

THE TANNERS

Based on fictional current events

P.O. Box 475
Nazareth, PA 18064
610-360-0508
Fifolv@gmail.com

THE TANNERS
Episode 1 Pilot - The Op-ed

FADE IN:

INT. INTERNET CAFE - DAY

Dark, delicate fingers type out, "Is 'confefe' Russian Code?" on a laptop computer.

THE VALLEY BLOG (TVB) reporter, GAYLE TANNER's almond eyes peer over her laptop screen. She checks for snoopers, then quickly taps out "Was #45 a Russian mole?" She closes her laptop and leaves.

INT. TWO RIVERS BREWING COMPANY - DAY

With the lunch crowd gone, TRBC is almost empty - bartender HOYT BENDER, Gayle, and a lone drinker, BENJAMIN "BEN" C. ROSS, sit in silence.

Hoyt studies Gayle, eyes her laptop. She leans back in her stool, exhales, HITS the Enter key, and signals for a beer.

HOYT

Think they'll use this one?

Gayle shrugs, shakes her head.

GAYLE

Who the hell knows?

She reaches for her beer, swigs and DRUMS her fingers on the bar. Her cell phone RINGS/VIBRATES.

GAYLE (CONT'D)

Mark... (listens) What?! But all my sources are vetted... twice!

(listens again)

Well go grow a pair, you pussy!

The call ends. Gayle fumes.

GAYLE (CONT'D)

If rent wasn't...I should tell them to go...

BEN (O.C.)

Just be sure your resume's current.

Gayle swivels curiously toward the voice. Hoyt eyes Ben.

BEN (CONT'D)

(sips his scotch)
 You're a fine writer, Gayle Tanner.
 A bit idealistic...but fair, clear,
 and unbiased, which is why you're
 getting fired today.

Before Gayle can react, SUSAN HOLLOWAY, Gayle's irate co-worker/best friend, storms into the bar. Susan is a petite, gay bulldog. She lands her backpack on a stool and mutters...

SUSAN

I wish that orange Russian puppet
 had tried to grab MY pussy so I
 could sue his sorry ass.

Ben raises his scotch glass and nods toward the two women.

HOYT

You're not his type, Suz. So what
 did Herr Douche Bag do now?

SUSAN

His new "proof" of voter fraud is
 satellite signals bouncing off
 abandoned water towers affecting
 voting machines.

HOYT

Before or after they were filtered
 through the water treatment plant?

BEN

And the beat goes on...

Gayle and Susan laser stare Ben. He smiles over his scotch.

GAYLE

Who the hell are you?

BEN

Benjamin Carlton Ross, at your
 service, but Ben to my friends.

SUSAN

What kind of friends...?

Ben rises and pulls out a business card.

BEN

(overly mysterious)
 You might be surprised. Maybe even
 impressed.

He walks to the bar, sets down his empty glass, nods at Hoyt for a refill.

He carefully places his card next to Gayle's beer.

BEN (CONT'D)
You never know...

Curious stares follow Ben out, then down at his card and up at Hoyt, whose look conveys a quiet conspiracy. Gayle grabs and studies the card. No address or number. Ben returns.

SUSAN
You're a lawyer?

Ben toasts them with his fresh scotch.

BEN
One of many dubious talents.

Gayle and Susan's cell phones ring/vibrate in unison. They answer and listen. Their faces register apprehension, anger and finally...resignation.

GAYLE/SUSAN
(alternately)
Yeah...OK./Leaving now.

They start packing up their gear.

BEN
(seriously)
Leave your laptops with Hoyt.

Their heads swivel from Ben to Hoyt for an explanation.

BEN (CONT'D)
Don't expect raises. And they'll demand your laptops because The Valley Blog owns your content. That contract you signed when they hired you? See, I AM a lawyer.

They reluctantly slide them over to Hoyt, give Ben a final, curious scowl and leave. The door closes...
(beat)

A siren WAILS ominously. Hoyt washes bar glasses. Ben nurses his scotch and Hoyt stores the laptops under the bar.

