turned heads wherever she went. Brooke, on the other hand, bounced in and out of every room like a high school cheerleader. She’d tried to go the sophisticated route in her first job out of college, but she’d quickly realized it came across as awkward and confusing to people she met. Finally, she’d learned to embrace the parts of her personality that had made her popular in high school.

It seemed to work, but she’d never been forced to work directly with a billionaire CEO until now. Her instincts said someone like Charlie fit in better in this environment.

“We emailed back and forth all weekend,” Charlie explained to Justin as they all sat. “We’ve come up with today’s schedule.”

Justin looked from Charlie to Brooke, an unreadable expression on his face. “Go on.”

So, Charlie did. She handed her tablet across the desk, and Justin scrolled, seeing a schedule that was jam-packed for the next couple of days. There was a mid-morning staff meeting to reassure the remaining employees that the company was solid. The last thing they needed was for people to start quitting. Then there was a previously-scheduled meeting about a big upcoming tech conference that would go on with or without a three-hundred-person staff running things around here. After that, he and Brooke had to sit down for an information-gathering session so she could pitch some stories to some top tech and business reporters.

“My leadership team is gone.” Justin handed the tablet across the table to Charlie. “Exactly who will be in this meeting about the tech conference?”

“You, Brooke, the lead developer... Anyone else?”

Brooke looked over at Charlie. Really? On a thirty-five-person team, Brooke, the lead developer, and the CEO were the three to discuss the tech conference? Wait, did that mean...?

“Can we switch the flight from Alyssa to Brooke?” Justin asked.

Now Brooke’s attention was on Justin. “I’m going to the tech conference?”

He looked up from his screen, his stubbled jaw set in what seemed to be its usual “clenched” position. “Is that a problem?”

“No, it’s just—”

Just what? She was caught by surprise here? She’d spent the weekend grappling with the new reality where she no longer had a boss directing her. She’d have to take charge. It was go time for Brooke, and if she wanted to prove her father wrong when he’d said she couldn’t make it in Silicon Valley, she had to *go*.

“I’ll switch the tickets,” Charlie broke in to say. “Hotel room, too, I assume?”

“That shouldn’t be too difficult,” Justin said. “We can work out the rest of the details later. I just didn’t want to pass any deadlines with the trip since it’s next week.”

“Next week?” Brooke hadn’t meant to say those words out loud. She’d been screaming them in her head, but somehow, they’d made their way to her vocal cords.

Justin set the tablet down. “Ms. Alexander, if you can’t go to the conference—”

“Just...a lot of surprises this morning.” Brooke took a deep breath. “I need to update my calendar.”

“I’ll get the dates to you after the meeting.” That was directed at Brooke, but Charlie’s attention was on Justin. “We should discuss office space.”

“Office space?”

“Lot of empty space here now,” Charlie pointed out. “Property management is going to need to know what we plan to do. We can sell off some desks, consolidate, that sort of thing. But what we need to decide is which part of the lease we plan to keep. There’s also the issue of breaking the lease —”

“We can sublet.”

“We’ll have to look over the contracts.” Charlie tapped around on her tablet a few seconds before speaking again. “I think you’re probably aware that your office is the most expensive space by far.”

Brooke had been frantically jotting down notes on her planner, but Charlie’s words made her hand freeze, pen hovered over the page. Was Charlie actually going there?

“You’re suggesting I give up my office.” Justin sat back in his seat, arms crossed over his chest.

Brooke was caught off guard for a moment by the way the posture emphasized his muscular biceps and his obviously toned chest. She’d been a lot better off when he’d been wearing a sweater. That T-shirt was distracting.

“Financially, it doesn’t make sense to keep all this.” Charlie gestured to indicate the expanse of the office. Justin’s desk only took up one-quarter of the space, if that. The rest was wasted on a lounge area with a sofa and a conference table she didn’t think he ever used.

Brooke knew exactly why Justin was resisting, and it had nothing to do with where he worked every day. This office was a status symbol. It established him as a successful business leader at the peak of his career. Anyone who visited this office knew right away that this man was on top.

It was the exact attitude she’d been talking about when she’d advised him to find a little humility. If he refused to give

up this office, it would be the type of behavior that would hurt him moving forward.

“You’re too far from your team,” Brooke blurted.

She had both Charlie’s and Justin’s attention immediately. That put pressure on Brooke to flesh out this idea that had just popped up.

She set her planner on her lap and folded her hands over each other to hold her pen in place on top of it. “There are only thirty-five of us now. Having you way up here makes no sense. By getting rid of this and moving downstairs with your employees, you’ll send the message that we’re all working together. It makes total sense.”

In other words, nobody could possibly see it as a failure if he was doing it for good reason. Instead, he’d be seen as a guy who was committed to whatever it took to make this business work.

“I think we should move everyone into the HR area on the second floor,” Charlie said. “We have this view, plus there’s an office in the corner that would be perfect. It has a door and everything.”

Justin narrowed his eyes at her. “You’re talking about your office, aren’t you?”

“I don’t need a door anymore. It’s all about teamwork.”

Brooke watched Charlie out of the corner of her eye. She liked this woman. She’d felt intimidated at first, but the fact that she was willing to give up her office... This was the humility she was trying to describe to Justin. Maybe it would be contagious.

“I suppose I should change my flight from first class to coach.”

“Yes,” both Charlie and Brooke said at the same time.

Justin sighed. “Okay, give me a little time to adjust. At least a day or two. A week ago, I was making reservations at Baumé and now I’m having to think about every dollar I spend.”

“Just here,” Charlie said. “You can still spend big in your personal life.”

He smiled, and Brooke was struck, yet again, by how his face transformed when he smiled. Maybe it was his dimples. Or maybe it was the way his eyes lit up. It was a complete change from the exhaustion she saw in his expression when he wasn't smiling.

Without warning, Charlie hopped up. “Staff meeting, ten minutes.”

This time, Brooke resisted the urge to panic. Things were changing on a dime around here, and she had to figure out a way to keep up. Even if the spontaneity had her frazzled, she couldn't let it show. She had to look like she had it together at all times.

“Brooke, could I speak with you a moment? Charlie, we'll be right there.”

Again, she tried to keep it cool. She returned to her seat, pen poised over her planner, sure he was about to give her something she needed to write down. This time, she'd be fully prepared.

“Thank you for all this. I know it's been a bit... overwhelming, but I need all the help I can get right now.”

Brooke nodded. She hated to put pressure on herself, but this was her big moment. If she succeeded in helping Justin, maybe this company would start growing and she'd be at the top.

“That branding thing you mentioned.” He leaned forward, as though doing so would keep anyone else in the world from overhearing. Like they were sharing some big secret. “I'm going to need that.”

“Of course. I'll send some emails out and make a few calls after our staff meeting. I think I can get you coverage in at least a few local media outlets by the end of the week.”

“No, not that. I mean, that's great.” He stood and started pacing. He looked stressed. More stressed than he'd been Friday when he'd been tasked with firing a bunch of people.

She didn't know what to make of that. "I'm talking about everywhere, even here. I need help making sure my team doesn't see me as a...what did you call it? Douchebag?"

She gasped. "No. I didn't call you a douchebag. I called your friends douchebags. Not your friends, I mean... You know, the people you try to impress. And that was before I knew I was speaking to you rather than *about* you."

Now she was rambling. Could she *be* any more obvious that she was completely humiliated by the fact that she'd called the CEO's friends douchebags to his face?

He stopped and placed his hands on his desk, leaning on his palms. "Let's pretend someone called me a douchebag because, really, that's what I am. If 'douchebag' refers to someone who takes private planes to conferences—"

"Helicopters," she corrected.

"If the people in that room think I'm one of *those* guys, what can I do to change their minds?"

