

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.

...