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CLERK US DISTRICT COURTSOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA DEPUT

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Attorneys for United States of America

# UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

Case No. 20CR2114-AJB

Plaintiff,

V.

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PLEA AGREEMENT

CRISPIN TORRES, JR.

Defendant.

IT IS HEREBY AGREED between the plaintiff, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, through its counsel, ROBERT S. BREWER, JR., United States Attorney, and Andrew J. Galvin and Aaron P. Arnzen, Assistant U.S. Attorneys, and Defendant Crispin Torres, Jr. ("Defendant"), with the advice and consent of Jami L. Ferrara, counsel for Defendant, as follows:

I

## THE PLEA

Defendant agrees to waive indictment and plead guilty to an Information charging Defendant with conspiracy to commit securities fraud, in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 371.

In exchange, the Government agrees not to bring any additional charges against Defendant for conduct outlined in the "Factual Basis" section of this plea agreement, unless Defendant breaches the plea

Def. Initials 6

agreement or the guilty plea entered pursuant to this plea agreement is set aside for any reason. If Defendant breaches this agreement or the guilty plea is set aside, section XII below shall apply.

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In addition, the attached financial addendum shall govern the fine, forfeiture, and restitution in this case.

II

#### NATURE OF THE OFFENSE

### A. ELEMENTS EXPLAINED

The offense to which Defendant is pleading guilty, and as alleged in the Information, has the following elements:

### CONSPIRACY, in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 371

- 1. There was an agreement between two or more persons to commit securities fraud, in violation of 15 U.S.C. §§ 77q and 77x.
- The defendant became a member of the conspiracy knowing of at least one of its objects and intending to help accomplish it.
- 3. At least one member of the conspiracy performed at least one overt act in furtherance of the conspiracy.

Furthermore, the offense that the conspirators agreed to commit has the following elements:

# SECURITIES FRAUD, in violation of 15 U.S.C. §§ 77q and 77x

- Defendant willfully used a scheme to defraud someone, or obtained money or property from someone by means of an untrue statement or omission of material fact;
- 2. Defendant's acts were undertaken, and his statements were made, in the offer or sale of one or more securities; and
- 3. Defendant directly or indirectly used the instruments or facilities of interstate commerce in connection with undertaking these acts and making these statements.

Defendant has fully discussed the facts of this case with defense counsel. Defendant has committed each element of the crime and admits that there is a factual basis for this guilty plea. The following facts are true and undisputed:

#### Relevant Individuals and Entities

- Defendant Crispin Torres, Jr. is a resident of National City,
   California. Defendant worked for American National Investments, LLC
   ("American National Investments") as Controller from 2003 until 2015,
   and as Chief Financial Officer from 2015 until September 2019.
- 2. American National Investments is a California corporation based in San Diego. American National Investments was a real estate development company, and the parent company of a large number of small businesses, which operated primarily in the real estate, retail, and restaurant sectors.
- 3. ANI Development, LLC ("ANI Development"), is a California limited liability company located in San Diego and a subsidiary of American National Investments. ANI Development's business consisted primarily of running a fake lending program (the "Lending Program") surrounding the transfer of California liquor licenses, as described more fully below.
- 4. Co-conspirator 1 ("CC-1") is the founder and was the Chief Executive Officer of American National Investments. CC-1 was also the managing member of ANI Development. CC-1 played a central role in perpetrating a fraudulent Ponzi scheme by convincing investors that CC-1 would use their money to make loans to individuals and entities attempting to purchase California liquor licenses. In fact, CC-1 and

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# her co-conspirators, including Defendant, used investor funds perpetrate the scheme and fund CC-1's other businesses, some of which were failing.

#### Overview of the Fraudulent Ponzi Scheme

- From in or around 2012 through 2019, CC-1 solicited money from investors by falsely promising that she would use their money to invest in a "Lending Program." Specifically, CC-1 told investors that, through the Lending Program, they could make high-interest loans to applicants for California Liquor Licenses. In addition, CC-1 represented that the loans would carry exceptionally low levels of risk, in part because the investors' money could only (1) be placed in holding accounts, and (2) be returned to the investors or their intermediaries. Contrary to her promises, CC-1 did not use investors' money to fund the Lending Program.
- Beginning no later than 2012, and continuing up to and including 2019, Defendant and CC-1 agreed with each other to commit securities fraud, by misappropriating investor funds to support CC-1's businesses, which were unrelated to the Lending Program.