Brooke looked at him. Really looked at him. She saw his T-shirt and jeans as his attempt to look casual and like "one of the little people," but it looked like a getup that had cost at least a hundred dollars at one of those fancy sportswear outlets. It didn't help that his haircut was probably top dollar by one of those fancy stylists who came to your home and charged a small fortune for the convenience. She thought of the people who would be seated in the conference room, watching him talk, and the fact that they probably had barely bothered to run a comb through their hair before rushing out the door for the two-hour morning commute. They would not see him as one of them.

But she was a brand consultant. Although she'd never tried to overhaul an individual's image before, she'd spent years preparing to do it for a business that had suffered a social media crisis. How would that be any different than overhauling a CEO going through a public image crisis?

"Come here." She stood, setting her planner and pen down on the chair. "Let's see what we can do."

Brooke was his rock.

Justin had always thought of himself as fiercely independent. He'd blasted through life with confidence, rarely being told "no." In fact, he'd argue if anyone said it about him, but he'd faced very few obstacles to get where he was now.

But where he was now was pretty much screwed. As he stood in front of his ridiculously small team, looking at their fearful-yet-hopeful faces, he felt the full weight of his responsibility. These thirty-five people—thirty-four counting the employee who was out with a sick baby—were counting on him to pay the rent and keep food on the table. And they were looking at him for confidence.

Brooke nodded at him as though to urge him on. So, Justin did exactly as she'd suggested and climbed up to sit on the conference table, crossing his legs in front of him like he was about to lead a meditation session. He wasn't some big, powerful CEO. He was a dude in a now-untucked T-shirt and jeans with mussed hair, thanks to some quick work from his new marketing director.

"Let's keep this simple. Why don't you ask questions and I'll answer them? What concerns do you have?"

He waited for arms to shoot up, but nobody raised a hand. Nobody spoke. Someone in the back cleared his throat, but it sounded like a nervous move.

"What's going to happen to our office space?"

He'd never been more relieved to hear someone speak. That person was, no surprise, Brooke. She was looking at him with that expression that made him feel like she believed in him. Brooke, someone he had only met three days earlier but hadn't been able to stop thinking about, was giving him the strength he needed to push through the darkness threatening to overwhelm him.

“Good question. As you all have probably noticed, we have some empty workspaces. We're still in the early planning stages, but we're going to consolidate. I have to speak to the property manager, so I'm not sure exactly how that will work, but we'll all be working a little more closely together soon.”

Now hands shot up in the air. Uh-oh. That probably wasn't a good sign.

Justin pointed to a guy toward the left side of the room. He was in a cluster of people that included some developers Justin recognized.

“I'm part of the app development team,” the guy said. “We need quiet to work.”

“We'll keep that in mind.” Justin glanced over at Charlie, who started typing on her tablet screen. “Maybe we can make sure the developers are in a more private area? Pipe some white noise in? I'd definitely recommend noise-canceling headphones.”

That brought laughter. A developer Justin recognized from project meetings explained, “I think we have that covered.”

“I'd say most of the staff live with headphones on,” someone seated on the other side of the room explained.

Justin's gaze immediately went to Brooke, like she was his life raft. She gave him a gentle smile, then nodded as if to urge him to continue.

“Any other questions about the workspaces?”

No hands. He shouldn't have been surprised. These people had watched their coworkers pack up their belongings, some with tears streaming down their faces. They were all in

survival mode. They certainly weren't going to complain about having to work in confined spaces.

He glanced over at Brooke, who was starting to look a little worried herself. The face that had calmed him just a few minutes earlier now held an uncertain expression. She was making him doubt what he was doing here.

“Look. I know you're all worried. I'd be worried, too. But I'm not worried. You know why?”

Still, silence. He didn't expect an answer to that. He was giving a speech. It was something he'd done at least a hundred times in recent years, but his confidence had been shaken during a very nasty call with a couple of his investors who demanded change. He wasn't sure he'd ever get it back.

He hopped off the table and stood, rising to his full height. Forget being one of them. Right now, he needed to show them he had what it took to *lead*. “You are my best resources. My app developers and marketing director and HR guru.”

He realized then, as he paced from one end of the room to the other, fingers steepled in front of him, that he'd named his entire team in one sentence. His app developers were his business's lifeblood. They were the core of the company—the people he absolutely needed to make the changes and refreshes necessary to encourage every student in the country to use his app for tutoring. But he didn't want to point that out, so he kept going.

“I'm going to sit down with each and every one of you and get your ideas,” he said, speaking as the thought came to him. “You're just as invested in this company's success as anyone else, so why not have you help me push this company to the next level? By next year at this time, TravTech is going to be the biggest comeback story in Silicon Valley history.”

If he expected cheers or applause, he was seriously disappointed by the total lack of a reaction. Nobody clapped. Nobody even coughed. The room seemed to be filled with tension. This was not good, and he had no idea how to turn it back around.

“Hi, everyone,” Brooke said, jumping to her feet. She stood at the front of the room, all her energy and enthusiasm coming across loud and clear. She was...rescuing him? “I’m in charge of marketing, so I’m going to need to get to know what you’re working on. I’d love to come through and maybe snap some photos of you working? Maybe do a profile on each of you for the website. We’ll talk about that later, but it’s all about letting the public see the faces behind the work we’re doing.”

Oddly, that seemed to do it. A low mumble moved through the small crowd, and he even saw a few smiles. He didn’t know if Brooke’s enthusiasm was contagious or these people were just excited about getting their pictures posted online. Either way, he wanted to go with the energy.

“My door is always open,” he said. “I mean it. TravTech started with just me and a couple of developers.” Both of those developers had left, but he didn’t mention that. “Things were better back then in so many ways. But now is an exciting time for TravTech, and I’m happy to have each and every one of you as part of it.”

He’d lost them again. He could see that. They looked nervous and bored and uncertain. Nervously, he looked over at Brooke, who glanced at Charlie. Charlie gave Brooke a nod.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming today. We’ll be coming around to talk to each one of you at your desks at some point.”

While people shuffled out, Brooke made her way over to stand next to Justin.

“Thanks for that,” he leaned over to whisper, noting that she had an apple smell. He wondered if it was her shampoo. Somehow, smelling like apples fit her personality perfectly. “You saved me.”

“I didn’t want to overstep.”

“Overstep. Please. I need someone to overstep right now.”

Everything felt completely jumbled. He was supposed to be this humble guy who had learned a lesson, but at the same

time, he needed to have the confidence necessary to turn this entire company around. He had no idea how to do any of that.

Which was why he needed Brooke's help.

"If you don't need me, I'm going back to my desk. I have some interviews to line up." She stepped back as she spoke, pointing toward the door. The last of the employees was emptying out of the room, and in seconds, they'd have the whole place to themselves.

He didn't want her to go.

It was absurd. He'd gone his entire life so far without even knowing Brooke Alexander existed. Now, she seemed to have gotten into every little nook and cranny of his brain. She could go back to her desk, but he'd still be aware that she was in the building.

He needed to get out of here. Go clear his head. Maybe by the time he saw her again, he'd be able to focus on the work they needed to get done.

Brooke had gone her entire life without knowing a man like Justin Travers existed. But since she'd met him, she couldn't seem to stop thinking about him.

And now she was packed up to head out on a two-day trip with him. Deciding what to wear had made it all too clear just how much she was trying to impress this man. The sad thing was, it wasn't like she could ever indulge her attraction to him. He was her boss. Even if a guy who had billions and could probably have any woman he wanted was interested in her, she couldn't do anything about it. It would be hazardous to her career.

Besides, billionaires didn't end up with women like her. Billionaires ended up with tall, sophisticated types like Charlie who probably knew which fork to use in a fancy restaurant. Brooke was the type who preferred eating pizza on her bed while watching reality TV to getting all fancied up to eat sparse servings in a way-too-darkly-lit restaurant.

