



Blood, Soil & Frozen TV Dinners

Part 1

by Matthew Dougal

Katie sat, wide-eyed, beneath the kitchen table and hugged her knees to her chest. She was shaking, vibrating visibly. Tanner put his finger to his lips and prayed that her silent tears would remain just that. There was no time to stop and calm her down. Not again. He moved slowly around the kitchen, fumbling through cupboards and pulling out pre-wrapped packages of food. Always be prepared. Tanner had practiced this before things went dark, but it was different doing it for real. His hands hadn't been so shaky, back then.

A noise, on the porch. His body froze before his mind registered the sound. Tanner dropped into a crouch and crossed the room to the window, willing every cell in his body to radiate confidence toward his baby girl. His hand found the Glock 17 at his belt and he brought it up in front of him, the familiar feel of the grip reassuring. He took a breath, steadied himself, and raised his eyes to the level of the windowsill. The muscles in his thighs steeled and he remained, unblinking, utterly still, staring out into the darkness.

After thirty or forty nerve-twanging seconds, Tanner drew breath and relaxed. His quads were burning, and they thanked him as he straightened. He could hear the specter of his ex-wife in his head, telling him to lose some weight, exercise more... Well she'd left, and that was 135 pounds gone right there. She'd probably say that was a good start.

An unbearably loud ringing pierced the silence and sent him diving to the floor, landing awkwardly on his gun and sounding a crash through the kitchen. A keening whine came from under the table, Katie shaken from her silence. The doorbell.

Feeling foolish, Tanner twisted over his shoulder and hissed at his daughter to be quiet. Still prone, he crawled toward the hallway in the most reassuring manner he could manage and pointed his Glock at the front door.

Footsteps outside, then a shadow appeared at the window. Tanner's heart pounded in his ears—more violent pulses of silence than sound—and his vision blurred as panic flooded his body. He'd heard the early reports of armed groups in the streets, some sort of fighting downtown, but he hadn't really believed they would come here. His legs were weak, and he silently thanked

God that he was already on the floor. The shape at the window didn't move, frozen in the gloom, silhouetted by flickering light coming from the street. As Tanner's head cleared he tried to take stock of what was happening.

The apparition was vaguely man-shaped but shorter and slighter, an ethereal grace evident even in its stillness. A voice called out, muffled through the door, the guttural singsong completely at odds with the sleek form at the window. Tanner couldn't understand everything, but he thought he caught the words "little girl."

A second shape mounted the porch alongside the first, similarly short but squat and stocky, and grunted something to its companion in an alien tongue.

Fluorescent light flooded the yard and the voices momentarily disappeared beneath the growl of an angry engine. Tanner's breath caught. His trembling finger hovered over the trigger and he willed the barrel to still its swaying dance. Two shots exploded outside—loud shots, from a much bigger gun than his. The creatures spun to face this new threat, their chatter rising in pitch and speed. They sounded panicked.

"yalla! hawula' alnaas majnoon."

Tanner sensed his opportunity. He was forgotten. All those hours of training kicked in and muscle memory took over as he rose to one knee, took a two-handed grip, and unleashed a furious hail of fire at his front door.

“Keep your filthy hands off my daughter!”

He fired until he felt the Glock stop kicking, the magazine spent. As the cacophony faded he realized he was screaming.

“Tanner! It’s me, Blake. Stop shooting goddammit, they’re gone.”

“Blake?” Tanner mechanically reloaded his gun. “Why...” His throat was raw, his voice barely audible even to him. He swallowed, fighting to control his breath, and cleared his throat. “What are you doing here?”

“Come to see if you were okay. Figured you and the kid might need a hand.”

A stocky, heavily muscled figure wearing fatigues and a plate carrier stepped up to the porch, visible through the splintered ruins that had been the front door. A halogen glow lanced through the holes, like the brilliant aura of some kind of avenging eagle.

“When this shit spread across the river from the city we locked down. It was touch-and-go for a while, but things quieted down eventually. When

they did, I came straight over. Good thing I got here when I did. The quick little fuckers ran for it, but I think you hit one of ‘em.”

The figure stopped, pulled down the red, white and blue bandana covering its mouth, and spat. Tanner had never been more relieved to see his buddy’s foul-mouthed face. Or his M1A SOCOM 16 rifle.

“We’re alright.” Tanner’s voice was exhausted, his body shivering as the adrenaline fled. “Thank God I was prepared. Still, it’s good to see you.”

“Prepared, shit.” His buddy grinned. “I been telling you for years to get something heavy duty.” Blake kicked the splintered remains of the door and his grin faded. “You can’t stay here. Those things’ll be back. Grab your girl and jump in the truck. Let’s head to mine, she’ll be safe there.”