### Liquor License Transfers in California

- Under California law, an applicant who wishes to purchase a 7. liquor license from an existing licensee must place in an escrow account an amount of money equal to the purchase price of the license.
- This escrow account must be established and funded within 30 days of applying for the license, and the money deposited must be maintained in escrow until the California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control (the "ABC") either (a) approves the application and the purchase of the license is completed, or (b) declines the

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application, at which point the escrowed funds are returned to the

#### CC-1's Solicitation of Investors

- Beginning in or around 2012, CC-1 told investors that they could fund ABC liquor license escrow accounts. On the phone, and by email, CC-1 described to investors important aspects of the supposed Lending Program, including the following:
  - a. Many applicants who wished to acquire a California liquor license did not have sufficient funds to deposit the license's full purchase price in an escrow account for the time period that the ABC takes to review a transfer application. Because of their lack of liquid funds, these applicants were willing to pay relatively high rates of interest on short-term loans that would fund the escrow account.
  - b. An attorney ("Attorney A") whose practice area involves California liquor license transactions had identified for Defendant applicants who wished to acquire liquor licenses and were seeking a loan to fund the related escrow CC-1 and Attorney A would negotiate the terms of such loans with these applicants.
  - c. Under the terms negotiated by CC-1 and Attorney A, investors would provide high-interest loans to the applicants. CC-1 told investors that their funds would not be at risk because their funds could only be withdrawn by the investors after the ABC accepted or declined the corresponding transfer application. Specifically, while

invested in the Lending Program, the investors' money would be maintained in special purpose accounts pursuant to agreements stating that the money could only be used to fund liquor license escrow accounts and/or withdrawn by the investors.

- d. The applicants would pay the transfer price plus interest if and when the ABC granted the related liquor license applications. Investors would then receive the amount of their original deposits, and CC-1 and the investors would split the interest proceeds.
- 10. CC-1's representations were false. CC-1 never invested the investors' funds in the Lending Program. Instead, CC-1, with Defendant's assistance, (a) used incoming investor funds to make principal and interest payments based on loans that were coming due in the Lending Program, and (b) embezzled investor funds to support shortfalls and hide losses in CC-1's and American National Investments' other businesses, and to pay for CC-1's personal expenses. By making these principal and interest payments, CC-1 and her co-conspirators sought to convince investors that the Lending Program was legitimate, which helped to perpetuate the scheme.
- 11. Defendant knew that CC-1 and American National Investments owned businesses with no direct connection to the Lending Program, including a restaurant chain, vacation rentals, a coffee shop, a juice bar, and a surf-themed clothing store. Many of these businesses were failing, and some had negative cash flows. When these businesses were unable to pay for certain expenses, such as payroll, Defendant requested that CC-1 provide investor funds from the Lending Program to cover

expenses and keep the businesses afloat. Defendant knew that this was not a permissible use of investor funds. From 2012 through 2019, CC-1 and Defendant used at least \$60 million of investor funds to meet expenses incurred by these business.

- 12. At CC-1's direction, Defendant helped CC-1 establish a bank account under a name that was similar to that of a well-known escrow company (the "Escrow Company"). This was done in order to create the appearance that the Escrow Company administered investor funds that were deposited in the bank account, which further supported the investors' belief that the Lending Program was legitimate. In fact, however, the Escrow Company was not involved in opening, maintaining, or managing this bank account. When investor funds were deposited into this account, receipts were fabricated from the Escrow Company to send to investors, and a copy was kept in files maintained by Defendant so that the amounts could be entered into the accounting system.
- 13. Defendant's participation in the conspiracy largely consisted of misappropriating investor funds to pay for business expenses unrelated to the Lending Program and establishing a bank account to assist in that effort, at the direction of CC-1. Throughout the conspiracy, Defendant was paid a salary of between \$150,000 and \$200,000, although he did not receive any additional compensation from CC-1 for Defendant's participation in the conspiracy.
- 14. As a result of the conspirators' scheme, misrepresentations and omissions, over 100 investors invested more than \$400 million in the Lending Program between 2012 and 2019.
- 15. The investors' interests in the Lending Program were securities because, among other things:

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- a. Investor funds were pooled in escrow accounts.
- b. Investors' profits from their investments depended on the success of the Lending Program.
- c. Defendant's efforts were critical to the success of the Lending Program, and investors played no role in the Lending Program's management or operation.
- 16. The loss attributable to the conspiracy amounts to at least \$65 million, but the parties agree that the amount could be greater. The parties will continue to gather facts and analyze the appropriate measure of loss, and will make corresponding recommendations to the Court at the time of sentencing. The parties agree that the appropriate loss amount, as contemplated by USSG § 2B1.1(b)(1), is at least between \$65 million and \$150 million.

