

THE ALATANQUA SOCIAL CONTRACT

Character Descriptions:

LEE CRISWELL: Male, 31. Operations manager of the Alatanqua Forest Service.

PHIL SCHNEIDER: Male, late 20s or early 30s. Chief biologist at the Forest Service.

TATIANA CORVO: Female, 32. Chairperson of the Forest Service, a City Councilwoman, and a public figure involved in various progressive causes.

WINNIE NGUYEN: Female, early 30s. Consultant recently hired by the Forest Service.

EMMETT NORMAN: Male, mid- to late 30s. Founder of his own private equity firm.

MARTINE BOWLES: Female, late 20s or early 30s. A McKinsey consultant working for Emmett.

Act I

AT RISE, no lights are illuminated within the set – only the faint outlines are visible of an office with a large conference table.

Footsteps on gravel are heard offstage right, followed by three taps at the door (stage right). No response from the empty stage. After a moment, the door handle turns, and WINNIE steps into the room. Energy-saving lights flicker on. Winnie wears business-casual clothes and thick glasses, her hair in a claw clip, a laptop bag on her shoulder.

WINNIE

Hello?

Winnie steps into the room and looks around. The space resembles a nature center or cabin as much as an office, with knotted pine walls and floors. The foot of the stage represents the space immediately outside the office. The ground is carpeted in gravel, grass, and dead leaves, and a canopy of branches stretches above. Stage left, there is a bench and, behind it, a signpost pointing to a trail that disappears upstage left.

Inside the office, the conference table faces the audience at an angle, surrounded by six office chairs. On the upstage wall there is, on one side, a bookshelf messily stacked with files, and, on the other side, a small sideboard holding a hotplate, a kettle, and some mismatched mugs. In the middle of the upstage wall are huge windows displaying wooded hills so beautiful they hurt.

Winnie walks to the window and takes in the view. Then footsteps storm through the gravel off stage right. The door swings open and PHIL bursts in with LEE trotting after him. Phil has a banana in one hand and phone in the other. Both men are around 30 and similarly dressed in jeans and flannels or t-shirts, all of it from thrift stores. But Phil is sloppy, with holey sneakers and uncombed hair, while Lee is as neat as a pin.

LEE

You need to take a step back and remember /what's important here—/

PHIL (*furiously*)

/Oh, do, do/ I need to step back, or does the so-called newspaper of record need to stop putting unpaired commas between the subject and the *goddamn verb!*

Phil flings the banana across the room. Winnie ducks it. Phil notices Winnie.

PHIL (CONT'D)

Who's this?

WINNIE

Someone who shares your distress at the death of the proofreader.

PHIL

What?

WINNIE

Hi, I'm Winnie Nguyen. I'm the consultant Tatiana hired.

PHIL

Consultant—what, what does that mean?

WINNIE

I consult. (*Winnie smiles.*) I'm here to just provide some insights, from an outside perspective, on the issues you're facing.

PHIL

Are you an accountant? Because what we need is financial advice. Or, better yet, cash.

WINNIE

No. I'm a consultant.

Lee steps forward and shakes Winnie's hand.

LEE

Hi, I'm Lee, I'm the operations manager for the Forest Service.

WINNIE

Nice to meet you.

PHIL

What's Tatiana spending money on a consultant for if our whole issue is lack of money?

LEE

And this is Phil. He's in anger management.

Phil scowls at Lee. Then he turns to Winnie.

PHIL

I'm the sustainability chief. What'd you say your name was?

WINNIE

Winnie. Nice to meet you. And to clarify, I'm here to consult more on the protection of your non-financial assets.

PHIL *and LEE together*

What's that mean?

Winnie looks from one to the other.

WINNIE

Has Tatiana gone over...what we'll be discussing today?

PHIL

It better be about starting trail maintenance. Nothing's more important than that.

Lee sighs and crosses to the kettle. He says over his shoulder, to Winnie,

LEE

Can I get you something? Coffee? Tea?

WINNIE

No thanks.

Lee starts making himself a cup of tea. Phil follows him upstage.

PHIL *(to Lee)*

We said early April. It's almost June!

LEE *(frustration creeping into his patient tone)*

I know. And if you show me where I can write paychecks from, I'll have candidates in here tomorrow.

PHIL

This isn't negotiable! Forget about the litter, we have to reinforce the slope trails *now*, or the rain'll wash them out and it'll get exponentially harder to fix when we finally get around to it.

LEE

We'll do what we can. But it'll have to be just you and me.

PHIL

It's twenty thousand acres.

LEE

Twenty thousand, eight hundred and thirty-two. Point six.

PHIL

I think it's 823, not 832.

LEE

It's 832. Trust me. I had to write that number, by hand, on a million thank-you cards.

WINNIE

So you were Tatiana's partner, back in the campaign to save the forest? Sorry, I'm still getting everyone straight.

LEE

Yeah. But, I mean, she ran the whole thing. When the old nature preserve went into foreclosure, she was the one who started the Kickstarter and got everybody talking about it and raised the money to take over the lease. I just helped.

WINNIE

What'd you help with?

LEE

Well—everything. Whatever she needed. Posters, thank-you cards. Writing letters to newspapers. Working the table. We had a table on campus with signs, and we tried to have someone there all the time.

Winnie smiles, impressed.

WINNIE

Real grassroots stuff. It's amazing, what you guys pulled off. And you were only college students. It's incredible that you raised enough money to take over the lease.

LEE

Well. We had to do some financing. But, yeah. We pulled it off.

Lee smiles at Winnie, then something through the upstage window catches his eye. Lee worriedly crosses to the window and peers out.

LEE (CONT'D)

Oh my god. That robin's nest is getting really close to falling.

PHIL *(in a warning voice)*

Lee...

LEE

If we just tucked that other branch underneath the branch with the nest, it wouldn't move so much in the wind.

PHIL

Wildlife. Biologists. Do NOT interfere with natural selection—

LEE

Well, I'm not a biologist. I'm gonna prop up the branch.

PHIL

Don't! Do not do it!

LEE *(sighing)*

Oh, c'mon, Phil...

Footsteps crunch through the gravel outside. Lee, Winnie, and Phil turn toward the door as it opens.

EMMETT steps into the room, followed by MARTINE. Emmett is in his mid-30s with a powerful build. Martine is in her late 20s or early 30s. Every detail of her business-casual outfit has been carefully curated. Emmett wears jeans and an outdoorsy vest. He smiles.

EMMETT

Hello.

LEE *(holding his mug of tea in both hands)*

Hi. Can I help you?

EMMETT

I think so. I'm Emmett Norman.

PHIL

Another consultant?

EMMETT *(laughing)*

Not quite. But I am here to help.

WINNIE

Tatiana should be here soon. But we can get introduced in the meantime. Can I get you anything?
Coffee, tea?

EMMETT *and* MARTINE *together*

No thanks.

Winnie, Emmett, and Martine take their seats at the conference table. Lee and Phil look at each other incredulously, and Phil opens his mouth, but Lee cuts him off with a gesture. Lee and Phil sit down on Winnie's side of the conference table, with Emmett and Martine on the other side.

LEE

Okay. Well. I'm Lee Criswell. And I'm the, um, operations manager here.

PHIL

...Phil Schneider. Chief biologist in charge of sustainability.

LEE *(turning to Winnie)*

Um, and this is...

WINNIE

I'm Winnie Nguyen, and I'm a director of client partnership at Cardinal Purpose Strategic Support.

PHIL

I thought you were a consultant?

Winnie ignores Phil.

MARTINE

I'm Martine Bowles. I'm an engagement manager at McKinsey, and I've been partnering with ENE the last two years.

EMMETT

And I'm Emmett. Founder of ENE.

PHIL

What's ENE?

Emmett smiles.

MARTINE

Emmett Norman Equity Partnership Solutions.

PHIL

...Private equity?

MARTINE

ENE offers a variety of structured partnership solutions that are designed to fulfill an organization's original mission by providing them with the capital they need.

PHIL

It's a forest.

LEE (*standing up*)

I'm sorry, if you have a pitch, I can put you in touch with our chair, Tatiana Corvo.

MARTINE

We're in touch with Tatiana.

LEE

Wh—? No, there's been a miscommunication, Ms. Corvo isn't talking to any private equity firms.

WINNIE (*in a low, even tone*)

She's familiar with their proposal.

Lee does a double take at Winnie. Then footsteps crunch through gravel off stage right. The door opens and TATIANA, 32, enters. She wears a smock-like dress offset by oversized necklaces or glasses that are eccentric in an on-trend sort of way. She crosses to the conference table, saying,

TATIANA

Apologies, everyone! I'm so, so sorry I'm late. I had an interview that ran long. I would have rescheduled for a follow-up, but they need to publish ASAP since it's about the EPA vote.

Tatiana smiles warmly at everyone as she takes her seat at the head of the conference table.

TATIANA (CONT'D)

But I'm glad everyone has gotten to know each other.

Lee sits back down. He and Phil look expectantly at Tatiana. But Tatiana just waits comfortably for someone else to take it away.

WINNIE

...It might be helpful to ground ourselves in everyone's objectives. As a starting point.

MARTINE

Excellent plan.

Martine and Winnie look at each other. Martine smiles and gestures toward Winnie.

MARTINE (CONT'D)

Please, clients first.

WINNIE

Prospective clients.

Winnie smiles at Martine. Martine smiles back.

WINNIE (CONT'D)

...Well. The Forest Service team is primarily concerned with upholding their mission to preserve the biological, cultural, and recreational value of the Alatanqua Forest for residents and visitors. Specifically, this includes commitments to regenerative forestry through indigenous land management and advancing accessibility for visitors with disabilities. Did I miss anything, team?

TATIANA

I think that covers it nicely.

MARTINE

Well, it's an absolutely wonderful mission. And completely in line with what ENE does. ENE has committed \$1.2 billion by 2030 to raise quality of living standards for communities around the world. And I don't have to tell you how important green space is to quality of life. So this is exactly the type of resource we want to secure for the communities we serve.

LEE

One-point-two *billion*? In donations?

WINNIE

Not quite donations.

MARTINE

The quality of life portfolio is a separate initiative from ENE's commercial business. The only stakeholders we serve in this work are the members of the local community. In terms of cash flow, these projects are a net negative. But ENE has always been committed to effective altruism.

LEE

Well, I mean, we obviously are always interested in talking to donors /about—/

WINNIE *(to Martine)*

/Does/ ENE write off those acquisitions as charitable tax deductions at the end of the year?

Small beat.

MARTINE

It doesn't work that way.

WINNIE

Because they're not donations if you take equity in the assets you acquire for the community.

EMMETT

We bear the risk and the responsibility for these assets. So no, they're not donations. It's a far more sustainable model. We want to *partner* with the Forest Service—we bring the resources, you bring the expertise. And we both get something out of it—you get a major capital infusion, and we get the land rights as collateral of sorts. It enables so much more to get done than one-way donations. Which, as you've seen, are few and far between. We put money where it's needed most, in things like charities and schools and farmers' cooperatives. And nature preserves. Taking stewardship of assets like land is what allows us to do all that. You see? Am I making any sense?

Emmett gives a crooked, self-deprecating smile, as if realizing he's talked too long.

LEE

No, yeah. That makes sense.

EMMETT

Great. Because the rest of our proposal's super simple. We're offering to pay off your 60-year mortgage, in its entirety. Right now.

LEE

I— Oh my God.

WINNIE

As Emmett noted, it's indeed quite straightforward financially. What presents more complication is the question of who holds the rights to the land.

PHIL

Can I ask a question.

MARTINE

Of course.

PHIL

Who the *FUCK* do you people think you are?

LEE

WINNIE

Phil!

We can discuss what this /means for—

PHIL

/You, you,/ you want to buy the land out from under us? And you have the fucking gall to phrase it like you're doing us a favor by coming in like feudal thugs to lord over your own little fiefdom like our benevolent dictator right up until you sell the forest to fucking developers /and—/

EMMETT

/We/ have no intention of selling this land. We're here to help you preserve it.

PHIL

So you'll put that on paper?

MARTINE

ENE has to maintain control of the resources they protect. Prohibitive restrictions on future sales and so forth are the main reason why so few equity managers are active in the philanthropy space. But ENE is pursuing a future-centric model of effective altruism. One that requires mutual trust in order to make these kinds of interventions feasible.

PHIL

Well, if you require my trust, I guess I trust you.

TATIANA (*calmly, to Winnie*)

This might be a good time for you to walk through the draft proposal with our team.

PHIL

I'm not walking through this flaming pile of shit.

TATIANA

And that's your prerogative, Phil. But ENE has tendered an offer, and we have an obligation to bring it to the board.

Tatiana looks at Phil with affectionate exasperation, then, turns to Emmett and Martine.

TATIANA (CONT'D)

Meanwhile, I'd love to show you around. Have you seen the picnic pavilion?

MARTINE

I haven't had the pleasure.

TATIANA

Well, then.

Tatiana rises and smiles. Emmett and Martine rise too—but Emmett pauses behind his chair.

EMMETT

Hey, Phil?

Phil scowls up at Emmett from his seat at the table, saying nothing.

EMMETT (CONT'D)

I just wanted to say... Obviously, everyone's entitled to their opinion on this stuff. But I think it's too bad when people see a resource as a threat. At ENE, we've built up considerable financial resources, it's true. And sometimes, that causes folks to—make assumptions about us. But money's just a tool. It can be used for good, bad, or other. I hope you'll consider helping us put our resources to good use with you.

Phil just snorts and shakes his head.

WINNIE

When should we plan to regroup?

MARTINE

Regroup?

WINNIE

Yes, before you take this to the board, there are just a few technical points we were hoping to iron out with you. So that we can arrive at a proposal tailored to the concerns of the board.

Martine glances at Emmett. Emmett nods.

MARTINE

All right. Should we say we'll meet back here tomorrow at noon?

TATIANA

Noon it is.

Tatiana smiles. She, Emmett, and Martine exit stage right, then reappear a moment later on the foot of the stage. Lee jumps up from his seat at the table.

LEE

Tatiana. Tat – Hang on?