The grin returned. “Prepared, shit.”

An hour later they were sitting in “the Hole,” as Blake affectionately called it. The Hole was both name and description, although it perhaps undersold the amount of effort that had gone into its construction. Attached to the garage by a short, downward-sloping corridor, The Hole was a full-blown bunker

that spread underneath almost the entirety of Blake's backyard. Tanner was sitting in the main chamber eating Top Ramen, chicken flavor.

They had made the half-mile journey in silence—lights down on the Tacoma, Tanner jumpy, Blake grim, Katie in a state of shock. The streets had looked completely foreign, the usual calming glow of LEDs replaced by the orange flicker of scattered flames. The familiar hum of traffic had been gone. Instead, gunfire had cracked in the distance.

Blake's wife Lauren had buzzed them inside after Blake confirmed his identity via video feed—three times: at the gate, the door, and the entrance to the Hole. The security was impressive. Lauren had ushered them inside, AR-15 at the ready.

“This is prepared,” Blake was saying, as Katie stared blankly at her untouched ramen. “Old owners, they had this backyard full of fruit trees, vegetables, fuckin’ kale and kohlrabi. What good is that gonna do, I said, you gonna hide in the pumpkin patch with a slingshot? Idiots.

“Anyhow me and Lauren, we wanted to be ready, so I been building this the last two years. Ain’t no one knows about it, not even the contractors...” Blake

sliced a finger across his throat, then laughed, “I’m joking, but they were from one of them Mexican countries. Had no idea what they were building. Good workers, though, came here the right way. And I did the security all myself.”

Tanner laughed too, but at what he didn’t quite know. “You took this all real serious.”

“Yessir. You never really believed, but we did. Earl Swanson was right, this here’s been a long time coming. It’s just like he said, and we listened. And here we are, while you was laying on the floor waving round that little water-pistol of yours.”

Tanner had listened too, but apparently not well enough. There was only so much time he could watch an angry man on TV shouting about the state of the nation, no matter how prophetic he was turning out to be. Tanner tried to put up a strong front and flex his knowledge. He had listened, dammit.

“Is this it, then? The invasion? Earl said they’ve been preparing it for years, brainwashing people. Recruiting sympathizers and traitors...”

“It’s worse than that. The invasion started way back, we just didn’t notice. Well, most of us didn’t. Earl did. He tried to warn us, that the aliens’d started

infiltrating, landing in remote parts of the country, blending in, looking just like us..." Blake spat. "Well, not quite like us. But close e-fucking-nough, hiding out and biding their time."

"And now it's out in the open..."

Tanner looked from his friend's face to his daughter's, scared and staring, and trailed off. He may have been listening, but he sure as hell didn't understand.

"What's happening?" Tanner asked. "We've been laying low at home, locked down and trying to wait out whatever this is. We haven't heard a thing since the power cut out three days back."

He could feel a surge of emotion building, pent-up adrenaline and stress and fear and loneliness rolling over him in a wave as they were released. His stoicism wobbled.

"We're... Katie's scared and confused, and tired and sick of hiding and we're all alone! What is all this? What's happening?" Tanner realized he was shouting and stopped, taking a deep breath and lowering his voice. "Blake, man, what the hell is going on?"

Blake never flinched, just ran his tongue over his teeth in thought while he watched Tanner's outburst through hooded eyes.

"Naw, we don't know nothing for sure. Swanson's been off-air for two days, since just after shit started going down. Said he was right, that it sure as shit seemed like those aliens he'd been warning us about were making a move, and the whole fuckin' lot of us did nothing. Well, seems like it blew up in our face. Last thing he said was he's heading somewhere safe to keep broadcasting, and he'd let us know when he found out more," Blake paused, sucked his teeth, "We've had the TV and radio on non-stop since then, since we fired the generator up. Nothing."

Lauren lent forward. "There was something, couple days back..."

"Nothing useful," Blake cut in. He spat. "Same old fuckin' commie stations, same old crap. They took over the channels, emergency broadcasting. Said there was a 'protest.' Stay inside, all under control, daddy government's here, blah blah," he laughed "Hell of a protest. More like an insurrection. Double-speak bullshit."

"So what's the plan? We hide out? Lay low? Wait for the military?"

“The troops ain’t coming, chief.” Blake grimaced, “Alien tentacles go deep. Probably strolling around in general’s stars by now, the politicians just handing over the keys. This President’ll have us kissing their feet before dinner.