#### III

#### PENALTIES

The crime to which Defendant is pleading guilty carries the following penalties:

- a maximum 5 years in prison;
- a maximum \$250,000 fine, or twice the pecuniary gain or twice В. the pecuniary loss, whichever is greater;
- C. a mandatory special assessment of \$100 per count;
- D. a term of supervised release of not more than 3 years. Defendant understands that failure to comply with any of the conditions of supervised release may result in revocation of supervised release, requiring defendant to serve in prison, upon any such revocation, all or part of the statutory maximum

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term of supervised release for the offense that resulted in such term of supervised release;

- D. an order from the Court pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 3663 that Defendant make restitution to the victim(s) of the offense of conviction, or the estate(s) of the victims(s). Defendant understands that the Court may also order, if agreed to by the parties in this plea agreement, restitution to persons other than the victim(s) of the offense of conviction; and
- E. forfeiture of any property, real or personal, which constitutes or is derived from proceeds traceable to Defendant's crime, pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 981(a)(1)(C).

#### IV

# DEFENDANT'S WAIVER OF TRIAL RIGHTS AND UNDERSTANDING OF CONSEQUENCES

This guilty plea waives Defendant's right at trial to:

- A. Continue to plead not guilty and require the Government to prove the elements of the crime beyond a reasonable doubt;
- B. A speedy and public trial by jury;
- C. The assistance of counsel at all stages;
- D. Confront and cross-examine adverse witnesses;
- E. Testify and present evidence and to have witnesses testify on behalf of Defendant; and,
- F. Not testify or have any adverse inferences drawn from the failure to testify.

#### V

## DEFENDANT ACKNOWLEDGES NO PRETRIAL RIGHT TO BE PROVIDED WITH IMPEACHMENT AND AFFIRMATIVE DEFENSE INFORMATION

Any information establishing the factual innocence of Defendant known to the undersigned prosecutor in this case has been turned over

to Defendant. The Government will continue to provide such information establishing the factual innocence of Defendant.

If this case proceeded to trial, the Government would be required to provide impeachment information for its witnesses. In addition, if Defendant raised an affirmative defense, the Government would be required to provide information in its possession that supports such a defense. By pleading guilty Defendant will not be provided this information, if any, and Defendant waives any right to this information. Defendant will not attempt to withdraw the guilty plea or to file a collateral attack based on the existence of this information.

VI

# DEFENDANT'S REPRESENTATION THAT GUILTY PLEA IS KNOWING AND VOLUNTARY

Defendant represents that:

- A. Defendant has had a full opportunity to discuss all the facts and circumstances of this case with defense counsel and has a clear understanding of the charges and the consequences of this plea. By pleading guilty, Defendant may be giving up, and rendered ineligible to receive, valuable government benefits and civic rights, such as the right to vote, the right to possess a firearm, the right to hold office, and the right to serve on a jury. The conviction in this case may subject Defendant to various collateral consequences, including but not limited to revocation of probation, parole, or supervised release in another case; debarment from government contracting; and suspension or revocation of a professional license, none of which can serve as grounds to withdraw Defendant's guilty plea.
- B. No one has made any promises or offered any rewards in return for this guilty plea, other than those contained in this agreement or otherwise disclosed to the Court.
- C. No one has threatened Defendant or Defendant's family to induce this guilty plea.
- D. Defendant is pleading guilty because Defendant is guilty and for no other reason.

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#### AGREEMENT LIMITED TO U.S. ATTORNEY'S OFFICE SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

This plea agreement is limited to the United States Attorney's Office for the Southern District of California, and cannot bind any other authorities in any type of matter, although the Government will bring this plea agreement to the attention of other authorities if requested by Defendant.

#### VIII

### APPLICABILITY OF SENTENCING GUIDELINES

The sentence imposed will be based on the factors set forth in 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a). In imposing the sentence, the sentencing judge must consult the United States Sentencing Guidelines (Guidelines) and take them into account. Defendant has discussed the Guidelines with defense counsel and understands that the Guidelines are only advisory, not 15 mandatory. The Court may impose a sentence more severe or less severe than otherwise applicable under the Guidelines, up to the maximum in the statute of conviction. The sentence cannot be determined until a presentence report is prepared by the U.S. Probation Office and defense counsel and the Government have an opportunity to review and challenge the presentence report. Nothing in this plea agreement limits the Government's duty to provide complete and accurate facts to the district court and the U.S. Probation Office.