Lee chases Tatiana outside, exiting stage right and reappearing on the foot of the stage. Emmett and Martine turn around in polite surprise. Tatiana is the furthest stage left and the last to hear Lee coming. Lee awkwardly skids to a stop in front of Emmett.

While the following scene plays out on the foot of the stage, the lights dim in the office, where Phil paces angrily while Winnie works on her laptop.

LEE (CONT'D) *(to Emmett and Martine)*

Um. Sorry. I just wanted to ask Tatiana something, real quick, before she shows you around.

EMMETT

Of course. I think we can make it to the picnic pavilion by ourselves. It looks very well-marked.

Emmett and Martine exit stage left, exchanging smiles with Tatiana as they pass her.

Beat. Lee is standing stage right, Tatiana stage left. Lee looks searchingly at Tatiana, but he's a bit too far away to see her face clearly. Lee steps toward her.

LEE

I'm sorry, I— Tatiana, what's going on?

Tatiana melts a bit as she looks sympathetically at Lee.

TATIANA

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry all this had to come as a surprise.

Lee and Tatiana meet in center stage.

LEE

Why didn't you tell me about any of this?

TATIANA

I wanted you to hear their pitch yourself before I told you what I thought. Seemed only fair.

LEE

So you think it's a good idea?

TATIANA

What do *you* think?

LEE

I mean, it sounds—amazing. But—but then Phil's so freaked out, and—if they *do* own the land, that is kind of scary. Like, right? And this all happened out of the blue, and Phil says they'll sell the place, and I just—I don't—

Lee is having trouble getting the words out, catching his breath.

TATIANA

Sweet man.

Tatiana takes Lee by both hands and sits him down on the bench. She sits down next to him.

TATIANA (CONT'D)

In for four, hold for seven, out for eight.

Lee, bending forward at the waist, breathes as instructed. Tatiana rubs his back.

TATIANA (CONT'D)

Honey. Do you trust me?

LEE

You saved my life, didn't you?

TATIANA

Stop.

LEE

You know you did.

TATIANA

OK. So, for the record? I do think this is a good idea. Better than good. It's, like, a godsend.

LEE

Okay. Thank you. Oh, thank God.

TATIANA

See? You don't have to worry so much.

LEE

Sorry. I just... got really scared in there, somehow.

TATIANA

There's nothing to be scared of. It's not Emmett's fault that he looks like Simon.

Lee stiffens and pulls away.

LEE

I don't think he does. Look like him.

TATIANA

How do you manage to avoid infection?

LEE

What?

TATIANA

You're one big open wound.

Lee rolls his eyes and sits up straight.

TATIANA (CONT'D)

Have you even met anyone else?

Lee pauses, glances at Tatiana. Then he nods. Tatiana squeals.

TATIANA (CONT'D)

Um, tell me everything!

LEE

We only met yesterday. But we had a long talk.

TATIANA

Who is he?

LEE

She's a bobcat. But I call her Elsbeth.

Tatiana shoves Lee.

TATIANA

You need to fall in love again.

LEE

I'll get right on that.

TATIANA

Has it ever occurred to you that you might need to get out of this forest sometime?

LEE

No. Maybe. I don't know. But—but so you're definitely sure this deal's a good idea?

TATIANA

What do *you* think?

LEE

I...I guess we should do it if we can't raise the donations to keep paying the mortgage ourselves. But, I just wonder—shouldn't we at least *try*—?

TATIANA

We've been over and *over* this—

LEE

Why don't we just *try* another fundraising campaign? If it doesn't bring in enough money, well, we can cross that bridge then. But why don't we try? It worked before, and we know so much more now than we did then. I mean, you're a City Councilwoman now. Not just a Councilwoman, you're a force. You're always on the radio. You've got, what, a quarter million Twitter followers?

TATIANA

It's called X now.

LEE

And I refuse to acknowledge that.

TATIANA

Which is exactly the point. This isn't 2015 anymore. That outrage we tapped into before is being spent on way bigger stuff. Just like people's money. If they've got anything to donate, it's going to food banks and Planned Parenthood. We're living in a new world now. I know you don't like it, but you have to acknowledge it. And a new world calls for new tactics.

LEE

But everyone adores this place. It's twenty thousand acres of primeval forest, preserved in the amber of Midwestern sunshine.

TATIANA

I know. I wrote that line.

LEE

You're such a good writer.

TATIANA

And a half-decent strategist. And I say this is the way to go.

Small beat as Lee looks at Tatiana, making up his mind.

LEE

Okay then. Okay. Let's...let's do this, I guess.

Tatiana smiles.

TATIANA

Hell yeah! Think about what we can do for this place when we don't have to worry about paying the mortgage?

LEE

We can finally restore the floodplain.

TATIANA

We can do anything.

LEE

Wow. Is this really happening?

TATIANA

You can make it happen.

LEE

Me?

TATIANA

You can help me present it to the board. We'll make a joint presentation, give our full endorsement to the deal. That should put any fears to rest. And it *would* be nice if Phil would notarize the forms for us. That way, they see we're all on board with it.

LEE

I don't think Phil's gonna do that.

TATIANA

He'll come around.

Lee hesitates for just a moment.

LEE

You're sure we can trust a deal from these guys?

TATIANA

That's what we have the consultant for, to check everything out.

Emmett enters from upstage left and approaches from behind as Lee and Tatiana are speaking.

LEE

I guess.

Lee still looks doubtful.

TATIANA

Why don't you and Phil come to the meeting tomorrow? Be there when we go through the details. Then you'll see there's nothing to be scared of.

EMMETT

Hey there.

Lee jumps a foot and nearly falls off the bench.

EMMETT (CONT'D)

Sorry! Didn't mean to sneak up on you there. Tatiana, you were right. That birch grove is breathtaking. And those, what are those, red maples?

Tatiana and Lee stand up.

TATIANA

No, they're... What are they, Lee?

LEE

Sugar maples.

EMMETT

Well, they smell great. I love that smell, leaves and dirt. Makes you want to sit next to a fire all night.

Beat.

TATIANA

Is Martine lost?

EMMETT

Never. She's taking a call from a picnic table. I'm gonna take off, I just wanted to say goodbye.

TATIANA (*glancing at her phone*)

I should head out too. I'm already running late for a fair housing meeting. Thank you for coming all this way to meet with us.

EMMETT

Of course. Thank you for having me.

TATIANA

Yeah. Bye, Lee—I'll see you tomorrow.

Tatiana gives Lee's elbow a quick, reassuring squeeze.

EMMETT

Sorry again, Lee, for taking you by surprise. I guess I did that twice today. Unfortunately, it's just the nature of the beast with these proposals.

LEE

No, sure—you're fine.

Emmett and Tatiana smile at Lee, then exit stage right. Lee watches them go from where he stands in front of the bench. He takes a deep breath, looking around at the woods. Then he exits stage right and reappears in the office, where Phil is pacing and Winnie is typing.

PHIL

We're fucked. This place is *fucked!*

LEE

Will you calm down? This is a good thing for /us—/

PHIL

/Can/ you not see what's happening? We're getting sold out!

LEE

That's not what's happening.

PHIL

Are you taking their side, with Tatiana and these Nazis?

LEE

Don't call her a fucking *Nazi!*

PHIL

There *is* no cooperating with people like this! So are you on *my* side or *hers*?

LEE

I'm not on any *side!* I'm neutral. I'm Switzerland.

PHIL

You're laundering money for terrorists?

LEE

...I'm Gandhi.

WINNIE

No one ever seems to remember that Gandhi was assassinated.

Lee and Phil swivel toward Winnie.

LEE

Gandhi wasn't assassinated.

WINNIE

I rest my case.

PHIL

I'm sorry, why are you still here? Go home.

WINNIE

No.

PHIL

What?

WINNIE

I can't leave until we discuss all the alternatives to accepting ENE's proposal.

Phil and Lee stare at her.

LEE

The woman who hired you says we should accept it.

WINNIE

I was hired to provide support and council to the Alatanqua Forest Service during the review process. That's what it says on my SOW.

LEE

Your what?

WINNIE

Look. Tatiana does... It does appear that she supports the deal. But that's not what I would advise.

LEE

...Really?

WINNIE

Yes. Because I know ENE's offering to preserve the land when they acquire it. Which is wonderful. It's just...the way they have it written, it's just a statement of intent. It's a handshake promise, it's nothing. I'm not saying they have bad intentions...necessarily. But if, at any point, circumstances change, they could sell to developers just like that. There's no legal protection. That's the crux of it. It seems like a good offer now, a great one, even. But you would lose all your rights. And you can't get those back.

Lee shivers.

LEE

So you're going behind your boss's back.

WINNIE

My client. But yes.

LEE

Why?

Winnie clears her throat and hesitates, uncomfortable talking about herself.

WINNIE

...I come hiking here a lot. I mean—that hardly covers it. This is my favorite place in the world. By far. I love taking a day to do the Five Sisters Loop. Any of the trails. As soon as I'm in the woods, I'm a different person. Away from work and doctors' offices and worrying about...everything. Walking—just *being* in this forest is the only thing that makes me feel...

Winnie trails off, never finding the word for how the forest make her feel. Beat.

WINNIE (CONT'D)

I could kill for these woods.

PHIL

Is that an offer?

WINNIE

He's not your problem. Or, he's just one incarnation of the problem. The fact is, your financing structure was dependent on grants. Which was a half-decent plan in the before-times. But you need private funding now.

PHIL

Funding like Emmett Norman.

WINNIE

Or someone else with his kind of money.

LEE

And who's that?

WINNIE

What kind of donor networks are you tapped into?

LEE

We still get recurring donations from a lot of the people who gave to the Kickstarter campaign.

WINNIE

Small donors, then.

LEE

Most of them, yeah.

WINNIE

What kind of *major* donor networks are you tapped into?

LEE

We're...not? I mean, sometimes Tatiana meets people at her City Hall functions, galas and stuff.

WINNIE

Oh boy. I need to sit down.

LEE

I can't work with you if you're just gonna be sarcastic all the time.

WINNIE

No, for once that wasn't a smart remark. I get vertigo sometimes.

Winnie slowly and gingerly sinks into a chair with her eyes closed.

LEE

Oh. Do you need—can I help?

WINNIE

It'll pass.

Winnie sits with her eyes closed and one hand braced against the table. Lee wants to ask her something, and he tries to wait, to give Winnie a moment—but he can't wait.

LEE

So, do you think—I'm sorry, are you...?

WINNIE

I'm fine. What were you asking?

Winnie opens and shuts her eyes and moves her jaw around experimentally as Lee talks.

LEE

Just, do you think— I, I was talking with Tatiana about this before, but. Do you think if we did another fundraising campaign, we could get enough donations to pay next year's mortgage?

Winnie looks skeptical. Lee rushes ahead.

LEE (CONT'D)

I mean, it would be mostly small donations, like you said. But I feel like—last time, we did it all by ourselves through social media, and we didn't know anything then. And now, Tat's a public figure. She could get real airtime, like, *serious* coverage.

WINNIE

Never say never. But if you're asking for my opinion...I'd say it seems unsustainable.

Lee looks devastated.

WINNIE (CONT'D)

What did Tatiana say about it?

LEE

She didn't think it would work, either.

PHIL

So, like I said: we're fucked.

WINNIE

Not so fast. Where there's a will, there may or may not be a way.

PHIL (CONT'D)

Like what?

WINNIE

The first thing that needs to be done is swing the board's vote. There's very little we can do without them. So, out of seven, we need to win four votes.

LEE

Eight.

Winnie glances questioningly at Lee.

LEE (CONT'D)

Eight votes. I have veto rights, too.

Small beat.

WINNIE

You do?

LEE

Yeah. I don't go to all the board meeting because—well, I mean, I don't know finance. And honestly, they usually don't have to vote on anything important. But I would have a vote on any land sale—land stuff.

WINNIE

Do you have veto rights too, Phil?

Phil stands staring out the window with his arms crossed. Phil isn't speaking right now.

LEE

No. We hired him after we set all that stuff up.

WINNIE

Well. So if there are eight people voting, four gets us nowhere. We'd need five votes. So tell me about the power dynamics on the board.

LEE

What?

WINNIE

Who holds sway? Besides Tatiana, of course. Who's a thought leader? Who votes together, who hates each other?

LEE

No one *hates* each other.

WINNIE

You know what I mean. Scott DeAngelo and Estelle Martin both run law firms, is there any competition there?

LEE

This is a *philanthropy* board. No one's out to get each other.

WINNIE

That would be unfortunate for us. But just tell me, which ones tend to vote together?

LEE

They all vote independently.

WINNIE

This is a philanthropy board.

LEE

That's what I said.

TATIANA

And you've got some very impressive chairs. CEOs, lawyers, heads of their own foundations.

LEE

Exactly.

WINNIE

Busy folks. It's great they give their time to a cause like this. But in my experience, it's just unlikely that they're reading *all* the paperwork. I mean, your annual report was 112 pages long.

PHIL

That report had our water table analysis in it. That analysis was three years in the making.

WINNIE

So if there had been a water-table-related vote, who would have carried it?

PHIL

They did have to vote. On whether to restore Wiley Stream.

WINNIE

Perfect. So who carried that vote?

PHIL

They all looked at the data themselves.

Winnie, not bothering to refute this, looks to Lee for help. Lee seems less certain than before.

LEE

...Everyone really respects Bethany Dewar's opinion.

WINNIE

Excellent. Thank you.

PHIL

If you're counting on Bethany to say no to money, this'll be a condo parking lot next month.

LEE

You're just mad that she voted against the stream restoration.

PHIL

It would have revitalized an *entire floodplain* with the grasses the sandhill cranes need—the cranes that we advertise to all the tourists and talk up in all the grant applications—the grasses *those* cranes need to build /their—/

LEE

/She/ made a good point, though. We couldn't afford it.

WINNIE

Leave Bethany to me.

PHIL

And tell her "fuck you" from me.

Winnie takes her glasses off and rubs her eyes.

WINNIE

Phil. I know we just met. But if I needed a wildlife biologist's advice, I'd listen to you.

PHIL

Okay.

WINNIE

So will you listen to me when I offer some advice from my field of expertise?

PHIL

Depends what the advice is.