EXT. CITY STREET - DAY

Gayle and Susan enter The Valley Blog offices.

INT. THE BLOG OFFICES - DAY

Daily Blog Editor, MARK LAWSON, Executive Editor, ANTHONY DRAY and HR Director, TIFFANY BROWN, perch on Mark's desk, peering down on Gayle and Susan, seated.

TIFFANY

A month's severance is *very* generous.

SUSAN

What exactly did we do?

GAYLE

Or NOT do...?

ANTHONY

It's your sources...

GAYLE

They're impeccable! Everything we write is vetted with multiple sources.

ANTHONY

So you say. But who are they? Our most seasoned writers can't get the access you get.

Gayle and Susan are stunned - revealing sources?

SUSAN

You want our sources?

ANTHONY

No sources...no job.

TIFFANY

And...we need your laptops.

SUSAN

(evenly)

We don't have them...

Anthony and Tiffany exchange doubting looks.

ANTHONY

What! You ALWAYS have them...

GAYLE

Not today...

Mark finally speaks.

MARK

Uh...I've got this. I'll finish up.

Anthony glares; Tiffany can't leave fast enough. The door closes...Mark slides each of them a business card.

MARK (CONT'D)

Use this number. And DON'T reveal your sources. You'll need 'em.

(beat)

The girls are in shock.

MARK (CONT'D)

Now go. Meet me at Two Rivers in twenty. I'll explain...

The girls leave, confused, cautious. Mark shows concern.

FADE TO:

INT. TWO RIVERS BREWING COMPANY - DAY - LATER

Ass-to-elbow Happy Hour. Ben scowls away two women eyeing his five empty chairs. They appeal to Hoyt, just as Gayle and Susan enter, see no seats at the bar and join Ben. Hoyt exhales in relief. Gayle lasers Ben.

GAYLE

How did you know?

BEN

Call it a hunch. And Mark and I go back.

SUSAN

How far back?

BEN

Iran.

GAYLE

Your card says you're an attorney.

BEN

We're all the sum total of our parts. Mine happen to be *varied*.

Ben signals Hoyt for beers for the girls just as Mark enters, he quickly adds one more. The girls immediately attack Mark.

GAYLE

What the hell just happened? We're good reporters. Our work is solid, accurate, fair...OBJECTIVE.

SUSAN

Revealing sources goes against the Ten Commandments...number eleven as I recall.

Mark grimly sips his beer until they're done...finally.

MARK

Journalism, and that's a stretch, has changed. Now it's all about influence, ratings, power and manipulation.

BEN

It's why we're here. But you can help fix things.

Confused but curious, the girl's heads swivel from Mark to Ben. Hoyt brings more beers. The girls confront Mark and Ben.

GAYLE

You aren't making any sense, Mark.

SUSAN

Are you spies?

Mark and Ben exchange amused smiles over their beers.

MARK

When laws and rules are manipulated and ignored, integrity suffers.

GAYLE

Integrity?! Was that integrity in your office? You still have a job. We just got canned.

BEN

We need him inside the system so you can do what you need to do.

SUSAN

And that is? And who's "we"?

MARK

Write truth, challenge readers, refute fake news with truth, use holistic analysis to report complex data.

Gayle and Susan eye-roll their skepticism.

SUSAN

And cure world hunger while we're at it?

GAYLE

Kinda lofty shit, Mark, especially coming from you.

BEN

This is an opportunity to lay waste all the opinion preachers, self-aggrandizing BS artists and science deniers.

(beat)

Or was that a bit too, "lofty"...?

MARK

All your unpublished News Blogs?

GAYLE

How...? You're the EDITOR and our stories still got killed...

MARK

It's more complex than that. We connect global dots that other media ignore, can't see or refute.

SUSAN

We...? Dots...?

BEN

Russian money laundering, diluting education, weaponizing health care, refuting climate change, are all connected if you look close enough.