“Nah, if we wanna fight back we can’t rely on that fuckin’ bunch of secretaries and scribes. We hole up here, wait for instructions.” He laughed again, “Huh, hole up in the Hole. That’s funny.”

That grin was starting to get on Tanner’s nerves. “Instructions from who? How long is that gonna take? Who’s gonna fight back against... this?”

“I know some people, from back in the old days. Good people. There’s still patriots out there who won’t give up this country without a fight.”

Tanner still bristled with questions, but he was starting to feel relieved. There were people in charge, and they had a plan. That was something he could work with. “What if it takes weeks? Months? Do we have food for that long?”

Blake settled further into his chair, grinned that cocky grin. “I do, don’t know about you.” Before the words were even out of his mouth he was al-

ready raising his palms, “Chill out, I’m joking. I’ll put it on your tab. You’re a lawyer, I know you’re good for it. Show him, babe.”

Lauren got up and went over to a large yellow flag hanging on the concrete wall, pulling it aside to reveal a long, narrow room that ended abruptly at a large steel door. She flicked on the light.

“Dry storage,” she said, gesturing at the shelves lining both walls. Packets of ramen, boxes of cereal, rows of whiskey, and gleaming stacks of cans stared down at Tanner. “And cold storage,” Lauren continued as she stepped over to the door, kicking aside two enormous tubs of supplements and pulling it open to reveal a walk-in freezer. Tanner followed her inside as she happily chatted away, showing everything off like a house-proud hen.

“We’ve got everything we need. Steaks, hotdogs, chili, hamburgers, mac and cheese, chicken parmesan, mashed potatoes--whatever you want. There’s a well, too, over the other side, we had that dug last summer. Tastes a bit funny, but it won’t hurt you.”

Tanner was hardly listening. He had never seen anything like it, never imagined anything on this scale. Blake really had taken preparing for the end

of the world seriously. The freezer room was filled, wall to wall, with a treasure trove of gourmet excess; thousands upon thousands of frozen TV dinners.

Tanner stared at his microwaved salmon filet, fries drooping from his fork. Out of habit he was eating in front of the TV with Katie, though the display hadn't changed in... however many days it had been. Just the red, white and blue logo, a tile flipping between ads for pillows, brain pills, and frozen food, and the same scrolling red banner:

Breaking: The United States of America is under attack. Stand by for updates.

Katie was poking at her food silently, barely eating. Still no appetite. Tanner had told her they were safe, told her he wasn't going to let anyone hurt her, told her a hundred times in different ways that she was his precious little girl and he would make sure she was okay. It had made no difference. She had just looked up at him with big, frightened eyes that pulled at Tanner's heart. The only time she had spoken in the past 24 hours was to ask why he had tried to shoot people. Of course she didn't understand. Maybe he should ask Lauren to talk to her.

The TV display glitched, blipped, flicked to static and then to black. Tanner shoveled the fries into his mouth and rubbed his eyes. He'd been staring at a blank TV for too long. He chewed and stretched, squeezing his eyes shut and trying to straighten out his aching back.

Earl Swanson was on TV.

Tanner blinked a few times to make sure he was seeing straight. Swanson's shirt was wrinkled, his hair a mess and his signature bowtie slightly crooked, but his face wore that familiar expression of righteously indignant bewilderment. It was him.

“Blake. Blake, get in here!”

Swanson was in what looked like a large living room rather than his usual studio. Bookshelves and a TV cabinet were visible behind him. There were shadows under his eyes and his wrinkles were clearly visible without his usual TV makeup, but his eyes were as sharp as ever. There was a strength to them, piercing the screen, full of faith and fire. It felt like he was in the room. He looked like he'd been in a fight, and won. He was back.

“Good evening America, and welcome to Earl Swanson Tonight.”

“Blake!”

Blake stuck his head through the door.

“What? I’m working out, give me a.... No shit.”

Blake stepped into the room. He was topless, breathing heavily. His stomach was shiny with sweat, pooling and running down the chiseled channels between his well-defined muscles before disappearing behind the low-riding waistband of his camo pants. Tanner realized he was staring and felt his cheeks flush as he snapped his eyes back to his friend’s.

“Blake, it’s--”

“Shut up, I’m trying to listen.”

The rebuke slapped Tanner back to the present and back to the TV. He surreptitiously sat a little straighter and sucked in his gut, trying to ignore the heat rising in his face.

“...cities up and down the west coast. From Seattle to San Diego, the alien invaders and the traitors from among our own citizens have taken control, sowing chaos and destruction. Order has broken down, and anarchy rules in the streets. Yet we hear nothing but silence from the White House. The elites

in Washington won't do anything about this -- they encouraged it. They caused it!