# SENTENCE IS WITHIN SOLE DISCRETION OF JUDGE

This plea agreement is made pursuant to Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 11(c)(1)(B). The sentence is within the sole discretion of the sentencing judge who may impose the maximum sentence provided by statute. It is uncertain at this time what Defendant's sentence will be. The Government has not made and will not make any representation about what sentence Defendant will receive. Any estimate of the probable sentence by defense counsel is not a promise and is not binding on the Court. Any recommendation by the Government at sentencing also is not binding on the Court. If the sentencing judge does not follow any of the parties' sentencing recommendations, Defendant will not withdraw

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the plea.

### PARTIES' SENTENCING RECOMMENDATIONS

X

#### A. SENTENCING GUIDELINE CALCULATIONS

Although the Guidelines are only advisory and just one factor the Court will consider under 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a) in imposing a sentence, the parties will jointly recommend the following Base Offense Level, Specific Offense Characteristics, Adjustments, and Departures:

Base Offense Level [§ 2B1.1]

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- Gain [§ 2B1.1(b) (1) (M)] +24 or more¹
   More than 10 Victims [§ 2B1.1(b) (2) (A)] +2
   Minor Role [§ 3B1.2] -2
- 5. Acceptance of Responsibility [§ 3E1.1] -3
- 6. Departure/Variance [\$ 5K2.0/\$ 3553(a)]: -52

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> As set forth in Paragraph 16, the parties agree that the appropriate loss amount, as contemplated by USSG § 2B1.1(b)(1), is at least between \$65 million and \$150 million. The parties may argue that the loss amount exceeds \$150 million and recommend a corresponding increase in the specific offense characteristic under USSG § 2B1.1(b)(1).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> See section X, paragraph C.

#### B. ACCEPTANCE OF RESPONSIBILITY

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Despite paragraph A above, the Government need not recommend an adjustment for Acceptance of Responsibility if Defendant engages in conduct inconsistent with acceptance of responsibility including, but not limited to, the following:

- Fails to truthfully admit a complete factual basis as 1. stated in the plea at the time the plea is entered, or falsely denies, or makes a statement inconsistent with, the factual basis set forth in this agreement;
- 2. Falsely denies prior criminal conduct or convictions;
- Is untruthful with the Government, the Court or probation officer; or
- Breaches this plea agreement in any way.

#### FURTHER ADJUSTMENTS AND SENTENCE REDUCTIONS INCLUDING THOSE C. UNDER 18 U.S.C. § 3553

The parties agree that the joint recommendation for a five-level variance or departure for a combination of circumstances takes into consideration Defendant's history and characteristics and the nature and circumstances of this case. The recommendation specifically takes into account, inter alia: (1) the fact that Defendant accepted responsibility when first approached by criminal authorities regarding the facts stated above and has saved resources the Government would have otherwise spent investigating and prosecuting the case; (2) Defendant did not receive any additional compensation from CC-1 for Defendant's participation in the conspiracy; and (3) Defendant was diagnosed with serious medical conditions during the time participated in the conspiracy. Defendant is free to request that the Court depart or vary more than five levels on these grounds.

Defendant may request 1 adjustments, departures, or variances from the Sentencing Guidelines under 18 U.S.C. § 3553. adjustments, departures, or variances not set forth in Section X, paragraph A above.

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D. NO AGREEMENT AS TO CRIMINAL HISTORY CATEGORY

The parties have no agreement as to Defendant's Criminal History Category.

or recommend

additional

The Government may oppose any downward

downward

"FACTUAL BASIS" AND "RELEVANT CONDUCT" INFORMATION E.

The facts in the "factual basis" paragraph of this agreement are true and may be considered as "relevant conduct" under USSG § 181.3 and as the nature and circumstances of the offense under 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a)(1).

F. PARTIES' RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING CUSTODY

The Government will recommend that Defendant be sentenced within the advisory guideline range recommended by the Government at sentencing.

SUPERVISED RELEASE G.

If the Court imposes a term of supervised release, Defendant will not seek to reduce or terminate early the term of supervised release until Defendant has served at least 2/3 of the term of supervised release and has fully paid and satisfied any special assessments, fine, criminal forfeiture judgment, and restitution judgment.