WINNIE

Don't talk to the board for the next three days. Don't email them, OK? Don't call. Because you're having a very strong emotional reaction, and we need to seem entirely reasonable.

PHIL

My "emotions" *are* entirely reasonable. They want to raze the last old-growth forest /in the—/

LEE

/Nothing's/ getting *razed*, for God's sake. Tatiana promised that's not happening.

PHIL

This is private equity's entire M.O. They tell you what you want to hear, get all the assets in their name, then sell out to the highest bidder. If you bothered to read the paper, you'd know.

LEE

I read the paper.

PHIL

So you know that the Dale Forest Conservancy had to sell half their land to some hedge fund last year, and the logging starts tomorrow?

Beat.

LEE

What?

PHIL

Look it up.

WINNIE

Let's get down to brass tacks. How long can you keep meeting your mortgage without help?

LEE (*brusquely*)

We can't.

Lee glances at Winnie, who waits for him to elaborate. Lee clears his throat, which has suddenly gotten thick.

LEE (CONT'D)

Earlier this year. We lost some grants? One after another. We had put climate change all over our grant applications. And when Trump came in, anything that said "climate change" got cut. So all

our funding went away. And we couldn't get enough donations to fill the hole. Not even close. So, we're going to run out of money to pay the mortgage in, like, a year. Less. So. We're all very concerned.

Winnie takes the news stoically. Then she rubs her eyes.

WINNIE

I see. Thank you, that's good context to have. I didn't realize the finances were so...severe.

Winnie gets up, walks to the window, and drums her fingers on the sill for a moment, thinking. Then she turns toward Phil and Lee.

WINNIE (CONT'D)

Y'know, Martine made a good point earlier—

PHIL

Who the *fuck* is she, anyway?

WINNIE

She's Emmett's consultant.

PHIL

So she gets paid to just go around and talk people into signing their lives away?

WINNIE

Nonsense. She does a lot of slide-building and email-writing, too.

PHIL

What does she get out of it?

WINNIE

A princely sum. And I'm sure she's angling for a job at ENE. That's how it usually goes with McKinsey consultants. They work their twenties away getting to where she is now, then offramp into the juiciest client they can find.

LEE

How do you know so much about them?

WINNIE

They're a little bit famous.

LEE

Oh.

PHIL

What were you saying before?

WINNIE

I was saying that Martine really pointed out their Achilles heel. They need the board's trust, right up until they sign their rights away. So we need to sow some *distrust*. Now, if the financial situation is as bad as you say—

LEE

It is.

WINNIE

Then hypothetical reasons to distrust him won't work. Trying to convince the board of all the ways this *could* go wrong in the future, that won't cut it. Not when there's concrete benefits to be had. So we need *concrete* reasons to distrust him. As in something he's already done.

LEE

Like what?

WINNIE

...Let me do some research. Emmett shakes up a lot of organizations. I think there's a good chance he's done *something* that could alienate the board.

Phil just shakes his head and exits stage right, slamming the door behind him.

Phil reappears on the foot of the stage. Lights go down over the office. Phil begins crossing stage left toward the trailhead sign, then suddenly stops. He looks around at the forest for a moment.

PHIL

FUCK!

Phil's shout is swallowed quickly into the velvety sounds of bug buzz and wind in the leaves. Then he sits down on the bench with a sigh. He pulls out his phone.

PHIL (CONT'D) *(speaking into his phone)*

Daily log for May 29th, 2025, 5:34 p.m. The temperature at the weather station at six a.m. was 66.4 degrees Fahrenheit. The temperature at noon was 79.2 degrees Fahrenheit. The temperature for six p.m. to be recorded later. If the world doesn't end before then.

Phil looks around at the woods for a long, anguished moment.

PHIL (CONT'D)

The level of Wiley Stream at the East Bend Checkpoint was 15 inches at noon. I saw three adult sandhill cranes feeding on the east side of Horseshoe Pond this morning around nine. Two males, one female. It's possible at least one of them has a nest nearby. But I didn't see any nests around the pond's perimeter.

Phil suddenly bends forward at the waist as though hit with a painful stomach cramp.

PHIL (CONT'D)

I think the worst thing in the world might be happening.

Beat. Then Phil relaxes his muscles, but it looks like defeat. He sits up on his elbows.

PHIL (CONT'D)

The leaves on the beeches are getting a little dry around the edges. But they have a good color. Pea-green. Chicory, buttercups, fleabane, bluebells, and phlox are in bloom in the meadow and open woodland areas. The milkweed has just a few early blooms out, but plenty of stalks above six feet tall. The sky has been cloudless all day.

Phil ends the recording, puts his phone away, and stands up. He glumly exits stage right.

Lights dim over the foot of the stage and come up in the office. Winnie is now standing by the bookshelf. She runs her finger down the page of a document in a file folder and then glances at Lee, who still sits at the conference table, paralyzed.

Winnie crosses downstage and sits down in the chair next to Lee.

WINNIE

Hey, Lee?

LEE

Yeah?

Winnie opens the manila folder.

WINNIE (CONT'D)

I just— What you said about your veto rights didn't align with my understanding of the situation. So I just thought I'd check the Forest Foundation's incorporation documents.

Winnie hands Lee the file, open to the relevant page. Lee stares at it blankly.

WINNIE (CONT'D)

...It looks like you have advisory rights.

LEE

Yeah.

WINNIE

Advisory rights.

LEE

What does that mean?

WINNIE

It means you have the right to give advice.

Lee scowls, sits up, and reads the document. He pauses, reads it again.

LEE

...This is probably something else. I must have both. Advisory rights *and* veto rights.

WINNIE

That's the incorporation document. It's all supposed to be there.

Lee flips through the pages. Beat.

LEE

Tatiana told me I had veto rights. I remember it exactly.

WINNIE

Did you read all the terms yourself?

Beat. Lee shakes his head.

WINNIE (CONT'D) *(consolingly)*

That happens a lot. People sign, thinking the papers say one thing...

LEE

Tatiana wouldn't lie to me. She must've been confused.

WINNIE

Of course.

Beat.

WINNIE (CONT'D)

Although... It does make you wonder.

LEE

What?

WINNIE

You should look at this proposal critically. Just because Tatiana supports it... Well, she might have a personal interest in seeing this deal go through.

LEE

She's the one who saved this forest in the first place. What *personal interest* would she have?

WINNIE

Emmett Norman's a powerful guy. And she's in politics, right?

LEE

You don't know Tatiana.

WINNIE

I haven't known her long, no. (*Beat.*) Sometimes that makes it easier to clock someone.

LEE

No, it makes it easier to *think* you know them. The picture's crystal clear when you're projecting on a blank canvas.

WINNIE

I'm sorry. I understand the two of you are friends.

LEE

She saved my life.

WINNIE

I'm not saying she's a bad person.

LEE

You're not?

Beat.

WINNIE

...How did she save your life?

Lee looks away.

LEE

If you knew half of what she's done for me, you wouldn't think of her like that.

WINNIE

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything. My opinion on this doesn't matter. What matters is that we look at all our options for protecting the land. To that end. What do you think of the idea /of-/

LEE

/I/ was in abusive relationship. And I wouldn't leave. Not because I was afraid to, mind. But because I fucking loved him.

Winnie looks at Lee. Lee's breath is shallow.

LEE (CONT'D)

I didn't just love him. I was obsessed. I thought he was the smartest, handsomest, most...powerful... I just adored him. Even when he was kicking the shit out of me. I would never, ever have left him. I'd've let him kill me just to be near him. I mean that. But Tatiana—

Lee's voice catches. He clears his throat.

LEE (CONT'D)

She figured it out. She knows me too well. I mean, back in college, when we worked on the fundraising campaign, we were together 24 hours a day. And even after she joined the City Council. She makes time for people no matter how busy she is. So she realized what was going on. And she just, slowly. Kept planting seeds. She documented things without me even knowing it. And she wouldn't let me hide. And one night, when he cut m—when I finally broke down, I went to her house the next day. And she brought me to the police. And sat with me for four hours until I would file the restraining order. She taught herself breathing techniques so she could coach me through panic attacks. I lived with her for a year and half before I could be alone again.

Lee catches his breath.

LEE (CONT'D)

That's the kind of person Tatiana is.

Beat.

WINNIE

I'm sorry. I had no idea.

LEE

Of course you didn't.

Lee pulls himself together; glances at Winnie, and says in a more businesslike tone,

LEE (CONT'D)

So don't ever say she's trying to make some kind of seedy deal. If she thinks this is good for us, it must be the right thing to do.

WINNIE

Well, that's good, since my only idea for turning the board against it is a long shot.

LEE

What are you talking about?

WINNIE

We'll see. I have to do some research. And then I'm gonna get some sleep. You should, too. Things are about to start moving quickly.

LEE

What do you mean?

WINNIE

These proposals come with a deadline. It's part of the game.

LEE

This isn't a game.

WINNIE

And the deadline is Sunday at noon.

LEE

Next Sunday?

WINNIE

No, Sunday as in—*(Winnie checks the time)*—about 68 hours from now.

Winnie puts her laptop into her bag, stands, and heads for the door.

WINNIE (CONT'D)

C'mon. Let's go home. And meet back here tomorrow morning? It would be good to get aligned before the negotiations with ENE start.

LEE

...Okay.

Lee starts robotically crossing stage right to follow Winnie to the door. Then he stops.

LEE (CONT'D)

Hang on.

Lee returns to the conference table and picks up the file Winnie showed him earlier.

LEE (CONT'D)

I'm gonna take this home and just...read it again.

Winnie nods.

WINNIE

I'll see you in the morning.

Winnie lets herself out. Lee starts to follow her out but stops in his tracks once again. He turns and looks out the window at the hills. He draws in a sharp, frightened breath.

Lights out. End of Act I.

Act II. Birds are chirping. As lights come up over the office, we see WINNIE typing busily.

The door opens and LEE and PHIL enter.

WINNIE (*brightly*)

Morning!

LEE

Morning.

PHIL (*like death*)

Morning.

Winnie looks Phil up and down.

WINNIE

Did you eat?

PHIL

Did I *eat*?

WINNIE

You just look like a person who hasn't eaten. I have half a breakfast burrito left over—I got two. Do you want it?

PHIL

...No thanks.

WINNIE

You'd feel better if you ate something.

PHIL

Why are you so chipper?

WINNIE

I ate, for one thing. But, more importantly: my research went well last night.

PHIL

Really?

WINNIE

Really.

Phil sits down at the table. Lee walks to the window and listens to their conversation from there.

PHIL

Well? What?

WINNIE

We can totally swing Bethany Dewar. The question now is how many other chairs can she bring with her.

PHIL

Seriously? She wouldn't go for private equity?

WINNIE

Well, no, I think she won't go for *Emmett Norman*.

PHIL

Why?

WINNIE

In 2023, Emmett personally donated a hundred thousand dollars to one of the last two clinics providing gender-affirming care in Missouri.

LEE

Wait. He *gave* them a donation, straight-up? He doesn't own the fucking clinic now, does he?

WINNIE

Forget the first part of the sentence and focus on the trans part. He wrote a check to support *gender-affirming* care.

LEE

Well, good for him.

WINNIE

No, friends, good for us. 'Cause you know who's a big transphobic TERF?

PHIL

J.K. Rowling.

WINNIE

And Bethany Dewar.

Winnie leans back triumphantly. Beat.

LEE

No...

WINNIE

Oh yes.

LEE

No, there's probably two Bethany Dewars. Bethany—our Bethany—is really nice.

WINNIE

It's her picture on the think piece she wrote for a family-values newsletter about the threat posed by trans educators.

PHIL

This is your plan to turn Bethany against the buyout?

WINNIE

We tell her—no, *show* her—that if ENE got this land and later sold it, Emmett's profits could wind up funding gender reassignment surgeries. If she still thinks like her think piece, she'll hit the roof. I'll send you the link. It's very vivid.

LEE

I don't wanna fuckin' read it. And I can't believe you would blackmail Emmett for doing something good.

Lee walks downstage and takes a seat at the table on the other side of Winnie from Phil.

WINNIE

This gives you options, that's all. You could get rid of Emmett and look for other ways to get some money while keeping at least some control of the land. Because otherwise...it's all theirs.

LEE

We're not getting rid of ENE. They're paying off our *entire mortgage*.

PHIL

Which is so kind of them. And I'm sure they'll make a nice profit when they sell to developers.

LEE

Would you stop being such a cynic? You're literally turning down help.

PHIL

They're not *giving* us /anything—/

WINNIE

/Boys./ Am I reaching out to Bethany? I'm sensing one vote for yes, one for no.

PHIL

Two votes for no. But only because it's a crazy idea. Bethany's not gonna change her vote just because Emmett supports trans rights. She's not insane. What we need to do is talk to the board about why we can't give up the deed to the land.

WINNIE

They should already be aware of those risks. These are businesspeople. But you said it yourself—they won't want to say no to money on the table. They don't want deal with the mess if the bank puts you in foreclosure.

PHIL

Then we've got nothing. Goddam it, you got my hopes up for a second.

WINNIE

There is one other thing I found. It's not much. Just a little leverage. We might be able to get a concession or two out of him.

PHIL

What is it?

WINNIE

It looks like Lee holds the naming rights to the visitors' center.

LEE

Yeah.

WINNIE

Why is that?

Lee smiles.

LEE

That was funny, actually. Back, ten years ago, after we raised the money to save the land and we got the board together—which, that was all Tatiana, I still don't understand how she got our board members, they're all, like, famous. Anyway. We had a lot of meetings to get everything set up. I was 21 and felt younger. I couldn't believe I was at the *board meeting* of anything. So I stayed quiet unless someone asked me a direct question. But Tatiana. She was only a year older, but she was so at ease with them. She dove right into the middle of their conversations. Literally a natural leader. She's going to be president one day.

Lee smiles archly at Winnie.

LEE (CONT'D)

Anyway. We were having this board meeting, and it was late. And the last thing they had to vote on was the name for the visitors' center. I thought it would take five minutes. I mean, just call it "Visitors' Center." But they were all treating it like the biggest deal in the world. They'd go 'round and 'round with these minuscule wording changes and then start all over with a new name. It turned into an hour, and they were getting nowhere. So Tat just stood up in the middle of someone's sentence and said, "This doesn't seem to be productive, and I think we'd all like to go home. Let's just let Lee decide."