I'm at the gate.

Justin's text came through as the rideshare driver pulled up to the curb in front of her terminal. Brooke sighed and got out, thanking the guy while she retrieved her suitcase from her trunk. By now, she should have become a pro at traveling to conferences and trade shows, but sadly, she'd never been high enough on the ladder to be invited. So, she would spend the next couple of days struggling to make it appear like she knew what she was doing.

She fumbled her way through check-in and security, then rushed in the wrong direction for five minutes before realizing her gate was the other way. Thankfully, Justin wouldn't have to know how long it had taken her to do something that a seasoned traveler could do in her sleep. When she saw the sign for the gate ahead, she slowed down, pushed her laptop bag strap higher on her shoulder, and took long, deep breaths to hide the fact that she was a nervous wreck.

“Hi!”

The sound of his voice only made Brooke more nervous. She turned and saw him in one of the chairs facing the direction she'd been walking. His phone was in his hand in front of him, so she just hoped he'd been staring at that and not watching her try to collect herself as she approached.

“Hi,” she said.

It was the way he looked at her. That's what had her so tied in knots these days. No matter how many times she told herself it made no sense that he'd be attracted to her, his eyes took on a certain softness when he looked at her. He didn't have that look with anyone else.

“Looks like our flight's delayed.” He pointed up at the screen. “You want to go grab some breakfast?”

She resisted the urge to look at the screen above her. A seasoned traveler would also know that the flight was delayed. Why? Because a seasoned traveler would probably have been monitoring the flight on her phone, maybe even have an app that alerted her to changes in departure times. So, it was best to pretend this wasn't news to her.

“Sure.” She pointed ahead of her. “There's one of those cinnamon roll places right up this way.”

There. That would make her sound like she knew this airport when, in actuality, she'd simply noticed the sign while she was walking.

But Justin wasn't reacting. He looked like he wanted to say something but thought better of it. “Maybe something a little more...”

“Healthy?” she asked.

“No, not the word I was going for. Some fruit, maybe some scrambled eggs? I’m sure we can find a real breakfast place if we walk a little.”

“Have you ever eaten a big cinnamon roll while sitting at your gate?” she asked.

He stood, gathering his rolling bag. “Can’t say I have. Let’s walk.”

“Yeah, not something a billionaire would do.”

Her words made him stop in his tracks. He turned to look at her.

“Says who?” he asked.

Brooke shrugged. “Just an observation. I can’t see you doing anything that would get your fingers messy.”

“I just prefer not to load my body with all that sugar this early in the day. Can we walk?”

There was no missing the annoyance in his voice. Great. She’d ticked off her boss. She told herself she needed to keep him on her side because he had the power to fire her, but really, she just didn’t want to make him mad.

“Sorry.” She rushed to catch up so she could walk in stride beside him. “I’m helping with your personal branding, remember? These are things we need to discuss.”

“So, you think eating a messy sticky bun or whatever would help my image?”

“Not exactly, but...” She looked ahead of them. A big food court was up ahead. “Okay, come with me.”

She sped ahead, surprised she could walk so much faster than him. He was pretty tall, so she’d assumed one long stride of his would equal four or five of her steps, but when she was determined, she could move pretty quickly.

She stopped, looking around at the various signs. This may have been a mistake. He could pick his restaurant from one of

the fancier, high-priced ones. The goal here was to get him to do something outside of his comfort zone.

“Fast food.” She pointed to a sign naming a very popular chain restaurant known for its hamburgers. “I dare you.”

That intense gaze landed on her again, and she felt like she might lose her footing. “You think I haven’t eaten fast food before.”

“A big, fluffy, greasy biscuit loaded with bacon and eggs. That’s the challenge. Oh, and maybe some of those fried potatoes.”

“Hash browns?”

“Whatever.”

He shook his head, still staring at her. “Billionaires eat fast food.”

“I want to see you do it. In an airport. Sitting at the food court like everyone else.”

That seemed to get the point across. She’d been doubting herself there for a second, but she knew now that she was right. If she wasn’t here, pushing him, he would have chosen one of those restaurants where servers came to your table. Or he would have used his frequent flyer points to access one of those fancy lounges where someone brought around lattes and eggs on a gold platter or whatever.

“Challenge accepted.”

She wasn’t sure what she’d expected, but there was nothing awkward or uncomfortable about what happened next. He got in line, ordered exactly what she’d instructed, along with a black coffee, and took his tray to a nearby table. When she joined him, he was already halfway through his biscuit.

“Impressive,” she said, smiling.

“So this rebranding, it involves me doing things like this?”

Brooke unwrapped her own biscuit and unfolded a napkin on her lap. “Sort of. It’s more about showing the world that you aren’t jetting around in five-hundred-dollar sunglasses,

eating caviar and drinking champagne by the pool. Do you own a suit?"

The question landed just as she would have expected. He squinted at her, not following her sudden change in direction.

He looked down at his long-sleeved button-down shirt. "No. Why?"

"We might have to take a client out to dinner."

"I thought the goal was to appear like I don't have a big bank balance."

"I guarantee I could find a suit that's cheaper than that pair of jeans you're wearing."

She took a bite of her biscuit, suddenly realizing how self-conscious she was. Every bite was taken with extreme caution, like she didn't want to appear as though she didn't have manners. How could she be attracted to someone who made her feel so out of her element?

"I'm not really a clothes guy." He shrugged, propping one arm on the back of his chair while he looked around. "My ex bought most of my clothes."

She nearly choked on the bite of biscuit she'd just swallowed. "Ex?"

The word came out sounding strangled, but she couldn't do anything about that. The thought of some woman picking out his clothes and sharing his life... It was ridiculous for her to feel jealous about it, but her emotions seemed to have taken over her common sense lately.

"I was engaged for three years." He looked at her then, making her immediately dab at her mouth with her napkin in case food remained. "It didn't work out."

"Three-year engagements rarely do."

She mumbled that, but the way one side of his mouth lifted revealed he'd heard. "Why do you say that?"

Sighing, she set her napkin back in her lap. "My friends and I have a rule. If we're in a relationship for more than a

year and he hasn't proposed, we end it. I had a friend, Amelia, who was engaged from the time she started college until a year ago—that was a seven-year engagement. It's just kind of obvious that if things stall for too long, there's something not right about the relationship, right?"

He took a long sip of coffee while he seemed to mull that one over. Then he looked at her. She forced herself to return his stare, but she had to fight with everything she had to avoid looking away. His scrutiny was that intense.

"You're right. It wasn't right. I knew it, deep down, and I'm pretty sure she knew it even though she was furious when I broke it off."

Brooke nodded slowly. "You broke it off."

"I think she saw it coming for a while. She was getting clingier and more jealous, and eventually, I knew I was dragging it out too long. I think I was afraid of being alone."

Okay, of all the things she expected him to say, that was the last. It showed a vulnerability she hadn't anticipated. He'd seemed so cocky when he was talking about the three-year engagement, she'd assumed he'd cut her loose and felt nothing about it, but here was this side of him again. It was a side she saw every now and then when he let his guard down and revealed that right now, he was feeling very lost and broken.

Brooke took a deep breath and set her napkin on her tray. "That's why I've stayed single the past couple of years. I want to be comfortable being alone. Happy, even. Then I'll know when I do fall in love, it's for the right reasons."

Crap. He was staring at her like *that* again. She smiled at him, trying to act as though she hadn't just put the words "fall in love" in the air between them like it was no big deal.

"We should go," he said without breaking the stare. Suddenly, he stood, leaving her with that warm, melty, shaky feeling she got every time he looked at her like that. She was going to have to get control of herself so she could focus on doing her job. It was the only option right now.

Maybe she was misreading the looks he was giving her, or maybe she wasn't. But either way, the only option was to keep things professional.