XI

#### DEFENDANT WAIVES APPEAL AND COLLATERAL ATTACK

Defendant waives (gives up) all rights to appeal and collaterally attack every aspect of the conviction and sentence,

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1 | including any restitution order. The only exceptions are 1) Defendant may appeal a custodial sentence above the high end of the guideline range recommended by the Government at sentencing, and 2) Defendant may collaterally attack the conviction or sentence on the basis that Defendant received ineffective assistance of counsel. If Defendant appeals, the Government may support on appeal the sentence or restitution order actually imposed.

#### XII

#### BREACH OF THE PLEA AGREEMENT

Defendant and Defendant's attorney know the terms of this agreement and shall raise, before the sentencing hearing is complete, any claim that the Government has not complied with this agreement. Otherwise, such claims shall be deemed waived (that is, deliberately not raised despite awareness that the claim could be raised), cannot later be made to any court, and if later made to a court, shall constitute a breach of this agreement.

Defendant breaches this agreement if Defendant violates or fails to perform any obligation under this agreement. The following are nonexhaustive examples of acts constituting a breach:

- 1. Failing to plead guilty pursuant to this agreement;
- 2. Failing to fully accept responsibility as established in Section X, paragraph B, above;
- 3. Failing to appear in court;
- 4. Attempting to withdraw the plea;
- 5. Failing to abide by any court order related to this case;

- 6. Appealing (which occurs if a notice of appeal is filed) or collaterally attacking the conviction or sentence in violation of Section XI of this plea agreement; or
- Engaging in additional criminal conduct from the time of arrest until the time of sentencing.

If Defendant breaches this plea agreement, Defendant will not be able to enforce any provisions, and the Government will be relieved of all its obligations under this plea agreement. For example, the Government may proceed to sentencing but recommend a different sentence than what it agreed to recommend above. Or the Government may pursue any charges including those that were dismissed, promised to be dismissed, or not filed as a result of this agreement (Defendant agrees that any statute of limitations relating to such charges is tolled indefinitely as of the date all parties have signed this agreement; Defendant also waives any double jeopardy defense to such charges). In addition, the Government may move to set aside Defendant's guilty plea. Defendant may not withdraw the guilty plea based on the Government's pursuit of remedies for Defendant's breach.

Additionally, if Defendant breaches this plea agreement: (i) any statements made by Defendant, under oath, at the guilty plea hearing (before either a Magistrate Judge or a District Judge); (ii) the factual basis statement in Section II.B in this agreement; and (iii) any evidence derived from such statements, are admissible against Defendant in any prosecution of, or any action against, Defendant. This includes the prosecution of the charge(s) that is the subject of this plea agreement or any charge(s) that the prosecution agreed to dismiss or not file as part of this agreement, but later pursues because of a

breach by the Defendant. Additionally, Defendant knowingly, voluntarily, and intelligently waives any argument that the statements and any evidence derived from the statements should be suppressed, cannot be used by the Government, or are inadmissible under the United States Constitution, any statute, Rule 410 of the Federal Rules of Evidence, Rule 11(f) of the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure, and any other federal rule.

#### XIII

### CONTENTS AND MODIFICATION OF AGREEMENT

This plea agreement embodies the entire agreement between the parties and supersedes any other agreement, written or oral. No modification of this plea agreement shall be effective unless in writing signed by all parties.

#### XIV

#### DEFENDANT AND COUNSEL FULLY UNDERSTAND AGREEMENT

By signing this agreement, Defendant certifies that Defendant has read it (or that it has been read to Defendant in Defendant's native language). Defendant has discussed the terms of this agreement with defense counsel and fully understands its meaning and effect.

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DEFENDANT SATISFIED WITH COUNSEL

Defendant has consulted with counsel and is satisfied with counsel's representation. This is Defendant's independent opinion, and Defendant's counsel did not advise Defendant about what to say in this regard.

> ROBERT S. BREWER, JR. United States Attorney

J. GALVIN AARON P. ARNZEN

Assistant U.S. Attorneys

Defense Counsel

IN ADDITION TO THE FOREGOING PROVISIONS TO WHICH I AGREE, I SWEAR UNDER PENALTY OF PERJURY THAT THE FACTS IN THE "FACTUAL BASIS" SECTION ABOVE ARE TRUE.

DATED

Approved By:

EMPLY ALLEN Assistant U.S. Attorney