Lee shakes his head, smiling at the memory.

LEE (CONT'D)

They all turned toward me. I hadn't said anything in hours. I must've looked like a deer in the headlights. They all smiled. A bit condescendingly. Understandably. And they said, sure. Let's go home. So they passed a motion, or whatever, to put the naming rights with me. I guess they trusted I wouldn't do anything stupid.

WINNIE

You picked a good name. "The People's Visitor Center of Alatanqua." Has a ring to it.

LEE

Thanks.

WINNIE

You know Emmett's gonna want that.

LEE

He'd care what the visitors' center's called?

WINNIE

He's doing this whole philanthropy portfolio to build himself a good name. That only works if he plasters his name on everything.

PHIL

That's...ridiculously petty.

WINNIE

No, it's wildly effective. If people love something, they love what it's named. If Biden had done that with everything the Infrastructure and Jobs Act funded, maybe things could've been different, /but—/

PHIL

What's your point?

WINNIE

Lee has some leverage. We should think about what we want to ask for.

PHIL

I want him gone.

WINNIE

Yeah, well, he's not gonna walk away just because you don't give him the name of the visitors' center. He can put his name on every trail, plus a billboard out front. He'll want this—but only up to a price. You have to think about what you want that's that price.

PHIL

Nothing else matters if we lose the rights to the land.

WINNIE

You could ask for an easement protecting a slice of the land. That's something, at least.

PHIL

A slice.

Phil buries his face in his hands, then runs his hands through his hair, making it stick up.

PHIL (CONT'D)

I can't, I can't, I can't deal with this. I don't have time. I have to check the rain gauges.

Phil heads for the door.

LEE

Phil, can we just talk about this?

Phil exits without looking at Lee. Lee starts to follow him out, but Winnie says,

WINNIE

Lee.

LEE

We'll be back in five minutes.

WINNIE

No, I just wanted to ask you. If this deal with ENE goes through...and if, someday, they do sell the land, pave over the creek, cut down the trees...do you think you could still be friends with Tatiana?

LEE

What?

WINNIE

I just wanted to flag that for you. That if you choose her over the forest, you could still lose both.

Lee stares at her in disbelief as he stands in the doorway. Then he shakes his head.

LEE

Okay. Thanks for *flagging* that.

WINNIE

Anytime.

Lee starts to exit, but as he does, the door is opened from outside and Martine enters, almost running into him.

MARTINE

Oh, I'm sorry. Am I interrupting?

LEE

No, I was just stepping out.

Lee exits. Winnie and Martine smile at each other.

MARTINE

I was just going to send a few emails before we begin.

WINNIE

Of course, come in. Do you want some tea?

MARTINE

I'd love some, actually.

Martine puts her laptop bag down on a chair and walks over to the kettle.

WINNIE

They have some good oolong.

MARTINE

Ooh, love that.

Martine turns on the kettle and drops a teabag in a mug. She leans back against the sideboard to wait for the water. Winnie glances her way, and they make eye contact. They smile.

WINNIE

It's like the first day of school, isn't it?

MARTINE

What?

WINNIE

The morning before negotiations start. The papers are crisp. The chairs are pushed in. And the teachers have five minutes to drink their tea before the kids arrive.

MARTINE *(laughing)*

You're not wrong.

Beat.

MARTINE (CONT'D)

I always loved the first day of school.

WINNIE

Me too.

They smile at each other.

MARTINE

I looked up Cardinal Purpose. You guys do some interesting work.

WINNIE

Thanks. Yeah, as a small agency, we can be really agile in support of a wide variety of clients.

MARTINE

That's so great. How long have you been with them?

WINNIE

About three years. How long have you been with McKinsey?

MARTINE

I joined their junior associates program in undergrad, and I've been with them ever since.

WINNIE

That's so great. And you said you've been full-time on the ENE account for two years?

MARTINE

It'll be two years in June.

WINNIE

You see a future there?

MARTINE (*surprised*)

What, like joining ENE?

Winnie nods.

MARTINE (CONT'D)

Oh. I mean, I'm always open to exploring possibilities, but I'm not actively looking to make a change. I love what I do now.

WINNIE

It is fun, isn't it? Like chess, but without all the rules.

Martine wrinkles her brow and laughs in surprise.

MARTINE

Yeah, I guess. In which case, I look forward to playing with you.

WINNIE

Likewise.

They smile at each other, then Winnie turns back to her laptop. Martine drums her fingers on her empty mug.

MARTINE

...I'm sure you've noticed that our clients don't always enjoy the game as much as we do.

WINNIE

Different strokes for different folks.

MARTINE

I'll just say, just being totally candid here...Emmett's one of the ones who doesn't appreciate playing around. I mean, he does love the game, but only the exciting part. When things get bogged down in minutiae...when people are indecisive, and negotiations start going in circles...that's when he tends to lose patience.

WINNIE

Well, we all have our flaws.

MARTINE

Not really a flaw. It gets things done. Just not in a way his counterparts always enjoy.

Winnie leans back in her chair and looks at Martine.

WINNIE

So it'll be better for us if we make this easy for him? In your opinion.

MARTINE

I'm sure you know how important it is to cultivate good relationships.

WINNIE

Will we have a relationship with him? I mean, if he wants to buy me dinner, I wouldn't say no. But that would be a first for a me, coming from a former prospective acquirer.

MARTINE

He hasn't been a *former* prospective acquirer in years.

WINNIE

You better knock on wood.

MARTINE

Why?

The kettle whistles. Martine and Winnie have locked eyes, and neither wants to be the first to look away. The kettle keeps whistling, ignored. Then the door opens, and they both turn as TATIANA enters.

WINNIE *and* MARTINE *together*

Good morning.

TATIANA

Good mor-ning! How are you?

Tatiana sits down next to Winnie. Martine pours her water.

WINNIE

Excellent. How are you?

TATIANA

Excellent.

From offstage right come the sounds of footsteps and LEE's and EMMETT's voices.

LEE (O.S.)

Oh, sorry—

EMMETT (O.S.)

You're fine. Good morning.

LEE (O.S.)

Hi.

EMMETT (O.S.)

How'd you sleep?

WINNIE

Sounds like the kids are here.

MARTINE

In full force.

WINNIE

Well. May the best woman win.

Tatiana glances over curiously. Winnie returns Tatiana's gaze.

LEE (O.S.)

Sorry—

EMMETT (O.S.)

I got it.

EMMETT opens the door and holds it open for Lee. LEE enters, followed by PHIL and Emmett.

TATIANA

Hello, everyone.

EMMETT

Hello.

Everyone not already seated sits down around the conference table and settles in. Everyone except Lee, who just stands there in front of his chair. Martine reaches into her laptop bag and begins to pass out five identical spiral-bound booklets.

MARTINE

Here we are.

LEE

What's this?

MARTINE

Our discussion guide for today.

Lee looks at the cover.

LEE

Shouldn't the whole board be here for this? Are we gonna put them on speakerphone?

TATIANA

Emmett and Martine will be making a presentation to them at his office tomorrow night. It's a lot easier for them to meet in the city, y'know, and since it's short notice, we didn't want to ask the board members to drive all the way out here. So we're going to wade through all the details together first, and then I'll give the board our recommendation at that meeting.

Lee slowly sits down.

MARTINE

So on page 1 here, you can see the agenda we've proposed. But first, I wonder if anyone has any questions before we get started?

Everyone glances around at each other. No one says anything.

WINNIE

I don't think so.

MARTINE

Wonderful. Then I'll just run over our proposed agenda. We can start with financial mechanics and then go on to mission safeguards; governance and oversight; exit strategy; legal and regulatory classifications; and finally the PR surrounding the change in ownership. So, diving right in with financial mechanics. The main issue we'll have to discuss here is the comparative merits of a sales-leaseback versus a debt-for-equity swap. If you turn to page 2—

LEE

I do have a question before we start.

Everyone looks at Lee expectantly. Lee seems embarrassed to have all eyes on him.

LEE (CONT'D)

I just wondered—I just wanted to ask if you guys would ever consider something like an easement? Even just on part of the land? Because, since you don't intend to sell the land anyway, it wouldn't really make a difference. Right? And it would maybe make the board more comfortable with...everything.

MARTINE

Okay, I guess we can skip ahead to mission safeguards. As you can see on pages 7 through 10, there are many options we can explore for safeguarding the mission of your organization. To your point, however, an easement isn't one of them. As we discussed yesterday, bureaucratic restrictions and regulations are the biggest factor inhibiting more businesses from investing in philanthropic portfolios. ENE needs to maintain the agility to meet future stakeholder needs.

PHIL *(to Lee)*

What did I tell you?

LEE *(to Martine)*

Oh—okay.

MARTINE

Okay. Let's turn back to page 2 and the financial mechanisms, because this section on mission safeguards will really make more sense if we cover the financial structures first. /So—/

LEE

/Hang/ on— Sorry, sorry to interrupt. Just one other thing before we start. I wanted to check— Yesterday, you guys said this would go to a board vote. But it's not just the board. I have veto rights, too. Remember, Tatiana?

Lee looks at Tatiana. Tatiana opens her mouth, hesitates, then says,

TATIANA

Do you have veto rights?

LEE

That's what you told me. When we signed the forms.

TATIANA

Really? I don't remember. Well, we can double-check the paperwork. But let's use Martine and Emmett's time wisely while they're here and go over the proposal.

EMMETT *(to Lee)*

Look, Lee, I can see that you're incredibly passionate about conservancy. That's great. I'm passionate about it, too. That's why we're here. So while we're not able to put anything on paper right now, just know that our only intention is preserving this land.

Lee hesitates, then turns from Emmett to Tatiana.

LEE

You don't remember if I have veto rights, Tat? We talked about it. We were sitting right here. You were there, and I was here. You were wearing those dangly earrings with little birds that swung when you talked.

TATIANA

OK, well, you have an incredible memory. Mine's not as good. But this isn't what we're all here to discuss right now.

Lee looks hurt. He abruptly stands up and exits the room. Phil watches him go incredulously.

PHIL

We're allowed to leave?

Phil scrapes back his chair and exits, too.

Lee reappears on the foot of the stage. He crosses the stage and exits stage left toward the trails as those remaining in the conference room look around and clear their throats.

MARTINE

...Well. Shall we continue?

TATIANA

Yes, please.

MARTINE

Okay. So, turning back to page 2. As you can see in this table, there are several key differences between a sales-leaseback and a debt-for-equity swap. The key ones for you are...

Martine's voice fades, drowned out by bird- and leaf-noises as the light changes to indicate the passing of time. The lighting stops changing, settling on slanted evening light. Martine, Tatiana, Emmett, and Winnie are arrayed around the table in different postures than before, their booklets open to near the end.

MARTINE (CONT'D)

...Okay, thank you. It's good to get that clarified.

WINNIE

Should we take five? Quick bathroom break before we start the regulatory discussion?

TATIANA

Yes, let's. *(to Martine)* Thank you for walking us through all that.

MARTINE

Of course.

Winnie and Tatiana exit; Emmett and Martine remain at the conference table.

WINNIE and TATIANA reappear on the foot of the stage as lights dim over the office.

TATIANA

Thanks for taking notes in there. That was a lot.

WINNIE

Of course. I'll send them to you when we're done.

TATIANA

That'd be great. In fact—in that case, I'm gonna take off. I'm beat. I was up at five today to join a Worldwide Education for Women call. And going through all the regulatory fine print, that's above my pay grade anyway.

Tatiana smiles at Winnie.

TATIANA (CONT'D)

Thanks again so much for your help. Seriously. I so appreciate how prepared you've shown up.

WINNIE

It's my pleasure.

TATIANA

I'll talk to you tomorrow. Send me those notes.

WINNIE

Will do.

Tatiana exits stage right. There is the sound of a car door slamming and tires on gravel.

Winnie sighs. She stretches her neck. Then she crosses stage left to the bench, sits down, and pulls a vape pen out of her pocket. She takes a few puffs, looking into the trees.

LEE enters from stage left. Winnie turns at the sound of his footsteps.

WINNIE

Hey.

LEE

What are you still doing here?

WINNIE

I could ask you the same thing.

LEE

Were you guys talking this whole time?

WINNIE

And we're not done yet. I'm just taking a smoke break before we reconvene. Tatiana just took off.

Lee points at Winnie's vape.

LEE

Can I hit that?

WINNIE

Yeah, but it's not tobacco.

LEE

Thank *GOD*.

Winnie passes the vape pen to Lee.

LEE (CONT'D)

Trade ja.

Lee pulls a flask out of his pocket and holds it out to Winnie.

WINNIE

...Don't mind if I do.

Winnie takes the flask and sips. Lee sits down next to her and hits her vape pen – repeatedly. He coughs out a cloud.

WINNIE (CONT'D)

Easy.

Winnie takes back her vape and returns his flask.

LEE

I looked up the thing Phil said.

Lee starts crying a little.

WINNIE

...Which thing?

LEE

The. How they sold. Dale Forest. How they ran out of money and had to sell the land to some kind of hedge fund. Who turned around and re-sold half it to developers. And they just, today, literally today, they started clearing the woods. They're gonna sell the lumber. And put in a golf course.

WINNIE *(slowly, with real disgust)*

Twisted motherfuckers.

Lee starts crying again.

WINNIE (CONT'D)

If you want to keep that from happening here, now's the time to start thinking strategically. And maybe lay off the drinking.

LEE

You're still smoking that.

WINNIE

This only makes me smarter. Listen. You have room to maneuver here. When you brought up the easement in there, you didn't tell them about the naming rights. That's your leverage, remember? There's still time to use it.

LEE

I don't get—I actually *do not understand* how people can do what they did to Dale Forest. And I can understand most things. Stealing? Sure. Murder? Eh, sometimes you're backed into a corner. But *that*...?

Lee looks around at the woods.