This woman was driving him to distraction.

Justin was well aware that he was her boss and anything personal was one hundred percent off-limits. But he couldn't seem to fight this overwhelming urge to pull her into his arms and give her the kiss of her life.

"This is it."

They'd been walking through the exhibit hall, looking for their booth, when she'd come to an abrupt halt. That meant the big box of supplies she'd been rolling behind her came to a stop as well, putting it directly in his path. He barely stopped himself in time.

He had to start paying better attention to his surroundings.

"What?"

"This." She pointed to the right of her, and with sinking disappointment, he turned to look. Yes, that had been exactly what he'd feared. This small walled-off area was their booth. It had the plain blue partitions that surrounded every other booth and no signage at all. Not that he was surprised—but when he'd had a full marketing team, he'd arrived at these events to find things were already done for him.

"I have everything we need right here." Brooke pointed to the box she'd been toting around. It had been shipped to the front desk and was waiting, with Alyssa's name on it, when she arrived. Then he remembered they'd had to cancel the setup they'd previously ordered, as it was ridiculously

elaborate and expensive. Yet all around them were big, professionally-designed, light-up signs and tables that looked like they'd been borrowed from an Apple store.

“It’s all about image, right?” Brooke reminded him. “Come on.”

As they pulled items out of the box, he got what she was saying. Having a flashy booth would send a very bad message to their investors, as well as the public. They were supposed to be reducing costs. This showed they were back to basics.

“You take that side, and I’ll take this one. Here’s a twisty.” She held out something that looked like it had come off a loaf of bread, then pointed to the chair she’d pushed up to the wall. There was a chair on his side, too. They both climbed up, tied the sign in place, then stepped down to admire their work.

And walked directly into each other.

“Sorry,” he said, trying hard to ignore how her arm felt against his as she bumped into him. How could such a small thing make his entire body react? He couldn’t recall it ever being like this with a woman before.

“Okay, now for the handouts.” She headed over to the box.

“Handouts?” he asked.

She’d been leaning over, but his words caused her to straighten. “Yes. Brochures. Business cards. Takeaways. We also have a signup sheet.”

“We’re supposed to be a tech company, and we’re using paper?”

“Paper is a takeaway.” Brooke stepped back and gestured to indicate the surrounding, very empty expo hall. They’d arrived earlier than everyone else to set up, probably because nobody else had brochures and business cards to set out. “How many of these other companies will give takeaways? People will walk out of here having seen demos and talked to people, but with nothing in hand.”

He didn’t know about that. He’d done quite a few of these, and he’d seen some business cards changing hands, for sure.

But he admired her passion. It inspired him to trust her and follow her on this journey to see where it went.

Brooke stepped toward him, handing him a stack of pages. “Fan those out over on that table. I’ll handle the display up front.”

They worked in silence, but he was all too aware of her, just a few feet away from him, moving with a grace that was fascinating to watch. In fact, he was having a hard time concentrating, thanks to the way she’d commanded his peripheral vision.

“All done.” He stepped back, admiring his work. Somehow, she ended up standing next to him, although he hadn’t noticed her moving. He looked over at her and noticed the way she bit her lower lip as she studied the work she’d done.

Suddenly, she looked up at him, and her lips parted like she was about to say something. But then she seemed to notice him looking down at her, and her expression changed. Softened. She was looking up at him like she was thinking exactly what he was thinking.

She wanted him to kiss her.

He moved slowly at first, giving her every possible chance to pull away if this wasn’t what she wanted. But she turned toward him, reaching out to place her hand on his chest as he lowered his head and did the very thing he’d wanted to do since the day she’d walked into his life.

The instant his lips touched hers, he knew this was the right thing to do. Nothing had ever felt *righter*, in fact. He turned until he was fully facing her, settling his hands onto the small of her back but not pushing. She rose up on tiptoe and rested her hands on his shoulders, deepening the kiss as she pressed her body against his.

“May I have your attention?”

The noise blared through the speakers above them, immediately obliterating the silence. He’d lost all sense of space and time while kissing her and now his ears were

ringing. He pulled back, looking up at the speaker, then down at her. He was sure she would be completely freaked out by what had just happened, but instead, she started laughing.

Laughing.

He couldn't help it. He found himself laughing, too. Stepping back, he released his hold on her and looked around, confirming that they were, indeed, still alone, at least in the immediate area. Meanwhile, the person coming through the speakers was carrying on about booth times and breaks and what types of beverages were and weren't allowed in the exhibit hall.

"Dinner?" he asked.

Brooke nodded. She looked like she'd just woken up from a nap, all groggy and confused. But she grabbed her purse from the box, then closed the box up and shoved it under one of the tables. He had to fight the urge to take her hand as they walked from the expo hall because they were, after all, here on business.

“So, tell me about your company.”

Brooke took a deep breath and smiled at the man standing in front of her. He was youngish, but that was nothing unique. Everyone here was male, young, and dressed like this guy—casual top of some sort and baggy jeans with sneakers. It was impossible to tell the investors from the entrepreneurs from the app developers who’d been dragged along by their bosses. The one thing that was even slightly unique here was her. She’d seen only four other women this morning. Two had been models hired to stand around and draw attention to specific booths.

“Homework Helper is a free app for students.” Brooke lifted the tablet Justin had left on the table before rushing off to get them some coffee. “Students log in and get help from other students. They can upgrade to a membership where professional tutors help out. There are also forums where they can have discussions about other things. Do you want to see how it works?”

The guy nodded, and Brooke went through the demonstration. She’d watched Justin do this countless times that morning, but she was having a hard time learning. All she could think about was what it had been like to kiss him. And that had been followed by dinner in the hotel restaurant, where he’d looked at her across the table and asked her questions about her future, her interests, her family... Like he was really interested in her. Genuinely interested in *her*.

Yeah, she was falling hard. And she didn't know how to rein herself back in. She'd spent the past couple of years trying to keep herself focused on work, and now she couldn't seem to focus on it at all.

“Sounds like Tutor2Tutor.”

Brooke blinked and looked at the man standing in front of her. She'd been so caught up in showing off the app, she'd actually forgotten to look for his reaction. Classic sales mistake, but she didn't have the talent for it that Justin did.

“There are other apps,” she said. “But—”

“No, Tutor2Tutor. They're right over there.”

He pointed to the right. Brooke leaned forward, and sure enough, there was a big, lit-up white sign with “Tutor2Tutor” in fun, multicolored lettering. Even more surprising, though, was the fact that Justin was standing in front of that booth. He turned and began walking back toward them with a coffee cup in each hand.

“There are many competitors, but let me show you some of the features that set us apart,” she continued, but she wasn't feeling very confident. Mostly because it was hard to show the features that set their app apart when she had no idea what these other people were offering. She was more than a little relieved when Justin arrived. He set her coffee on the counter next to her and stepped inside the booth, staring down at his phone.

“This is our CEO and founder, Justin Travers.” Brooke turned slightly, hoping her boss would get the hint. He didn't. He was still focused on his screen.

“I'll be right back,” Brooke said when the man began going through the features himself.

They'd been here most of the day, but she still couldn't get used to just handing over Justin's tablet to strangers. There seemed to be an odd sort of trust in this place that nobody would take off with anyone else's electronics. She kept an eye on the guy as she edged over to where Justin was standing.

“This man said there’s an app like ours just down the way,” Brooke whispered.

She had to stand extremely close to Justin to avoid the man overhearing—something she actually enjoyed doing. But Justin didn’t even seem to notice she was standing there. He appeared to be going through some sort of crisis.

Finally, he looked up at her. She didn’t like the look on his face. Even with all he’d been through recently, he somehow always managed to keep his cool. This was *not* keeping his cool. He looked frazzled, panicked even. She wanted to do something, anything to help. But what?