“No, it is up to patriotic Americans to stop this existential threat. It is up to us, to you and me and the other patriots out there. If you value the American way of life, if you respect the principles that built the greatest nation ever imagined, if you care about your family and the future of your children, then the time has come to stand up. Your country needs you.

“I have been warning about this day on this very program for years. If you have been listening, you will be prepared for this betrayal. You know what to do. Find other true Americans who are ready to fight for our civilization and our culture. Defend our Western values against this attack by anarchists and aliens who wish to destroy us. They tried to take our guns from us, to disarm us, and failed -- now is the time to use them. Seek out the prepared, the militias, the heroes. Fight back. Show them that we will not allow it.

“I will be moving to an undisclosed safe location so I can keep you informed. You know your job. I am doing my part, will you do yours?”

Swanson sat erect and defiant, no less commanding for his disheveled appearance. His willpower flowed from the screen in waves, washing over the watchers. It was compelling. It was urgent. It was the only option.

The screen went black.

Swanson's gaze bored into Tanner long after the TV went dark, burning with righteous fire, lip curling with fury. The heat in Tanner's cheeks sharpened, focused, began to spread into his chest and throughout his body. There was only one thought in his mind.

"We gotta go."

It took him a second to realize that Blake had spoken the words out loud.

"We do. But where? I don't know anyone like that."

"You know me, and I know people. Don't worry about that. We gotta go to Baker City. I talked to one of my buddies from the marines this morning, he's headed to join one of the militias out east. They might not be big, but they're hard. They're something."

Tanner looked at Blake blankly, unable to quite comprehend what he was being told. Days of no news, no action, now everything all at once.

“But what’s in Baker City? Don’t you know anyone here? This is where we live, where we have the Hole, where we have a safe base.”

Blake was clearly agitated, shifting from foot to foot.

“It’s not safe. Weren’t you listening? It’s fallen. The military ain’t doing jack, like I fuckin’ told you they wouldn’t.” Blake stopped bouncing and steadied himself. “But my buddy said the boys in Baker held out. It was bloody, but they held strong. If we can get there in a hurry, we can join a caravan heading for Boise.”

“Baker... Boise? What the... Boise?! Surely it’s safer in Texas, or... or...”

“Texas? And how far away is that? Look, I don’t know nothing about nothing, but I know I ain’t looking for safer. All I know is I got buddies in Baker, and they say Boise, and they are the fuckin’ resistance. We got our orders, soldier.

“The west had been invaded. Destroyed. Gone. You heard Swanson, same as me. Grids are down, water’s down, TV’s down--mostly, anyway. Sky’s half full of fire and smoke, gangs roaming the streets, traitors and aliens taking or breaking whatever they can get their thieving hands on.” Tears came to Blake’s eyes.

“It’s a fucking mess out there, buddy. Anarchy. They’ve burned the lot.”

It was a lot to chew on. Tanner put a piece of salmon in his mouth.

“I’m not gonna let some filthy aliens take my home, fuck my wife, invade my country, and steal the god damn US of A! The fight is right there, and I’m gonna fight it. Are you?”

Tanner’s brain was spinning, but his blood was still hot from Swanson’s speech. Blake’s fire, delivered standing there half-naked like a Steven Seagal action figure, was rousing something inside him. His country needed him, and he felt the call in his bones. He put down his fork. He swallowed. He rose.

“Of course I’ll fight. I’ll put a bullet in every alien who steps foot on American soil. I’ll put every collaborator in the dirt.”

He saw himself, next to Blake, riding shotgun as they made a fighting escape through the streets. He saw a heroic journey to Baker City, filled with danger and righteous violence. He saw a triumphant return, at the head of an army, cleansing his city with purifying flame. And he saw Katie, small and fragile and beautiful. Perfect, and terrified. The flame wavered.

“But I’m fighting for her,” Tanner gestured, “I got my little girl, and I’m not so red-hot on riding out guns blazing to meet these savages with her hanging off my arm. She’s the future of this country, and that’s a future we have to protect.”

To Tanner’s surprise, Blake took a half step back.

“Shit. I know, man. Katie and Lauren, the innocent and the pure. I’m thinking of them, too.” He dropped his shoulders, but held Tanner’s gaze. “But it’s not safe for them here neither. We’re on our own, and all hell has broken loose up top. We fight for them, and they are the reason we have to fight.”

Tanner paused, then nodded. He reached out and placed his hand on his friend’s shoulder, fingers gripping the sweaty skin.

“Let’s go pack the truck.”

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