LEE (CONT'D)

This is, like...the only thing that could possibly be sacred. It's the only thing in the world that's good. I've never been in a museum that had a fraction of the beauty of crabgrass growing around the roots of a tree. And it's *alive*, times a million. And people don't care. It's almost... It's almost more than that. It's almost like they *hate* it. They don't need the land. But they go out of their way to destroy it. I mean, killing *this*... For a *golf course*.

WINNIE

They do hate it. Some people hate anything that makes them feel human.

LEE

I thought *I* could protect it. After all, I had veto rights. But I didn't even read those papers. Just signed 'em. 'Cause Tatiana told me what they said.

WINNIE

And you still listen when she tells you to trust ENE?

LEE

Stop telling me to choose!

WINNIE

You have to go for or against the deal soon. The deadline's Sunday.

LEE

No, stop telling me I have to choose between Tatiana and...

Beat. Crickets fill the silence. A breeze ruffles Lee and Winnie's hair as they gaze into the woods.

LEE (CONT'D)

You're making me choose between the only two things I have.

WINNIE

I'm not the one making you choose. I'm just making you look at the choice.

Lee closes his eyes.

WINNIE (CONT'D)

But it's not necessarily one or the other. Like I said earlier, you could lose both. Or—flip side—you might not have to lose either one. Maybe Tatiana wouldn't be so mad if we get rid of ENE.

LEE

What "get rid of"? The most we could get for the visitors' center is an easement on some little tiny part of the land. I wouldn't call that getting rid of him.

WINNIE

There *is* that one other thing we could try. Let me talk to Bethany. Let's blow this thing up.

LEE

What, the...getting Bethany all mad that Emmett gave money to a gender care clinic?

WINNIE

If she really has influence, and we give her the right talking points, we could flip the whole board against ENE. It'd at least buy you enough time to really examine all your options before you run out of money.

LEE

I don't wanna do that. It's gross. It's...it's like profiting off bigotry.

WINNIE

Exactly, for a good cause!

Beat. Crickets. Lee looks at the trees.

LEE

I really thought something would happen to save us. I thought we had time. I didn't think we'd have *bidders* at the door so soon.

WINNIE

...The timing *is* a little funny.

LEE

Funny as a hole in the head.

WINNIE

Funny that there aren't multiple bidders. 'Cause, when you think about it. Your financial situation isn't public knowledge yet. There's just one bidder who showed up early.

LEE

He reminds me of Simon.

WINNIE

Who?

LEE

My ex. Simon always knew everything before you did. And he had that intensity that just made you... Made you wish he'd ask for something just so you could say yes.

WINNIE

Yeah, I don't trust him, either.

LEE (*starting to cry again*)

The chipmunks will *die* if they pave the ground over. They'll keep digging and digging around, trying to get to the surface, but they'll never be able to. They'll *die*. But nobody cares about that.

WINNIE

Lee. You have to make a call here. What's our plan?

LEE

I need to think.

WINNIE

Let me remind you of the timeline. The negotiations that you walked out of after two minutes? That was our one day of negotiations. Tomorrow, ENE makes their presentation to the board, and Tatiana will give them her recommendation. And then on Sunday, they'll vote. They could sign the mortgage over to ENE right there.

Lee stands up, takes a step toward the edge of the stage, and peers into the woods. Long beat.

LEE

Call Bethany. Give her whatever little speech you've been rehearsing in your head all day.

Winnie puts down her vape and whips out her phone.

WINNIE

We send an email first. You can't cold-call these people.

LEE

I'm assuming you have it drafted, then?

WINNIE

Of course.

LEE

Send it.

WINNIE

Sent.

Winnie puts her phone in her pocket, stands up, and joins Lee where she stands.

WINNIE (CONT'D)

Welcome to the fight.

Winnie looks excited. Lee looks sick. Then Winnie inhales sharply.

WINNIE (CONT'D)

Fuck.

Winnie grabs her lower back with one hand and steadies herself against Lee's arm with the other.

LEE

Are you okay?

WINNIE

Back...pain. I get these...spasms.

Lee puts his arm around Winnie to hold her up. Winnie's face is screwed up in pain. She draws in a deep breath. After a few moments, she relaxes. Exhales.

WINNIE (CONT'D) *(lightly)*

Gah damn. That one went right through my spine.

LEE

Is it gone now?

WINNIE

We'll see.

Winnie straightens up. Lee lets go of Winnie, watches her for a moment, then takes a drink.

WINNIE (CONT'D)

Okay. Time to get you home. I'll take your keys.

LEE

I walked here.

WINNIE

From where?

LEE

My apartment.

WINNIE

Which is...?

LEE

In Ashton Village.

WINNIE

For fuck's sake. C'mon, I'll drive you.

LEE

I can walk.

WINNIE

You're drunk. And it's getting dark.

LEE

I have a headlamp. In there.

Lee gestures at the office.

WINNIE

In the car. Now, please.

Winnie clicks her clicker, and a car beeps offstage right.

LEE

...Okay.

Lee quietly exits stage right. Winnie exits behind him.

Lights go up in the interior set. Martine is turning the page of a document when the noise of tires on gravel makes her glance up.

MARTINE

Are they leaving?

Emmett looks out the window.

EMMETT

Looks like it.

MARTINE

Both of them?

EMMETT

Yeah.

Martine scoffs in annoyance and shakes her head. Then she pauses, glances around—and stands up. She goes to the bookshelf.

EMMETT (CONT'D)

What are you doing?

MARTINE

If they won't tell us who *actually* has veto rights, I can figure it out for myself.

Martine rummages through the files on the bookshelf.

EMMETT

See, this is why I love you.

MARTINE

It's right here, out in the open. It could've fallen off the shelf. Would it be my fault for seeing something that fell off a shelf?

EMMETT

You think I don't mean that. But I really do.

Martine finds the file she wants and starts flipping through it.

MARTINE

Lee's got nothing. "Advisory rights." And Phil doesn't even have that. It's all with the board.

Victorious, Martine slips the papers back into the file and the file onto the shelf. Then she faces Emmett.

MARTINE (CONT'D)

You were saying?

Emmett picks Martine up; they kiss. She drapes one hand around his neck and hooks her ankles behind his back. They move easily together—this isn't the first, or second, time. Emmett perches Martine on the conference table.

EMMETT

I was just saying I love you, is all.

MARTINE

You keep using that word. I don't think you know what it means.

EMMETT (*casually*)

I absolutely do love you.

MARTINE

If you loved me, you'd offer me a job. You'd *want* me to take the job.

EMMETT

I'm not gonna fuck somebody who works for me.

MARTINE

No. That would be unprofessional.

EMMETT

It's about the power dynamics and...consent.

Emmett gently repositions Martine on the table.

EMMETT (CONT'D)

Now, a valued colleague, on the other hand. A peer... That's different. I mean, it's a free country.

They stare at each other, him standing, her sitting on the table with her knees either side of him.

MARTINE

I'm not sure we count as peers. I've never given you a peer review.

EMMETT

I would *love* that. Take off your shirt.

Martine glances around, hesitating.

MARTINE

You're crazy.

EMMETT

That's not true.

MARTINE

You're a big, dumb animal.

EMMETT

And that's why you love me.

Martine considers Emmett while he runs his fingers up and down her thigh.

MARTINE

True enough.

And it is true. She lost her cool composure the second he picked her up. They kiss. Then Emmett gently but firmly pushes Martine back and starts unbuttoning her blouse. She tilts her head back.

Lights out.

The lights stay out for a few long moments in which we hear nothing but crickets. Then pale morning light slowly rises on the foot of the stage.

PHIL stands on the foot of the stage, arms crossed, speaking into his phone.

PHIL

Daily log for May 31st, 2025, eight forty-two a.m. The temperature at the weather station at six a.m. was 72.6 degrees Fahrenheit. No rain last night. The level of Wiley Stream at the East Bend Checkpoint was 13 inches an hour ago. I saw an adult female bobcat when I was checking the water level. It was taking a drink from the stream. I think it's the one Lee named something dumb.

Phil trails off, lost in thought.

EMMETT strides onto the foot of the stage from stage right. He's wearing a t-shirt and track pants and is lost in thought, just like Phil. He barely sees Phil in time not to bowl him over.

EMMETT

Whoa, sorry. Didn't see you there.

PHIL

What are you doing here?

EMMETT

It's a public park, isn't it?

PHIL

For now.

Phil shoots Emmett a dark look and exits stage left toward the trails. Emmett watches Phil go, then he pulls out his phone, hits a button, and holds it to his ear. The phone rings once.

EMMETT *(softly)*

Pick up, goddamn you.

MARTINE (O.S.)

Hey.

EMMETT

Hey.

MARTINE (O.S.)

What's up?

EMMETT

I got a call this morning from Bethany Dewar.

MARTINE (O.S.)

Yeah?

EMMETT

She says she can no longer vote for us. And she's talking to Scott and Larry and God knows who else today.

MARTINE (O.S.)

What? Why?

EMMETT

Because *somebody* told her that I donated money to reopen a gender-affirming care clinic out in the middle of nowhere. And *apparently*, she has nothing better to do than obsess over what adult strangers do with their bodies.

MARTINE (O.S.)

...Oh. Oh.

EMMETT

Yeah.

MARTINE

So Bethany's...opposed to... What, is it a religious thing?

EMMETT

I don't really care. But we need to change her mind about me.

MARTINE (O.S.) (*Sighing*)

Well. You did write that check. If she knows about it now, you can't un-ring that bell.

EMMETT

Clearly. But surely a McKinsey consultant can suggest a way to address it.

MARTINE (O.S.)

We can mitigate the fallout, of course. I'll call Scott and Larry now. I'll call all the board members except Bethany. For her...you and I should quickly align on our talking points first. But...I do need to manage your expectations here. This is exactly the type of thing that blows up relationships. This is why philanthropists stick to *safe* causes.

EMMETT

It isn't an option to lose the relationship with Bethany. Forget this park, she's got her hand in everything. She's on the board of that restaurant group we're looking into.

MARTINE (O.S.)

I know.

EMMETT

Her husband's the *state A.G.*

MARTINE (O.S.)

I know.

EMMETT

Then I'd have thought you would realize the need to find a solution.

MARTINE (O.S.)

We will. We will absolutely find a solution.

EMMETT

I can't have this spiteful old bigot turning the state *attorney general* against me.

MARTINE (O.S.)

I fully appreciate how critical this is.

EMMETT

So what are we going to do about it?

MARTINE (O.S.)

...First things first. I need to call the other board members, preferably before Bethany does. Then I'm going to draft some approaches. And I'll call you in two—three hours.

EMMETT

If you can fix Bethany's perspective on this... Maybe I would reconsider my employment policy.

MARTINE (O.S.) (*affecting indifference*)

...What a generous non-offer.

EMMETT

And if you don't fix it, you're fired.

Emmett hangs up. He takes a breath. Then he turns and exits stage right. He immediately reappears in the office. The conference table is cluttered with yesterday's coffee cups, water bottles, and discussion guides. Emmett glances around, looking for something.

LEE enters from stage right. Lee is startled when he sees Emmett, but Emmett doesn't flinch.

LEE

Oh.

EMMETT

Sorry to barge in. I'm just looking for my water bottle.

LEE

Oh.

EMMETT

I was thinking I'd hike the Five Sisters Loop. Gotta hydrate. It's gonna get hot.

LEE

That's a big hike.

EMMETT

I know. I've done it before. I bring my dogs here all the time.

LEE

Really?

EMMETT

Why should that surprise you?

LEE

No, I just—You never mentioned.

EMMETT

You have the wrong idea about me. Several wrong ideas, probably.

Emmett has been staring at Lee, and he now looks him up and down so unsubtly that Lee bristles in surprise.

EMMETT (CONT'D)

Sorry. Sorry, it's just. You look just like an ex of mine. You remind me of him, too.

LEE

...Oh.

EMMETT

What were we talking about?

LEE

I don't think we were talking.

EMMETT

No, we were talking about your wrong idea of me. Like, you probably think I come from money. Silver spoon and all that. But the reality couldn't be further. The reality is, my mother scrubbed public toilets when we were growing up. And I fucking hated that.

Emmett says this lightly but while staring intently at Lee.

LEE

I didn't really think you came from money. I didn't think about it at all.

EMMETT

Sometimes people assume that. Just because I have money now. And it's true, things have changed for my family. Now my mother gets her toenails painted while someone is scrubbing *her* bathroom. Every other month, she's on some European river cruise with her friends from the old neighborhood, drinking white wine and trotting out their high school French. You should see the pictures they send me. My sister tells me not to pay the way for all Ma's friends. But honestly, I love doing it. But, that's just me.

LEE

Well, that's really nice.

Beat.

EMMETT

Y'know, I'm incredibly impressed by you, Lee. You're clearly willing to take big risks for your principles. I find that really admirable.

LEE

...Thank you.

EMMETT

Most people I deal with are pragmatists. Their thinking is all about the calculus of power dynamics. They look at me, and the ability I have to make or break their organization, and they assess my proposal coming from this place of fear-based thinking.

LEE

That's too bad. People should see they don't have to be afraid of you.

EMMETT

What happens is, they start thinking that my success is inevitable. That everyone else is already in my pocket. And of course, no one wants to be the only guy on the wrong side. And frankly, it's hard to refute that kind of logic, because my proposals do meet with such broad support. That's not my fault. But it does create this dynamic of...deference. That's why you're such a breath of fresh air. A lot of people in your shoes would be worried about their job security. But it's like that doesn't even occur to you.

LEE

I...

Lee looks stunned.

EMMETT

That really hadn't occurred to you, had it?

Emmett laughs good naturedly.

EMMETT (CON'T)

You're wonderful. Never change.

LEE

Are you threatening me?

EMMETT

Oh, no. When I threaten you, you'll know it.

Emmett laughs and slaps Lee on the arm in a bro-y way.

EMMETT (CONT'D)

I'm just kidding. I look forward to working with you. I really do.

LEE

I wouldn't be so sure.

EMMETT

Oh, I'll enjoy it.

LEE

I don't think we'll be working together. Bethany's gonna vote to get rid of you, and so is the rest of the board.