“This app is a carbon copy of ours,” he said. “They’ve managed to reverse engineer our code and create the same thing, only better.”

“Can they do that?” Brooke frowned. She glanced over her shoulder at the man, who seemed to be focused solely on the screen in front of him. She only hoped he wasn’t listening.

“I’m trying to get my attorney to call me, but he’s not answering. I’m going to have to make some calls. Can you handle things here?”

Brooke nodded, feeling more than a little numb. What was the point in even being here if everyone was just going to point out that they’d copied someone else? It all felt like such a waste of time.

Even worse, when she turned around, the man was gone. At least he’d left the tablet on the countertop next to her coffee. Brooke leaned forward and looked down the way, and sure enough, the man was heading in that direction. Frowning, she wondered what that meant.

She had to go see for herself.

Brooke grabbed her purse and the tablet and headed straight toward the big sign. The exhibit hall was fairly empty right now, anyway—it was that way every time a big session started. Nobody would even miss her at her booth.

“Explain to me how you built this,” the man was saying as Brooke approached.

She hung back a little, mostly because she wanted to hear what the guy on the other side of the fancy glowing, white counter would say in response. She knew nothing about developing an app, so she'd have to commit whatever it was to memory so she could report back to Justin.

“We hired it out,” the guy said. “Outsourced it overseas. We’re just a small shop right now but growing. We know the dangers of expanding too quickly.”

That felt like a dig at Justin. But if this guy had outsourced developing the app, would he necessarily know if the code had been copied from Homework Helper? Maybe this wasn't this guy's fault at all.

The man was tapping around on the tablet at this booth now. “Is there another app that will do what yours does?”

“There are other apps, sure, but nothing like this. Our interface is easier to use than anything else on the market. We also offer a free personalized coaching session for everyone who signs up for our expert tutoring services. The competitors don't give out anything like that.”

Brooke had heard all she needed to hear. She spun and headed straight back to the booth, already pulling up the web browser on the tablet. She was going to look up this Homework Helper site herself.

The trip back to San Francisco was a tough one. Justin didn't want to take out his stress on Brooke, but he couldn't seem to dig himself out of this funk he was in. Homework Helper was his big project. TravTech lived and died on its success. To hear someone had just swiped his idea was devastating.

When they landed, he did his best to thank Brooke for her help. The last thing he wanted her to see was how defeated he felt. He wanted her to view him as strong, capable of tackling any challenge—the person the world seemed to have thought he was before he had to downsize his company and pretty much start over rebuilding his image. But he couldn't fake that right now, so he just had to give her a halfhearted smile and say he'd see her at the office the next morning.

He was sitting at his desk, refreshing his inbox in the hopes that someone from his legal team might have finally sent over their promised response, when Charlie knocked on the doorjamb. “You have that interview at nine,” she said when he looked up.

Nine. Interview. What time was it? He glanced at the clock in the corner of his computer screen and realized he had five minutes to get to the conference room downstairs for his interview. Before the trip, he and Brooke had discussed that it would be better for the reporter to interview him downstairs rather than in his sizable office. It sent a humbler message.

Now it all just seemed so pointless. His signature app was crashing and burning, and he'd pretty much put all his eggs in that basket. Sure, TravTech had other apps, but none were as popular as Homework Helper. Yet, Tutor2Tutor was taking off in app stores, as well as getting coverage everywhere, no doubt thanks to an ace marketing team the company had hired to drop some money for some sponsored reviews that the public wouldn't notice were sponsored.

All stuff he'd once done, but now, he just felt defeated.

Summoning as much energy as he could, he stood and headed to the conference room. Charlie led the way. She was heading back to her own office, she said. He made small talk with her, pretending everything was normal, until they stepped into the elevator and the doors closed.

"Okay, what's going on with you?" Charlie asked as he pressed the button for the second floor.

"What do you mean?"

"You're down. I can see it. Anyone could see it. This isn't like you."

Justin stared straight ahead, noting his blurred reflection in the elevator doors in front of him. Yeah, his posture did seem a bit slumped. He deliberately forced his shoulders into a more confident position, but that wouldn't help the puffiness around his eyes and drawn mouth that gave away he'd gotten very little sleep the past few days.

"I think it's over."

It had to get pretty bad for him to admit that to Charlie. She hadn't exactly been his close confidante at any point before. Typically, the last thing he'd want any employee to know was that the company could be on its way to closing its doors, but it had gotten bad enough that he didn't think it was worth covering up anymore.

The doors slid open, and Charlie grabbed his arm, pulling him into a now-empty work area and closing the door. "What are you talking about?"

“Another company swiped our idea. We can’t compete with them. We don’t have the team or the resources anymore. We’re in survival mode. I could pour my own money into legal fees to sue, but by the time it comes to anything, our app will be so low in the rankings, nobody will even be able to find us out there.”

It was...a lot. Justin could admit that much. He’d dumped all his thoughts and worries of the past few days right on Charlie’s shoulders. He wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d panicked. But she didn’t panic. Instead, she took a step forward, lifted her arms, and hugged him.

Hugged him.

Justin’s initial response was to shake off the offer of a hug. After all, she was his employee, and keeping a professional distance was wise. But within seconds, he realized just how much this was exactly what he needed right now. A big, warm hug. Just sharing the burden he’d been carrying around alone was enough, but the hug was a reminder that he wasn’t in this alone. There were people here who cared about this company and wanted to make sure it succeeded.

Only when he pulled back from the embrace did he remember that the walls in this room—and pretty much every room in the entire building—were glass. And outside that room stood Brooke, staring at both of them with an expression he never wanted to see on her face.

Pain. Hurt. Sadness.

Anger he could have handled, but sadness was gut-wrenching. He reached for the door, intending to explain everything to her. But that sad look quickly turned to an expression of steel. Her eyes shot daggers at him as she spoke the next words, then turned and walked in the direction of the conference room.

“We’re late.”

Brooke forced a smile as she approached the conference room. The man waiting there had called yesterday afternoon to say he wanted to interview Justin first thing this morning. She'd been so nervous about the whole thing, she'd asked someone else to escort him to the conference room while she gathered her professionalism. She'd been all ready to go...

And then she saw Justin and Charlie together.

It had confirmed her suspicions all along. Not that they were having an affair—that had been a surprise. But that Charlie was more Justin's type. Kissing her had been...what? A mistake? She shook her head as she walked. She'd sort all that out later. Right now, they had an interview.

"Brooke...wait!" Justin called from behind her, and she quickened her pace. Ahead, she saw someone sitting at the conference table. Darn these glass walls. The last thing she needed was for one of the top tech reporters in the country to see Justin and Brooke having what looked like a lover's spat right in front of him.

But thank *goodness* for the glass walls. Otherwise, she might not have found out about Charlie and Justin.

"Later!" Brooke called back.

She reached for the door handle, jerked it back, and entered the room with a smile so forced, it probably looked cartoonish to the man standing at the table. But she came to an

abrupt halt, smile frozen in place, when she saw the man seated there.

“You?”

The word came out on the whoosh of air she’d been holding in as she entered. Her smile fell, and she looked at the skinny, extremely tall—she saw as he rose to his feet—man as though he’d just stepped out of a spaceship.

“Ben Eisenberg.” He held out his hand. “Senior columnist for *Business News Today*.”

At some point, Justin had slipped into the room, and he was now standing next to Brooke. He looked over at her, and she saw that he seemed to be struggling to catch his breath as she was.

“Justin Travers.” Justin returned his handshake. “This is my marketing director, Brooke.”

“Brooke and I have met,” Ben said. “Although not formally.”

Brooke somehow found her manners and extended her arm to shake Ben’s hand. It would have been awkward otherwise. Hopefully, Ben would clear up what was going on here.

“We met in the exhibition hall.” Brooke looked over at Justin. “You were there, but you were...preoccupied.”

Probably with texting Charlie or something. No, that was catty. He’d been preoccupied with trying to figure out why some other company had copied his app. He’d been trying to reach his attorney, as she recalled, while Ben had been testing out the app on the tablet she’d let him hold.

“It appears you’ve been ripped off,” Ben said. “And I want to cover the story.”

“You’re a reporter,” Brooke said needlessly. Obviously, he was a reporter. She just hadn’t reconciled what had happened here and was struggling to catch up.

“Senior tech columnist. I love investigative pieces like this. Being able to break a story nobody else knows about—even the companies at the center of it.”

“We’re well aware of the trademark infringement,” Justin broke in to say. “My legal team is on top of it.”

Ben nodded, then sat down. “Good, good. Please. Have a seat.”

Brooke immediately sat down, not even looking to see what Justin was doing. To heck with Justin right now. Okay, so she wanted to see the company get through this somehow, hopefully with Ben Eisenberg’s help, but that was just so she could keep her job...until she could find another one, anyway.

“Have you ever heard of Simply Source Code?”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Justin nodding. “Company that provides app developers. A lot of startups use them.”

“Yes, not for much longer, I’m guessing.”

Ben passed a sheet of paper across the table, landing it perfectly between the two of them. That meant Brooke and Justin had to lean toward each other to get a better look. She was tempted to hold her ground until he finished looking, then lean over, but she didn’t want Justin to know he’d gotten to her. She just held her breath, told herself to shut off her attraction to him, and leaned over.

And immediately felt that attraction she was trying so hard to fight.

Darn it. This couldn’t be easy, could it? He smelled like soap and...something else she couldn’t put her finger on. Cinnamon? Probably something he’d picked up while hugging Charlie. That was enough to snap Brooke right back to center. She pretended she’d seen whatever was on that paper as she turned her full attention on Ben.

Ben pointed at the page. “Simply Source Code has been stealing code from various apps and selling it as original. A basic web search pulls up complaints from a few people who have paid them and fired them after they figured it out. But I have an app developer friend who’s looking into the apps they have helped successfully launch. This goes much farther than TravTech.”

“So, there are other companies who are using stolen code?” Brooke asked.

“I’m pretty sure. But I need your help. My friend needs access to some things that only your own development team can give them. You can verify my credentials—whatever you need to do. If we’re going to blow this thing wide open, we need to work together.”

Brooke looked over at Justin. Okay, yeah, she was furious at him. But she was also pretty darn excited. For the first time in at least a week, she was hopeful about this company’s future. If they could be at the center of helping blow a big scandal like this wide open, it could be great publicity for TravTech.

“What happens to the companies that unknowingly used stolen code?” Justin asked.

Brooke’s excitement didn’t appear to be shared on this side of the table. Justin still had that anxious, drawn expression that he’d adopted about halfway through their trip to the conference. Right around the time they’d learned another company had swiped his app.

“I doubt they could be legally liable unless they knew.” Ben shrugged. “It doesn’t look good for the future of their apps, though. They’d probably have to pivot, redesign, whatever. Why?”

Justin frowned. “It could happen to anyone. Any startup. Just one wrong decision and your entire business can be destroyed.”

Across the table, Ben was nodding slowly, studying Justin. Brooke knew exactly what he was thinking. Justin was a tough one to read. Initially, you wanted to see him as this guy who’d been handed all his success and expected things to keep going his way. But the more you got to know him, the more you saw this vulnerable side. He seemed to be in perpetual fear that everything was going to come crashing down around him.

Or maybe it was just that, since she’d met him, everything actually *had* been crashing around him.

Brooke pushed her chair back and stood. “Right now, we need to worry about TravTech. Mr. Eisenberg, we’re excited to work with you on this project. Anything you need from us, you let us know.”

“One more thing.”

Ben’s comment made Brooke feel silly for standing. Neither of the two men at the table seemed inclined to budge just yet.

“Let’s keep this under wraps for now,” Ben said. “The last thing we need is for it to get out that Tutor2Tutor is a rip-off or some overseas company is stealing code from startups. We have to move fast, but I want to make sure the first time Simply Source Code is aware we’re onto them is when they read about it on the internet with the rest of the world.”

Brooke nodded, stepping around her chair and pushing it back to the table. She could keep a secret, no problem. What she couldn’t do was stay in this room until Ben Eisenberg was gone and it was just her and Justin. The plan, as it now stood, was to avoid him at all costs until finally he gave up and realized she was fine with keeping things professional between them.

Even if she wasn’t fine with it, she would be. In time.

Everything was coming together. So why did it still feel like his life was in shambles?

Justin paced the length of the conference room a full week later, racking his brain for ideas to get Brooke back. He'd tried texting her, calling her, emailing her... All to no avail. Every time he showed up in her office, she was either on the phone or gone. When he asked Charlie, she said Brooke had been working from home a lot.

That explained it. She was avoiding him by working from home. In the meantime, things seemed to happen without her having to be alone with him. Meetings took place, always with one other person happening to walk through the door at the same time Brooke did. Ben showed up, and Brooke somehow knew to come in two minutes behind him. It was all so carefully choreographed, he'd laugh if the whole thing wasn't giving him constant digestive upset.

She couldn't avoid him forever, though. He'd get her alone. Maybe after this big staff meeting-slash-celebration party. The article had launched that morning, and everyone in town seemed to be talking. Brooke—who had managed to send him work-related emails every few hours for the past week—had arranged a big gathering with the development team to thank them for their hard work and discretion as Ben's friend collected the information they needed to put Simply Source Code on blast.

“Over there.” Brooke’s voice broke through the silence, and Justin turned, his heart suddenly jumping into racing mode at the thought of being alone with her. All the words he’d planned to blurt out froze on his lips, though, when he saw that Brooke wasn’t alone. Not at all. She had three guys with stacks of pizzas and two people from the development team with her.

“Mr. Travers.” Brooke nodded tersely in his direction as she followed the pizza guys across the room.

He was contemplating ways to get the developers to give the two of them alone time without seeming unprofessional when they plopped down at the conference table. “Big day, huh, Mr. T?” one of them asked.

Justin smiled and nodded. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Brooke as she followed the delivery guys from the room. They stopped outside the door, and she handed them something—a cash tip, he assumed. Maybe he could follow her out there. If she was headed back to her office, he could get her alone on the elevator—

No. She was returning to the conference room. She opened the door and headed directly to the table where the pizzas were. There, she began removing plates and napkins from their packaging.

With another nod at the developers, Justin turned and headed over to that table. Maybe the developers would start talking. Probably not, though. It wasn’t safe to discuss this here.

“Ms. Alexander.”

She stiffened. The developers probably wouldn’t have noticed if they were looking, but Justin definitely saw it. Her entire posture went rigid at the sound of his voice. Or maybe it was the fact that he was closing in on her. They hadn’t been this close to each other since the day they’d met with Ben in the conference room.

“I need to speak with you before everyone gets here.”

Brooke didn't pause in what she was doing. She may have been tense, but she was doing a great job of setting things up in spite of it. "We can meet on that later."

Those words were said in her most professional voice, no doubt by design. She didn't want the developers, who were indeed engaged in conversation and seemingly not even listening to them, to overhear and think something personal was going on.

"There appears to have been a misunderstanding," he said, speaking in low, even tones, as he would if they were planning social media posts or website conversions.

"No, I understand things completely. Thanks for clearing it all up for me. We have a lot of work to do here, and I'm glad we can refocus on what's important."

"That's exactly what I need to talk to you about. What's important." He looked over at the developers, who had gotten quiet all of a sudden. They were awkwardly staring down at the table. They could very well have been listening to every word. "Come with me."

It was a gutsy move. He was pretty much pulling rank to get her alone with him. If she said "no," he'd have to honor that.