EMMETT

No they're not. You think your little stunt about the clinic will matter to anyone else? None of the rest of them share her transphobic obsession. And they can read the writing on the wall. Which says, "You're out of money." And there's only one offer to help you protect this place.

LEE

We're exploring other options.

EMMETT

"We," is that your consultant? Is she the one who thought up this little gambit with Bethany?

LEE

"We" is me and Tatiana. And this was my idea.

EMMETT

You did not come up with this. And Tatiana didn't sign off on any of this harebrained fuckery.

LEE

What would you know about Tatiana?

Beat – Emmett looks Lee in the eye without expression.

EMMETT

Look. Because I like you, I'll be honest with you. This deal is going through. I know this because I know people. Tatiana and the rest of the board, they're the kind of pragmatists I mentioned before. They see that I'm offering a solution. And no one wants to be the only one on my bad side. You see how it goes?

LEE

I'm not stupid.

EMMETT

That's good.

Calmly, Emmett walks toward Lee—and keeps walking right into Lee's personal space. Lee takes an instinctive half-step away from him, backing into the conference table. Lee stumbles and steadies himself against the table as Emmett, still making eye contact, reaches behind Lee to pick up his water bottle.

EMMETT (CONT'D) *(softly)*

Not so fearless now.

LEE *(trembling)*

Who says I'm not afraid of you, you fuck?

Emmett grins. He likes Lee.

EMMETT

I'll see you tomorrow morning.

Emmett exits stage right. When the door shuts behind him, Lee gasps in a huge, shaky breath that somehow doesn't reach his lungs. He props himself up against the table. He starts to breathe in for four, hold for seven, out for eight. After a while, he is able to look up, blinking.

The door opens, and Lee jumps. TATIANA enters.

TATIANA

Hey, boo.

Beat.

LEE

Hey. Thanks for coming.

TATIANA

I never say no to a coffee date with you.

Tatiana puts down her bag and pushes her sunglasses onto her head.

TATIANA (CONT'D)

You look like you've seen a ghost. What's up?

Lee opens his mouth but then just stands there, staring a thousand-yard stare. Finally,

LEE

...Did you know they assassinated Gandhi?

TATIANA

...I did know that, yes.

LEE

Who would assassinate *Gandhi*?

TATIANA

Hindu nationalists. Why are we talking about this?

Tatiana sits down at the conference table, and Lee sits next to her.

LEE

I don't know. It just seems so crazy.

TATIANA

I feel like you haven't been sleeping.

LEE

I mean, not really.

TATIANA

Well, go back to bed. It's Saturday morning. Stop going down Internet rabbit holes about political assassinations of the 1940s and get some sleep.

LEE

It is Saturday.

TATIANA

Right.

LEE

What's gonna happen tomorrow? I need to know what your plan is at this point. Because this. This place. It's just one thing you're part of. You do so much amazing work. So I know you love the forest, but it's just one thing for you. But this is my job. It's my only job. It's my life. I basically live here. And in, like, 27 hours, all of that could change completely. So I need to know what your plan is. Like, now.

TATIANA

Nothing's gonna change. You'll keep running operations here as long as you want. I mean, there is another job I am kinda hoping you'll take in the near future, but...

LEE

What? What is it?

Tatiana bites her lip. She looks like she's dying to tell Lee something.

TATIANA

...I'm *really* not supposed to say yet.

LEE

Is it part of your plan?

TATIANA

Mm-hmm.

LEE

Your plan to get Emmett out of here?

TATIANA

You want to do another campaign, the two of us?

LEE

Oh my God, thank God. Yes!

Tatiana grins.

TATIANA

It's gonna be so great.

LEE

I mean. I do feel like we should have started before? Like, more than the day before the board votes.

TATIANA

This is something different. Something much bigger.

LEE

Oh. Okay?

Tatiana looks ecstatic. Lee looks tentatively hopeful but also like he's gonna lose his mind.

LEE (CONT'D)

...Tat, I'm gonna lose my mind here. Would you just tell me?

TATIANA

Fine, fine! But you can't tell *anyone!* Not for a little while.

LEE

Okay.

TATIANA

Okay.

Beat. Tatiana leans in.

TATIANA (CONT'D)

I'm gonna run for Congress, Lee.

Tatiana beams at Lee as though she just told him he's going to be a father. Lee doesn't react for a moment—he's too shocked.

LEE

Oh. Oh my God. That's...that's *amazing!* But...this is so out of the blue. You never said you were thinking about doing this, like, soon. You always said it wasn't worth it to run unless you had the money to make a dent in the primaries.

TATIANA

Well, I'm getting the resources now to make more than a dent.

LEE

The *resources?*

TATIANA

When this donation lands, we're gonna be able to launch a *real* campaign. TV spots, radio, a speaking tour— The two of us could be moving to D.C. in a year and a half! I mean, maybe. They think I might really have a shot.

LEE

Where are you getting the *resources* from?

Beat. Lee and Tatiana just look at each other.

LEE (CONT'D)

...If you tell me that you....

TATIANA

Lee.

LEE

Please. Don't—

Lee stands up from the table, as if to back away from what he's hearing.

TATIANA

I know you think his business model is...well. But the paradigm has changed. Private wealth has been weaponized, and refusing to sully your hands with it is like going into battle with wooden spears. What Emmett's doing is redirecting wealth toward causes we both care about. Wouldn't you say that's a good thing?

LEE

He's redirecting it back to himself.

TATIANA

Do you know anything about this man?

LEE

Do you?

TATIANA

I've known him for more than two years.

LEE

You've known him for more than two years?

TATIANA

He supports some really great causes. That's how we met. Look him up. He's more than "*private equity*." That's just the tool he uses to accomplish his goal. And his goal is to *help people*.

LEE

I did look him up. ENE chews up good businesses and spits out the bones. There's, like, twenty lawsuits against them.

TATIANA

That's business, there's always lawsuits. Look at what Emmett's actually doing. He's stepping in to patch up so many safety nets that are crumbling away. And no one asked him to do it. He just wants to protect resources for people. It's so much more than this forest. It's community centers. Housing for low-income families. *Clinics* for trans folks in need.

Tatiana shoots Lee a look.

LEE

Forgive me if I don't suck his cock for acquiring low-income housing.

TATIANA

You agreed to support this thing with me. And then you go and rile Bethany up with all this transphobic stuff, without telling me? What the hell was that? Was that Winnie's idea?

LEE

Why does everyone assume it couldn't have been my idea!

TATIANA

Please.

LEE

Wait. How did you know about that?

TATIANA

You think Bethany didn't call me first thing? I've been putting out fires all morning thanks to you. I forgive you, though. It was a crime of passion.

Tatiana smiles at Lee.

TATIANA (CONT'D)

And I'm sorry I couldn't tell you what was really going on. But now you see. This is the beginning, not an ending. This is just the beginning of what we're gonna do together.

LEE

I...

Lee can't find the words for a moment.

LEE (CONT'D)

...I don't wanna move to D.C.

TATIANA

It'll be so good for you. You need a change of scene. You need to meet people. And I need you! I can't do this without you.

LEE

Seems like you've already done it, without me.

TATIANA

They wouldn't let me tell *anybody!* And I was protecting you. Now no one can say you weren't genuinely impartial.

LEE

I'm not impartial. And...and why would that matter?

TATIANA

Why would what matter?

LEE

For me to look neutral toward Emmett. Why would it be bad if people knew that I knew that he was funding your campaign?

TATIANA

Well.

Tatiana spreads her hands in a "duh" gesture.

LEE

Because it would look like you made a deal with him?

TATIANA

Because it could be misinterpreted, yes. But this forest isn't in any danger. It's going to stay a nature preserve, just like always.

LEE

Then why won't they put that in writing?

TATIANA

Because that's not how it works.

Tatiana smiles sympathetically at Lee.

TATIANA (CONT'D)

I know change is hard for you. But honestly, I think you need some change right now. I really hope you'll come join the campaign. It doesn't even have to be full-time. You could still come here and help Phil with whatever.

LEE

Tat, I'm so sorry, but...but you can't do this. Emmett is not who you think he is.

TATIANA

What do you mean?

LEE

He's... He's just like Simon.

TATIANA

C'mon.

LEE

You should've heard him just now, he was threatening me, telling me to get in line!

TATIANA

He's passionate about making this partnership work. Because he does *good* for people. Way more than you know. His soup kitchens feed more people every day than the whole population /of the—/

LEE

/His/ soup kitchens!

TATIANA

Where do you see the threat coming from?

LEE

His soup kitchens are a symptom, not the cure.

TATIANA

I know you don't like how the world has changed. You're living in some twentieth-century model of politics that never actually existed. But I operate with what I have. And this is how I get my foot in the door. I'd have a seat at the table. I'd have a *vote*, Lee. A real vote on *all* of the issues we care about. I can secure people's access to healthcare, their voting rights, their safety. Don't you think that's a million times more important than a forest?

LEE

Where do I see the threat coming from? It's coming *from* his help. When you make people dependent on you, you don't need any other threat.

TATIANA

I can't believe you're so fixated on this insane idea that Emmett wants to sell the park. You can't see *anything* beyond that? You don't care that I'm *running for Congress*, where I could create *real* change? I could put all the things we talk about into practice, on a national scale. And you care more about twenty thousand acres that most people will never see.

LEE

I thought you loved this place.

TATIANA

Of course I do. I *love* it. But that doesn't mean I put it above everything else. I love helping people. I love this country. What's left of it. And I want to be there when we start putting the pieces back together. Whereas this? It's just one forest. And it'll be fine.

Beat.

LEE

...If it'll be fine, why did you say it's just one forest?

TATIANA

It'll be *fine!*

LEE

How did Emmett know we were out of money?

TATIANA

What?

LEE

There's no other bidders because no one really knows that we don't have the money for the next mortgage payment. So how does he just happen to show up now?

TATIANA

...I approached him. Because I thought he'd be the perfect person to help us.

LEE

Oh my *God*.

TATIANA

I'm gonna need a chief of staff. For my campaign. Who could do that for me but you?

LEE

I wish we hadn't had this conversation.

TATIANA

Why?

LEE

They say don't meet your heroes.

TATIANA

Lee!

Lee walks to the window and looks out, his back to Tatiana.

TATIANA (CONT'D)

You know what, forget it then! While I fight for the people out in the real world, you keep on playing hermit in the woods. As if that does anyone *any* good!

Tatiana gets up and grabs her purse. Lee glances back at Tatiana. But he doesn't say anything. Tatiana exits stage right. We hear footsteps through gravel, a car door opening and closing, an engine starting, tires peeling away. Lee buries his head in his hands.

Lights dim over the office and rise on the foot of the stage.

EMMETT enters from stage left. He carries his water bottle in one hand and cell phone in the other. He sits down on the bench, scrolls through messages on his phone, then starts typing a long response.

WINNIE enters from stage right carrying her laptop bag. Emmett looks up at her entrance.

EMMETT

Speak of the devil.

WINNIE (*brightly*)

I prefer "antichrist."

EMMETT (*smiling and getting to his feet*)

I was just talking about you. Typing about you, anyway.

WINNIE

Oh yeah?

EMMETT

Yeah. I want to offer you a job.

WINNIE

...Interesting.

EMMETT

Listen. I won't presume to praise your intelligence. What I'll say is: you're manipulative.

WINNIE

That means a lot, coming from you.

EMMETT

Right?

WINNIE

Sounds like Bethany's causing real trouble for you.

EMMETT

'Course not, or I wouldn't be feeling so generous. But it was a *damn* good try.

WINNIE

A job offer's not generous. It's an equal exchange.

EMMETT

You'd be a member of my executive strategy team with a starting salary of \$250,000 a year. And our new business incentive program means you get a cut of any clients you bring in.

WINNIE

Very much money indeed.

EMMETT

You can get back to me tomorrow. I'll have HR write up an offer.

WINNIE

Okay.

EMMETT

Okay.

Winnie and Emmett look at each other. Emmett smiles.

EMMETT (CONT'D)

Take the rest of the day off. I am. I'm gonna hike the Five Sisters Loop.

WINNIE

Have fun. Bring lots of water.

EMMETT

Done and done.

Emmett smiles, then exits stage left. Winnie looks after him. Then she exits stage right. The next moment she enters the office from stage right. Lee is staring out the window, devastated.

WINNIE

Hey there.

LEE *(his back to Winnie, still looking out the window)*

The robin's nest fell.

WINNIE

What?

LEE

The one on the branch. It fell

WINNIE

Oh, yeah.

LEE

I told Phil it was going to.

WINNIE *(gently)*

That's a shame.

LEE

It's natural selection. You shouldn't be sad.

WINNIE

Okay. Well, to that end: do you want some good news?

LEE

Yes.

Lee eagerly turns away from the window. Winnie sits down at the table and Lee sits next to her.

WINNIE

I think our plan might be working. Or...or maybe not. I can't tell.

LEE

...Good to know. Why do you think it *might* be working?

WINNIE

Emmett seems to think it was a nice move.

LEE

He told you that?

WINNIE

I bumped into him outside just now. He offered me a job.

LEE

WHAT?

WINNIE

Bet.

LEE

Oh my *GOD!*

WINNIE

Relax. I'm still in this to win it. *(Beat.)* He'll be even more impressed with me if I win.

LEE

You're *taking* the job?!

WINNIE

No. Well, probably not. I mean...

Winnie pictures it to herself.

WINNIE (CONT'D)

They must do some *really* interesting work. It would be exciting. No doubt about that. And it wouldn't suck to be rich. But...his team must work around the clock. I'm not cut out for that.

LEE

I can't believe you would even consider it.

WINNIE

Why, 'cause it's "wrong"?

LEE

Yes, exactly that.

WINNIE

It's just a different system. It's a mistake to think the values tradition you were born into is automatically better others. Private ownership is the way of the foreseeable future.

LEE

It's like you already work for him. Why did you even take our side?

WINNIE

Because I love the woods.

Winnie is calm and matter-of-fact. Lee is losing his mind.

WINNIE (CONT'D)

You look like you've seen a ghost.

Beat.

LEE

...You were right. Tatiana's not voting with us. Emmett is funding her run for Congress.

WINNIE

Going straight for Congress! Damn. She doesn't mess around.