Surprisingly, she set down the stack of napkins she'd been holding and turned to face him. "Let's go."

It didn't escape his attention that she looked like she was walking toward her eventual doom. She was *that* sure he was about to give her some sort of speech, he guessed. Maybe a *we have to keep this professional* sort of thing or an apology for kissing her when he was very clearly...what? In a relationship with Charlie? A womanizer who just hit on every woman he met? He wasn't sure what the storyline was supposed to be here.

The problem with glass walls was that there was nowhere to go when you wanted to have a private conversation. He paused for a second, then headed straight for the one place he knew they could have at least a small amount of privacy.

“This is the women’s restroom,” she commented. As if he didn’t know.

“Do you think someone’s going to need it?”

She thought about that for a second. Yes, she was processing it the same way he had a few seconds earlier. Silicon Valley itself was mostly male, and this building was even more so, especially now that he’d laid off most of the staff. They’d had a woman on the development team, but she’d left for a hefty raise just a few months before the layoffs. That meant there hadn’t been many women to keep on board when he was deciding which employees to terminate.

“You haven’t let me explain,” he blurted before she could manage to halt the discussion somehow. He had to get this out. “What you saw was a comforting hug.”

She shook her head. “It’s more than that, and that’s okay. You and Charlie...fit. I get it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She’s sophisticated and tall and beautiful and a more suitable companion than someone like me. If you walked into one of your fancy events with me on your arm—”

“I’d be proud. Charlie’s great, but she’s no Brooke Alexander.”

“It’s not just Charlie. It’s the way you acted after the kiss. It just all makes sense to me. You don’t have to sugarcoat things to avoid hurting my feelings. I’m fine. We’ll just keep things professional.”

“I don’t want to keep things professional. If you have problems working for someone you’re in a relationship with, I can get you a great job somewhere else, but you’re the common denominator here. I want to be with you. That is, if you want to be with me.”

As he said the words, he realized how they’d come across if she wasn’t into him at all. It sounded like some kind of threat.

“That’s not to say that we couldn’t keep things professional if you aren’t interested in me,” he rushed to say. “I’m just saying I don’t want this to be an obstacle.” He gestured to indicate the surrounding area, meaning the business itself, not the bathroom.

Brooke shook her head, confusion knitting her brows together. “Relationship? Interested in you? I don’t understand.”

He stepped closer to her, realizing, for whatever reason, that he was going to have to lay it all out on the line here. Otherwise, this conversation could go in circles all afternoon.

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since I met you. That’s the truth. I don’t know where this is going or how we’ll navigate the work stuff, but my point is, whatever it takes, I can’t walk away from this.”

This was the part where he just had to shut up and wait for her response. He’d always thought himself fairly good at gauging when someone was interested in him, and the way Brooke had looked at him—the feeling she’d put into that kiss—all of it indicated he wasn’t wrong. But he’d been such a mess since she’d come along, it wouldn’t surprise him to learn his radar had been way, way off.

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you, either,” she said after what seemed like a lifetime. “I tried. Believe me, I tried. Nobody’s ever looked at me the way you do. I just worry—”

“The Charlie thing?”

“No. Well, I guess I worry that we won’t be compatible. I’m a ‘fast food in the food court at the airport’ type of person and you’re... you’re a billionaire.”

He took her hand, loving the way she immediately entwined her fingers with his. “I eat dinner out of takeout containers almost every night, usually after working until way too late. I’d one thousand times rather go to a sports bar with my high school friends than eat in some fancy restaurant with a fellow tech founder. This—” Again, he gestured to indicate

his surroundings. “Whatever people think of me, this isn’t me. Give me a chance to show you. I promise I won’t let you down.”

Brooke’s mouth spread into a slow smile, and he suddenly felt like everything in his life was right again. None of the victories of the past few days had meant a thing when she wasn’t speaking to him. Now, it could all fall into place.

“I think we have a party to get to,” she said, rising up to tiptoe to give him a light kiss on the lips. “We’ll save the romantic moment for later, when we aren’t in the ladies room.”

He looked around. “You do have a point there.”

It was a clean bathroom, and fairly fancy, what with all the marble and such. But there were definitely better places to start a relationship with someone. He’d have to work on finding a better location.

Meanwhile, they had some celebrating to do.

Brooke looked out at the helicopter sitting on the runway at the small airport and wondered how she possibly could have gotten here. Just a few weeks ago, she'd been sure she was about to be jobless, and now she was about to hop on a helicopter and fly to Los Angeles for dinner.

Dinner.

“Ready?” Justin asked.

He settled his hand on the small of her back, looking down at her. She felt shaky about getting on a helicopter, but she was trying to put on a brave face. He wanted to take her somewhere special, and she knew she'd look back on this as one of the most romantic things anyone had ever done for her, but right now, she was worried about leaving the ground in a helicopter he'd chartered and flown by a pilot she'd never met.

“I think so.”

Justin held up a hand to signal the pilot to give them a second. The pilot was sitting behind the wheel, but at that gesture, he nodded and went back to staring at his phone.

“What's wrong? We don't have to do this if you're uncomfortable.”

Brooke took a deep breath. “No, it's not the dinner or flying to L.A. It's getting on that.”

She pointed to the helicopter. She'd gotten on planes before. In fact, she'd hopped on one with him the first week

they'd known each other. Flying wasn't new to her. Flying on a *charter helicopter* was new to her.

"Take my hand." He held out his hand.

Without unlocking her gaze from his, she slipped her hand in his and saw what he was doing. It was working. She immediately felt safe.

He didn't let her hand go. Not as they climbed onto the helicopter and took their seats—well, except to fasten their seatbelts—and not as the helicopter began its ascent. He even endured her grip tightening during takeoff. Once they were above the city, he pointed out various sights. Soon, she was so absorbed in the scenery, her heart rate slowed slightly, and she began to feel like she could breathe again.

But then it was time to land—another process that was unfamiliar to her. It wasn't like a plane where the engine noises picked up and you slowly felt the descent. No, with a helicopter, you just dropped down and perched on a surface, like you were in a car that could fly. The almost-deafening whirring of the blades above them didn't change at all. Brooke, meanwhile, was trying to take deep breaths like she'd learned to do when she was stressed out in college.

"Ready?" he asked again, and this time, she was all too ready. She'd have to climb back onto this transport when it was time to leave, but for now, she was safely back on land. Never mind that statistics showed plane and helicopter crashes weren't as common as the many dangers that lurked when you were wandering around on the Earth's surface. For now, she felt in control of her environment once again.

"Our ride is here," Justin said.

Brooke emerged from the helicopter to see the "ride" he was talking about. It was a limousine—something she'd only ridden in once, on prom night back in high school. He'd said he didn't like to do billionaire things, but this night was already looking to be a series of billionaire-ish events.

"Justin..." She hesitated, staring at the vehicle in front of her. "You didn't have to do all this."

“Don’t worry. We aren’t going to spend the evening sitting in some over-the-top fancy restaurant. Come on.”

He took her hand again, reminding her that he was there with her through whatever adventure they were about to face. Her heels dug into a few small holes in the pavement, making her all too aware of how improperly she was dressed for an adventure. That was easy to explain, though, since he’d whisked her away from her desk mid-afternoon, which meant she was wearing the outfit she’d put on to wear all day at work—heels, dress pants, and a suit jacket over a blouse in case they had an unexpected press interview.

“This might not be sending the best message,” Brooke said as they climbed into the limo.

“Nobody will see us. Trust me.”

She couldn’t process his words because she was distracted by the bouquet of multicolored roses on the table next to her. Someone had managed to position it so that it became the focal point.

“Those are yours,” he said, obviously noticing her taking them in. “Part of your perfect romantic evening.”

Okay. As much as she might have thought otherwise, all of this was amazing. She’d never felt like a princess before. She’d worried about fitting in with Justin’s world, but when it came down to it, this *was* his world. He didn’t try to show off for friends or toss money around to demonstrate how well-off he was. Instead, he’d spent way too much just to impress her.

Justin leaned forward and pulled a couple of bottled waters from an ice chest that was stored in a cabinet in front of them. “We worked hard to get where we are with the company right now. I think we should celebrate. Your favorite.”

Handing her one of the bottles, he settled back into place, one arm around her shoulders. She’d mentioned once in passing that she had a very specific type of water she liked, which she usually carried around in a tumbler with her. The fact that he’d noted and gone to the trouble to track it down meant more than even the roses in front of her.

“Finally, our app is back on track,” Justin said. “I don’t think we’ll ever get to where we were before. I’m kind of enjoying having a smaller team and spending my time in the office every day, rather than traveling around. All this—and you—helped me rediscover my love for running a business.”

She looked up at him, hardly able to believe she’d ever seen him as someone who would get caught up in the Silicon Valley way of life. That wasn’t Justin Travers at all. Instead, he was a hard worker who had maybe gotten a little distracted by the bright, shiny objects that came with success. But having people like herself, Charlie, and the rest of the team close by to keep him grounded would likely ensure that wouldn’t happen again.

Smiling, she opened her bottle and took a sip before capping it and looking up at him again. “You just needed a reason to come into the office every day.”

“I think I did.”

Their gazes held for a long time, and she wondered if she’d ever be able to look at him without having the overwhelming urge to kiss him. Before they could do anything, though, the limo slowed to a stop, and Justin turned his attention to the scene out the window on her side of the vehicle.

“Let’s go.”

She turned to get out and saw exactly where they were going, even before she’d opened the door. It was a park, but there was an area off to the side that had candles. She could see them glowing in the fading light.

“Is that a...blanket?” She squinted as she straightened and waited for him to exit the vehicle behind her.

“Let’s go see.” He took her hand and led the way. It wasn’t a short walk, but they moved in a silence that seemed comfortable to her. Just being with him, walking across this lawn in her ridiculously unsuitable shoes, was better than anything she could imagine doing.

“It’s a picnic?” The words came out as a question as they approached. It was pretty obvious what it was, though. There was an actual picnic basket off to the side of a very large checkered blanket. The candles that were covering the area in a romantic glow were actually flameless, which made sense, considering they were in jars on the ground surrounding the blanket. Wouldn’t want to start a fire in the middle of a park.

“I know it’s not fast food in the airport, but I thought this would give us a little more privacy.”

Brooke followed him onto the blanket, taking a seat on the ground next to him. The first thing she did was kick off her heels and breathe a sigh of relief that she could be comfortable. Finally. “This is perfect.”

She placed her hands on the ground behind her and leaned back, tilting her head, eyes closed, toward the sky. Who knew eating dinner on the ground could be exactly what she needed? Suddenly, she felt the need to really open up to him.

“I’ve been thinking about my family back home. I always felt like I had to prove something by succeeding. My father wanted me to stay close by. My mom supported me but was worried... But you know what the weird thing is?” She opened her eyes and looked over at him. He was watching her intently, that warm, yet intense gaze making her feel like she mattered.

“What?” he asked.

Brooke straightened and turned to face him, folding her legs behind her. “Now that I have the title of marketing director for a big-name company, I don’t even care about that. I think I know why.”

“Why?”

“Because this is my home now.” She laughed when she remembered they weren’t exactly home right now. “Not *this*, but San Francisco. Our office, my condo, the people around me...you.”

The last word was whispered. She still felt hesitant to imply they were in more of a relationship than they actually were. It was tough to shake the perception she’d previously

had of him as some sort of womanizer. He'd never given her any reason to think that way. It was just a stereotype she'd fallen for.

“And everyone here—*there*—believes in you.” He reached over and rested his finger and thumb on her jawline, moving closer to her. “But it can't hurt to go back home and show everyone just how much you've kicked butt. Maybe we should schedule a private jet to take us there.”

Brooke laughed. “That does sound appealing, but no.”

He leaned over and gently grazed her lips with his. “No?”

She shook her head. Her concentration was waning here. “It's...I just don't care what they think anymore. In fact, let's rent an old junker when we visit.”

Eyebrows arched, he leaned back and looked at her. “Are you inviting me home to meet your parents?”

Her first instinct was to backtrack. No. He'd freak out if she said “yes” because it was too soon, right?

But then she realized that was the old Brooke. The new Brooke wasn't afraid anymore. She'd lay it all out on the line and have faith that he'd return it.

“Yes, I am. I want my parents to meet the man I love.”

Now she had his attention. She waited, breath held, for his response, and nearly let out that breath in a big gush when his mouth slowly spread into a smile.

“As the man who loves you, I accept.”

They sealed the pronouncement with a kiss, followed by a loud rumble from Brooke's stomach. With a laugh, Justin dug into the picnic basket while Brooke leaned back again, taking a moment to be thankful for everything great that had come into her life.



WANT MORE SILICON VALLEY BILLIONAIRES? Keep reading for a free bonus excerpt from the first book in the series, [FORGIVING THE BILLIONAIRE](#), now available!

LIVING above a coffee shop sucked when you suffered from insomnia.

Grumbling to herself, Alyssa Kennedy sat up, swinging her feet to the floor in the process. Her best friend's sofa was her bedroom for the foreseeable future. It was necessary while Alyssa struggled to build her own marketing firm after being suddenly laid off from her job at one of the city's top tech companies.

Alyssa looked at the coffee table, already reaching out for her laptop. Her hand was met with empty space, then the table surface. Her laptop wasn't there.

"Ugh," she said as she remembered exactly where it was. Downstairs.

Careful not to wake her roommate sleeping on the other side of her closed bedroom door, Alyssa crept toward the door to the apartment, grabbing her keyring from the hook near the kitchen. She'd just retrieve her laptop and return to the sofa, catching up on some work in the two hours before they had to get ready and open the coffee shop.

The closer she got to the store, the stronger the smell of coffee was. They could close this place up for six months and she was pretty sure the scent would still permeate this entire area. It had permanently soaked into the floors, walls, ceiling, and furnishings.

Alyssa unlocked the door and stepped inside, flipping the lock behind her before entering. Over the past couple of weeks, she'd gotten used to entering a dark coffee shop every morning. Usually, she came down and started on opening duties while the café's owner, her roommate, showered and got dressed. She found it amusing that she could be thought of as the early bird when Emily had been opening this store at four a.m. for two years.

The laptop was right there, on the counter. Alyssa headed straight toward it, eyes on the prize, and was just about to grab it when a sound caught her attention. It was coming from the direction of the front door to the café. Her heart began racing as she turned, seemingly in slow motion, to check out the source of the noise.

There was a man outside that door. He was dressed in all dark clothing, like a burglar, and even had a black beanie on his head. Burglars wore black beanies, didn't they? She was pretty sure she'd seen that on cheesy TV shows. Alyssa quickly looked around for something to use as a weapon, realizing at the same time that the wise move would probably be to run. She could call the police from her cellphone upstairs and—

A loud click drew her attention back to the door. The burglar had figured out how to pick the lock, even though it was a super strong deadbolt. But that door was opening and the man in the beanie was entering. If she didn't find a weapon fast, she'd be toast.

“I called the police!” she shouted.

It was too dark to make out the face of the burglar, but she could confirm he was wearing a beanie. And he had a fairly thick winter coat on, which was odd for San Francisco-area weather. He probably had all his burglary tools secured in the pockets or something.

“Alyssa?”

That voice. She'd know that voice anywhere. It was the grown-up version of the voice of the boy she'd heard in her head every day and night of her adolescence. It was the voice of Jeremy Owens.



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