LEE

So we'll need fully four votes now. We have Bethany. Presumably. But I don't know if she can bring over three more people. Especially given that her reasoning is...

WINNIE

Unsavory?

LEE

Yes.

WINNIE

I can talk to Bethany and give her a few pointers about not polarizing her audience with her personal views. Get her to focus on the principle of the private equity risk.

LEE

But do you think she can bring over three? Even though Tatiana's gonna recommend Emmett?

WINNIE

I don't know. Three out of five undecided chairs is a tall order. But it's possible. Some could already be leaning our way. You never know. I've reached out to them all by email. Nothing too scary—just a quick note offering to walk through any of the complexities of the deal they may be unsure of. But they haven't even seen ENE's proposal yet. So they've all ignored me so far.

Lee is staring into space, not really listening.

LEE

/How/ could Tatiana do this?

Lee is trying to sound angry, but he looks near tears.

WINNIE

I'm sorry. *(beat)* And I'm *really* sorry to use a cliché, but...the truth is, this is all for the best.

LEE

In what *fucking* way is this for the best?

WINNIE

Because disillusionment and enlightenment are the exact same fucking thing.

Beat.

LEE

...I wish I didn't know.

WINNIE

I know.

LEE

You know what the worst part is?

WINNIE

What?

LEE

Emmett's right. Even if we get rid of him, it'll just have to be someone else. We're out of money.

WINNIE

That's why you get multiple bidders in here. You use a bidding war to negotiate for an easement that protects part of the land from development.

LEE

Bidding war.

WINNIE

Figure of speech. There probably won't be *that* many interested parties. But you only really need two.

LEE

How much of the land do you think we could get protected that way?

WINNIE

Depends on who comes to the table.

LEE

Be optimistic.

WINNIE

I really can't guess. There's too many unknowns. We can make a list of prospective acquirers. But that's down the road. First, we have to figure out how to pull three more board members over to our side. Who's our best bet, do you think?

LEE

I don't know. I don't know these people. Clearly.

Winnie grimaces. Lee doesn't notice it.

LEE (CONT'D)

Maybe start with Scott? He's nice. And he's good friends with Bethany.

Winnie gasps, softly but sharply and stands up from her chair.

WINNIE

Damn it.

Lee glances up. Winnie takes off her glasses, puts them on the table, and staggers to the floor. She curls up with her knees beneath her and her head on the floor, in something between child's pose and the tornado drill position.

LEE

What are you doing?

WINNIE

I get sick sometimes.

Winnie takes deep, intentional breaths.

LEE

What's wrong?

WINNIE

Sorry, can you come back later? I just need to stay here for a while.

LEE

I—okay, but—can I do something for you? We have Tylenol, would that help?

WINNIE

No.

LEE

Or maybe it's Advil. Let me check.

WINNIE

That stuff doesn't work on neuropathic pain. Which is what I'm having. Or so they think.

LEE

Oh. I'm sorry.

Beat. Winnie, with a hand over her eyes, twitches and shifts on the floor.

LEE (CONT'D)

I don't know what that means.

WINNIE

Means caused by nerves. Sometimes it's in my back. This one's in my stomach. And my eyes.

LEE

Your *eyes*?

WINNIE

My eyes just kill sometimes.

LEE

What...what's causing it?

WINNIE

That's the question.

LEE

Oh.

WINNIE

They've done tests for M.S., scans for a brain tumor—

LEE

A *brain* tumor?

WINNIE

Don't worry, I didn't have one. The worrying part is, though...they haven't found anything else.

Winnie rocks back and forth.

LEE

I'm so sorry.

WINNIE

It's okay.

LEE

It doesn't look okay.

WINNIE

Right, but who's to say bad things are a *bad* thing, y'know?

LEE

Um...I don't get it.

WINNIE

It's just an experience. Another experience. And the only alternative to earthly experiences is death. So...

LEE

...I guess.

WINNIE

Plus, when the pain finally passes, it's blissful. I feel high.

LEE

You sound a little high right now.

WINNIE

High on *life!*

Winnie puts her forehead on the floor and leans forward as though about to go into a somersault.

LEE

...Should you go to the doctor?

WINNIE

This is the only thing that helps. And if I were in a hospital, they wouldn't even let me do this.

LEE

Why not?

WINNIE

The nurses find it disconcerting.

LEE

Let me call someone for you. Who can I call?

WINNIE

No one.

LEE

Please, they don't have to come here, but it would just make me more comfortable if someone close to you knew /that—/

WINNIE

/I/ mean there's no one to call.

LEE

Oh.

WINNIE

Do you mind if we reconvene later? I just need an hour or two of your floor.

LEE

I'm not gonna leave you here alone to...have a seizure, or something.

WINNIE

I've never had a seizure.

LEE

Well, now that I said it, you're gonna start.

Winnie bursts out laughing. Lee sits down on the floor next to her. She is still curled up, facing the floor. Lee reaches out to rub her back, but he hesitates and draws back his hand before touching her.

WINNIE

Well. If you're gonna stay...

LEE

What?

WINNIE

Read me something? Doesn't matter what.

LEE

Oh, yeah, sure.

Lee pulls his phone out.

LEE (CONT'D)

Oh. My phone's dead. I think I forgot to charge it last night.

WINNIE

Oh.

LEE

But, um... Have you seen *Lord of the Rings*?

WINNIE

Yeah.

LEE

Have you seen...*Amelie*?

WINNIE

Yeah.

LEE

Have you seen...*Secondhand Lions*?

WINNIE

No.

LEE

Oh, good. Okay. So. It starts on the main character, Walter, as a grown man. For most of the movie, he's gonna be a little boy. Picture Haley Joel Osment. But in the first scene, he's grown up, and he's a cartoonist. He's sitting at his desk. Or drafting table. Is it a drafting table for cartoonists? Anyway. It's present-day. By which I mean the nineties...

The sound of birdsong gets louder as Lee's voice gets fainter. The lights over the foot of the stage get brighter and brighter, blinding the audience to everything upstage. Then, after reaching a painful level of brightness, the lights dim. The birdsong quiets. We hear Lee again and can see

him and Winnie in the office. They're still on the floor, but in slightly different positions. Winnie is now lying on her side with her head propped up on one arm.

LEE (CONT'D)

And we see the uncles flying their little red plane through the clouds. They're laughing their heads off, screaming and hollering, having the time of their lives. Which are, of course, about to end. But. It's still wonderful. And that's the end of the movie. The end.

Beat.

WINNIE

That was a really good movie.

LEE

Isn't it? One of my favorites.

WINNIE

Thank you.

LEE

Of course. How do you feel?

WINNIE

High.

LEE

Oh, good.

Winnie gets to her feet. Lee follows suit, watching her carefully.

LEE

You got it?

WINNIE

Uh-huh.

Winnie looks just a tiny bit off-balance but cheerful as she stands.

LEE

You want some tea?

WINNIE

Love some.

Lee crosses upstage and turns the kettle on. Winnie stretches and says,

WINNIE (CONT'D)

So. What were we talking about, before I interrupted?

LEE

No, please, let's not talk about all that again. Let's watch another movie!

WINNIE

Believe me, I'd love to. But we have very limited time.

The door opens, and MARTINE enters. She carries a stack of slim blue folders embossed with ENE's logo.

MARTINE

Hello! I'm glad to find you both here.

LEE

What are you doing here?

MARTINE

Just dropping off the final proposal.

WINNIE

Aren't you skipping a step? The board could ask for changes when they see it tonight.

MARTINE

There's been a change of plans. The board hopped on a call to discuss, and they decided to recuse themselves from this matter. They gave Tatiana their proxy, since she's so well versed in the complexities. So it'll be just her and Emmett signing tomorrow. Although, of course, Lee, you're welcome, too. Emmett said you'd be happy to turn over those visitors' center naming rights. So there's a page on that in the proposal.

Martine sets the folders down on the table. Winnie lowers her head and stares at the table.

LEE

They gave Tatiana...proxy? They just...decided not to vote?

MARTINE

That is what that means, yes.

LEE

Even Bethany?

MARTINE

Yes.

WINNIE

And why would Bethany do that?

MARTINE

Turns out, people are very reasonable when you approach them in an adult way.

WINNIE

What was your reasonable, adult conversation about?

MARTINE

I spoke with her about how Emmett's not partisan in his donations. He's truly agnostic, open to supporting any good cause. After all, spending is a form of expression, and he's mindful to observe a kind of Fairness Doctrine. Giving equal billing to opposing points of view, so to speak.

WINNIE

So Emmett cut another check.

MARTINE

Bethany told us about the extremely admirable work being done by a group she's involved with. The Feminists for Women's Right to Space. After Bethany explained her perspective and told us about all the work they do to protect and promote young women's access to opportunities, ENE was inspired to make a contribution.

LEE

That sounds fucking *illegal*.

MARTINE

Which part? Donating to a nonprofit? Seems an odd stance for *you* to take.

LEE

What the fuck are you doing? You're just—just destroying everything for *no reason!* You're worse than those people who assassinated Gandhi!

MARTINE

Gandhi was a pedophile.

LEE

What?!

MARTINE

Look it up.

Neither Lee nor Winnie has anything to say.

MARTINE (CONT'D)

Well. Toodle-oo. I'll see you in the morning.

Martine shoots an exultant look at both of them, but especially Winnie, before turning on her heel and exiting the office.

Beat. No one moves. Finally,

WINNIE

...I'm sorry.

LEE

I can't believe they're just choosing not to vote. I didn't even know they could do that.

WINNIE

They're covering their asses.

LEE

Can we call them?

WINNIE

They gave Tatiana their vote. That's done. Emmett will be the new steward of this land in 24 hours. That's the reality now. So from here, our mindset does have to shift from negotiation to damage control.

LEE

But I...I have those naming rights. He'd need *my* permission to rename the visitors' center the Emmett Norman Center for Noblesse Oblige. So I can keep negotiating, /and—/

WINNIE

/Think/ about his personality. He wants his win and he wants it quick. Martine specifically told me that he loses his patients when negotiations go 'round in circles too long. I think Phil's right. Given the...new circumstances, I think the best thing to do is concede the rights. He'll get to feel big, and then hopefully he'll be generous. Maybe *ask* about an easement, as a favor, a few weeks from now. Exchanging favors seems to be his preferred way to operate.

LEE

They can't have this forest.

WINNIE

They already do.

LEE

They can't HAVE IT.

WINNIE

But it's not the end of the world. The land, even without an easement, could still survive with Emmett as its owner. We'll find ways to work with him, to keep his interests aligned with the forest's. I can help. If you want. Like I was saying before: private ownership is gonna be the new law of the land. As in, everywhere. So we should learn how to live within that system.

LEE

Sounds a lot like giving up and dying.

WINNIE

You have to let go of your idea that some systems are correct and everything else must be morally wrong. It's not a question of absolutes. Think about it: why do you have the naming rights to the visitors' center in the first place? They gave them to you because democracy is not always the best way to get good decisions made. I mean, Christ, look what we just democratically voted in!

LEE

The fuck is your point?

WINNIE

This could be an okay social contract from your end. You give him honors, and he gives you protection. It's a classic exchange. Maybe what we do is this. You name the visitors' center after him, *AND* you suggest renaming the trails whatever he wants and putting a little plaque in the grass every hundred feet that says "Emmett Norman's generous contribution saved this land." That strokes his ego and gives him a direct incentive not to sell it. And it's kind of a carrot *and* a stick, because he'd look more like a hypocrite if he ever did sell. It might be as simple as that. Obeisance in exchange for protection. What d'you think?

Beat. Lee looks around, small and bewildered.

LEE

...Aren't we supposed to be Americans?

Winnie gives Lee a look.

LEE (CONT'D)

What's that supposed to mean?

WINNIE

You wouldn't like it.

LEE

Say it anyway.

WINNIE

...I think you're sweet.

Lee swings hard at the back of a chair, which clatters loudly to the ground.

WINNIE (CONT'D)

Why are you mad at me?

LEE

I'm mad at myself.

WINNIE

Why are you mad at you?

LEE

Because I'm a bad person.

WINNIE

Is it because you can't fix this?

LEE

WHO THE FUCK SAYS I CAN'T FIX THIS!

WINNIE

...This isn't your fault. The socioeconomic patterns of history are not your fault.

Lee turns around and walks to the window again. Beat. Winnie types.

LEE *(softly)*

I could kill myself for these woods.

WINNIE *(not having heard)*

What?

LEE *(louder)*

I said I'm gonna do something stupid.

WINNIE

Please, don't do anything till you sleep on it. You have to think of Emmett now as your employer and the park's owner.

LEE

There's still things I could do.

WINNIE

Like what?

LEE

There's *things!*

WINNIE

You need to start adjusting yourself to what's coming. But *it's not end of the world.*

LEE

Oh, right, 'cause bad things aren't really bad things, right? That's *total shit!* It doesn't even make sense! You just make up these little equations where everything comes out A-OK so that you don't have to care that you're dying! But *this* is not *acceptable!*

Winnie stares at Lee, shocked. Lee opens his mouth—closes it—fuming and lost.

WINNIE

I probably *am* dying, now that you said it.

LEE

No, I didn't mean...

Winnie stands and shoves her laptop in her bag

WINNIE

You'll learn to live with lots of things whether you like it or not.

Winnie exits. Lee is left standing there, alone, his hands on his hips, at a loss. After a long moment, he turns and faces the window. He raises a hand to his head as he looks out at the woods. Lights out – end of Act II.

Act III.

Lights rise slowly over the office. The only occupant is WINNIE, who sits at the conference table and types. After a moment, she stops typing and stares into space.

PHIL enters on the foot of the stage. He crosses stage left and sits down on the bench. After a moment of staring glumly into the woods, Phil pulls out his phone.

PHIL

Log for June 1st, 2025. The temperature at six a.m. was 69.2 degrees Fahrenheit. The rain gauge shows...I don't know. But I don't think it rained last night.

Phil sighs, turns off the recording and stares into woods.

LEE enters in a rush down the trail from upstage left. His hair is wet and he has a backpack on.

LEE

Phil! PhilPhilPhilPhil!

Phil turns around, eyebrows raised. Lee skids to a stop in front of him.

LEE (CONT'D)

Hey!

PHIL

Hi.

LEE

Are you coming to the meeting?

Phil snorts.

PHIL

Wasn't gonna.

LEE

We need you to be the notary.

PHIL

“We”?

LEE

Everyone needs you to be the notary.

PHIL

No, let ENE bring in their own. Or Martine can probably do it.

LEE

No, no, I need you there. For moral support.

PHIL

No one's ever told me I'm good for morale.

LEE

I can't do this alone.

PHIL

No one's making you go at all!

LEE

We should be there. To make sure he doesn't try to slip something by us.

PHIL

He's already getting everything.

LEE

You don't know what he could do! Please, please just come with me!

PHIL

No.

LEE

No?

PHIL

No! I'm not doing this! I'm not going anywhere near this desecration! It's disgusting!

LEE

You have to!

PHIL

No I don't!

LEE

Please come with me.

PHIL

No.

Beat. Lee looks desperate.

LEE

I... I'll give you all my money to come do this.

PHIL

What?

LEE

I'll give you all the money I have.

PHIL

You don't have any money.

LEE

PLEASE, Phil!

PHIL

Are you cracking up?

LEE

One hundred percent, and I'm going to have a full-blown panic attack if you don't come with me right now.

PHIL

Okay, okay. Deep breaths. Jesus.

LEE

Thank you. Thank you. You just need to rubber-stamp it.

Phil and Lee start crossing stage right.

PHIL

Rubber-stamp my own death warrant. *(beat)* I suppose there's a certain dignity to it.

LEE

That's the spirit.

Phil and Lee exit stage right, then enter the office, where WINNIE sits at the table with her laptop in front of her, staring into space. She looks up at their entrance.

LEE

Oh, good, you're here. You must've just got here. What time is it? What time do Emmett and all them arrive?

Winnie looks up and down at Lee's hair and clothes.

WINNIE

Did you go home last night?

LEE

No, I was here. Then I went to the library. Then I came back here. Then I showered at the campgrounds. Now I'm back.

Winnie is looking at Lee with eyes narrowed and an eyebrow raised. Then she gets up and walks to where a few packages sit piled on the sideboard. She rips open one of the packages.

WINNIE

Here.

Winnie tosses a button-down shirt at Lee. He catches it, after it hits him in the face.

LEE

Whatthefuck?

WINNIE

I ordered these the day we met. No offense, but I had a feeling you didn't own anything worth wearing. Eighteen-inch shoulder?

Winnie pulls a gray blazer out of the next package.

LEE

...Seventeen.

WINNIE

I think you're wrong about that.

Lee looks down at the rumpled t-shirt he's wearing. Then he glances at Winnie, shrugs, and tugs off his shirt. He tosses the t-shirt into the corner of the room and pulls on the button-down.

LEE

Thanks. I didn't think about changing clothes for the meeting.

WINNIE

That's why you have a consultant.

Lee finishes buttoning his shirt. Winnie hands Lee the jacket and he slips it on. It fits like a glove.

Footsteps crunch through gravel. The door opens, and MARTINE and EMMETT enter. They glance with some surprise at Lee's wardrobe upgrade.

MARTINE

Morning, everyone.

WINNIE

Good morning.

LEE

Good morning. Did that journalist catch you, Martine?

MARTINE

What?

LEE

Oh, I thought you'd have seen him. There's a journalist wandering around down by the park entrance, looking for you. He said he has questions about some new development in the Teachers' Pension Fund lawsuit.

MARTINE

What?

LEE

He said he works for *The Sun*, but he didn't sound British. And I thought, weird. 'Cause that's a British paper, right?

Martine sighs and glances between the conference table and the door.

EMMETT

Take it. It's fine. We don't need you here for signatures.

MARTINE

...All right. I'll be back in a minute.

Martine starts to exit, muttering,

MARTINE (CONT'D)

The fucking *Sun*.

TATIANA enters. She and Martine almost collide.

TATIANA

Oh, sorry.

MARTINE

Sorry.

TATIANA

Are you leaving...?

MARTINE

I just have to step out for a moment. There's a journalist here.

TATIANA

A journalist, here?

MARTINE

Yes, but it's not about this. They want a quote from me on something else.

TATIANA

Oh. How did they even know you'd be here?

MARTINE

I'm gonna find out.

Martine exits with grim determination. Tatiana looks around at the rest of the room's inhabitants. Long, awkward beat.

LEE

Well. Shall we?

EMMETT

Let's.

Lee picks up the stack of blue folders and walks to the head of the table. Tatiana, Emmett, and Winnie take their seats. Phil walks over to the bookshelf and rummages around.

LEE

Phil?

PHIL

Hang on.

LEE

What is it?

PHIL

I can't find the thing.

LEE

The what?

PHIL

My stamp! To notarize it.

Phil looks around fruitlessly, beginning to check places he's checked before. Lee looks worried.

PHIL (CONT'D)

Got it.

Phil, stamp in hand, takes his seat at the table. Lee clears his throat.

LEE

So. We had a chance to review the proposals Martine dropped off yesterday.

Lee looks nervous and not quite sure what to say.

EMMETT

I'm assuming, since you're here at all, that you're here to sign over the visitors' center naming rights.

LEE

Yes.

EMMETT

Perfect.

LEE

Yeah, I discussed it with the team, and we felt that it was only right to give you that small honor, given your generosity in paying off the mortgage.

Lee starts to hand out the blue files containing the contract.

LEE (CONT'D)

Although...

Lee pulls back his hand and holds the files against his chest.

LEE (CONT'D)

Although, I don't know. I do just feel...super conflicted. The board gave *me* those naming rights, ten years ago. Remember, Tatiana?

TATIANA

I remember.

LEE

It's special to me. And I know things are changing, and things have to change, but—you know change is hard for me, Tat.

TATIANA

I know.

LEE

But. We do want to show our gratitude for your help in saving the forest. And I know that at the end of the day, that's your intent. So. Yeah. I'll sign them over.

Lee starts to hand out the files.

LEE (CONT'D)

Except...

Lee pulls back his hand and holds the files against his chest. Emmett, who sits next to where Lee stands, had raised his hand to take a folder. He drops his hand and looks exasperated.

LEE (CONT'D)

I mean, I really just feel we should get...that it would be really nice for you to do something symbolic, too. Say, like, an easement on just a hundred acres of land. After all, you're getting a lot here. You're getting twenty thousand acres.

EMMETT

Every one of which I'm paying for. I'm paying off your mortgage.

LEE

Right.

Lee starts to hand out the files...then pulls back his hand. Emmett and Tatiana both look exasperated.

LEE (CONT'D)

It's just. I kind of really don't feel comfortable with the way the board chose not to vote. That seems so weird to me. Shouldn't they at least hear the final terms? Let's get them on a call and we can read through everything for them.

TATIANA

The board met, and they were comfortable letting me and Emmett decide on the final terms. So will you give us our contract, please? We'd like to get it signed, and you can choose to sign off on the naming rights or not.

LEE (*holding the files against his chest*)

Well...All right. Sorry. I just thought we should call them.

Lee starts to hand out the files.

LEE (CONT'D)

But when you think about it, I feel like it's—

Lee starts to pull the folders back, but Emmett is too quick. He grabs the folders out of Lee's hand.

EMMETT

You can finish that thought on someone else's time.

Emmett picks up a pen. Tatiana shoots Lee a look at once apologetic and reproachful. Then she picks up a pen, too.

Emmett and Tatiana each take one of the folders and flip quickly through the pages, signing at the highlighted places. They sign several times. They exchange their folders, sign again on each other's copies, and then passes them to Phil. Lee watches anxiously.

Phil looks up at Lee, at the other end of the long table. Phil looks ashen. Lee nods once. Phil sighs and rubber-stamps the forms. Then he looks away as he slides one contract each back to Tatiana and Emmett. Emmett leans back with a small, satisfied sigh.

Lee picks up Tatiana's signed copy. He flips through the pages, then closes the folder. Then he picks up his backpack, puts the contract inside, zips it shut, and locks the zipper with a small lock, the kind backpackers use in hostels. Tatiana looks surprised.

TATIANA

What are you doing?

LEE (*ignoring her*)

That's settled, then.

EMMETT

Lee, I hope you know that as we move /forward—/

LEE

/And/ whenever you have a moment, you can read what you just signed.

Emmett and Tatiana glance at each other; then Emmett quickly begins reading his copy. Lee still has Tatiana's copy, so she grabs one of the unsigned extra copies from the table. So do Winnie and Phil.

Emmett reads for barely three seconds before he looks back up at Lee, enraged and amazed. Lee stares back at him. Tatiana looks horrified and crushed. Winnie puts a hand to her mouth as she grins.

Gravel crunches. MARTINE enters, suspicious and out of breath.

MARTINE

There's no journalist out there.

TATIANA

Lee, what did you *do*?

EMMETT

This is outrageous!

MARTINE

What's going on?

EMMETT

They, they fucking *tampered* /with the—/

LEE

/Let me/ clarify for you, Martine. Emmett and Tat just signed a contract that says that ENE will pay off the mortgage and generously donate the deed to the land back to the Alatanqua Forest Service.

MARTINE

...What?

Martine scoops up a folder and begins to read. Her eyes get wide as they run down the page.

EMMETT

This is insane. This is blatant fraud! He must /have—/

LEE

/You're/ welcome to finish that thought on someone else's land.

Lee stares down Emmett. Lee stands at the head of the conference table with his backpack strap in one fist, his hands on his hips. Tatiana's eyes are swimming with tears.

Emmett laughs a one-syllable laugh, then pushes his chair back from the conference table.

EMMETT

All right. All right. You'll be hearing from my lawyers.

LEE

That's sweet, I'd love to keep in touch.

Emmett storms out the door. Martine snaps herself back into action. She grabs the second signed copy and takes it with her. She looks at Lee and Winnie furiously, then hurries out the door after Emmett.

Tatiana starts to cry. Lee looks at her and feels a pang.

LEE (CONT'D)

Tat...

TATIANA

Save it.

Tatiana jumps to her feet and grabs her bag.

TATIANA (CONT'D)

I can't even look at you. You, you—you're ungrateful.

LEE

I'm sorry.

TATIANA

I never thought *you* would betray me.

LEE

Me neither.

Tatiana turns on her heel and storms out. Lee sighs deeply. Then—slowly, in sync—Lee, Winnie and Phil turn their heads to look at each other.

WINNIE

You son of a *bitch*.

LEE

Oh my God, I'm shaking.

PHIL

You switched out the papers?

LEE

Someone certainly did.

Winnie leafs through the document, smiling.

WINNIE

It looks just the same. Same typeface. Same headers. Same intro.

LEE

Same margins. I'm very fastidious.

WINNIE

Well fucking done.

Lee places the contract gently on the table and just looks at it. Then he takes off his suit jacket and hands it to Winnie.

LEE

You can probably still return this.

WINNIE

Keep it. It suits you.

LEE

Ha.

Lee tosses the jacket on the table and rolls up the sleeves of his button-down shirt. He sighs, starts to stretch out his neck—then he stops.

LEE (CONT'D)

You don't think his lawyers could really get out of it. Do you?

PHIL

I don't think so. It's called duty to review.

LEE

Yeah, that's what ChatGPT said. God, I hope it's right.

Winnie laughs.

WINNIE

It is.

Lee sighs in relief.

LEE

Then all I need to do is post a job listing.

PHIL

For what, trail maintenance?

LEE

For an operations manager.

PHIL

Where are you going?

LEE

I'm gonna do the trail maintenance.

WINNIE *(smiling)*

You'll like that, I think.

Lee nods. He's already miles off, thinking about it.

PHIL

That's a lot of work.

LEE

That's the idea.

PHIL

I'll give you a hand. But not right now. Right now, I have to go have a heart attack. But, um...

Phil and Lee look at each other. They hug, a brief, back-slapping hug. Then Phil exits, shaking his head in disbelief.

Winnie and Lee are left alone. They are silent for a beat. Then Winnie laughs quietly, at the whole thing.

WINNIE

Well. I should get going too. It... It was nice working with you.

Winnie smiles, not quite sure how to say goodbye. Then she awkwardly heads for the door.

LEE

Winnie.

Winnie turns around in the doorway. Lee cocks his head, beckoning her back. Winnie walks over to Lee, and Lee wraps her in a fierce bear hug. After a moment of shock, Winnie softens. She presses her forehead into his chest, wraps her arm around his neck, and hangs on tight.

LEE (CONT'D)

Thank you.

Winnie nods against Lee's chest. After another moment, they release each other.

LEE (CONT'D)

We did it.

WINNIE

That was all you.

LEE

Please. I couldn't have done the first thing without you, and you know it. Even today, that was from what you said. About how he gets impatient when people start going in circles.

WINNIE

And Martine told me that. We should send her an Edible Arrangement.

Lee laughs loudly, surprising himself.

LEE

Can I call you, if something happens? Or even if it doesn't... Can we go hiking sometime? Can we talk? I just feel like I need to be able to talk to you. Possibly every day for the rest of my life.

WINNIE *(archly)*

Or the rest of mine.

LEE

Win. I am *so sorry* I said that, I wasn't thinking straight. Not that that makes it okay, I just—

WINNIE

It is okay. Everything's okay. Remember?

Winnie smiles a crooked smile at Lee.

WINNIE (CONT'D)

C'mon. Let's go celebrate. We need something to eat...and maybe a smoke?

LEE

Yes, please.

Lee starts to move toward the door—and stops.

LEE (CONT'D)

I almost don't even want to leave.

Beat. Lee looks out the window at the hills.

LEE (CONT'D)

But. I am really hungry.

Winnie smiles.

WINNIE

It's not going anywhere.

Lee smiles, shoulders his backpack, and crosses stage right toward the door.

LEE

I think I want to sleep in the woods tonight. Any interest in camping? Supposed to be a beautiful night.

WINNIE

I have work tomorrow...so we'll have to camp somewhere with reception.

LEE

I know a good spot.

Lee and Winnie exit stage right. Their footsteps crunch on gravel, fade. Birds and bugs and leaves make their noise.

Lights out. THE END.