MARK

Russia's growing meddling in elections, its reliance on dark money and hostile cyber activity, combined with its failing economy amounts to a desperate gamble.

A pensive silence falls over the group as they all consider everything just shared. Finally...

HOYT

That's a lot of bloody dots, mate. You got a theory or must the girls cut through the clutter?

Gayle swigs her beer and sets it on the table.

GAYLE
My Dad had a theory.

Heads turn, eyes focus on Gayle. After another swig...

GAYLE (CONT'D)
He covered Vietnam for the AP. He said it was like playing checkers at a chess match.

HOYT
Your old man sounds like a smart guy.

Gayle thoughtfully eyes Ben and Mark.

GAYLE
So all this isn't random? That over time, money and power have quietly manipulated people and events?

MARK
Partly. Exploiting timely events to distract people from seeing things clearly is more than a strategy. It's more the rule than the exception now.

BEN
Like the frog in the pot of boiling water science project. Crazy shit in small doses can slowly start to seem normal.

Mark's cell phone rings/vibrates.

MARK
(listens) Yeah, sure Tiffany.
(ends call)
Gimme your laptops. Reed'll scrub 'em before they go back and transfer all your files onto your new ones.
(beat)
Ben has the details. Gotta go...

Mark swigs his beer, throws cash onto the table, gathers up the laptops and hustles out. Ben sips scotch, eyes the girls.

SUSAN
Okay, "BEN"...what's up? And why all this cloak-and-dagger shit...?

HOYT
A wee bit direct, are we?

GAYLE
How do you figure in all this?

BEN
I provide "Contextual Objectivity".

SUSAN
What...!?

BEN
Everyone - politicians, special interests, governments, media, PACs, and global businesses - all hide behind noble intentions...for the good of the people, so they say. When, in fact, they only care about what benefits them.
(beat)
Yet they need the People, in large enough numbers, to remain viable.

Ben pauses to sip his scotch.

BEN (CONT'D)
We need to jolt people into thinking critically - not WHAT to think, but HOW to think and why - to learn how to connect the dots.

SUSAN
You're too late. People are just plain dumb, stupid or lazy, which is why our stories were diluted or ignored.
(swigs beer)
When they ran them at all.

BEN
...mere sound bytes that obscure and distract from larger issues.

Gayle has heard enough. She shoulders her backpack.

GAYLE
NO!...I'm responsible for me and my writing, not the whole damn world. I'm out.
(beat)
(MORE)

GAYLE (CONT'D)
Force feeding uninformed, lazy
whiners, unwilling or incapable of
recognizing when they're lied to
isn't a shrewd career move.

Mark stands unnoticed behind Gayle.

MARK
This isn't about you. It's whether
our country can regain a sense of
purpose and clarity. And this is
the only way I can see to do it.

He slides the new computers to the girls.

MARK (CONT'D)
Reed can't install your files until
tomorrow but at least you'll have
them to work on for now.

GAYLE
Thanks, but why us?

MARK
Honest, interpretive journalism
relies on deep analysis. It forces
people to think. It's interactive.

BEN
Opinions only outweigh facts out of
laziness. What scares The Valley
Blog is that your writing helps
readers interpret the news because
you make it personal.

MARK
While others seek to influence and
control, you educate and inform.

Gayle and Susan exchange looks and consider Mark and Ben's
words while they nervously sip their beers.

SUSAN
Sounds a lot like global collusion.

MARK
In a way, it is.

GAYLE
That's massive. How do we even
begin to "connect the dots"?

BEN

A small network of investigative writers are planting seeds to hold business leaders, politicians and other powerful people accountable.

A pall falls over the table. Gayle glances at Susan.

GAYLE

What are the power people after?

BEN

Take your pick: Disruption instead of consensus; a hands-off approach with Russia; chaos over stability. The result is a slow dismantling of democratic order in the guise of national security.

MARK

Lies over facts; rule of law be damned; disdain for the good of country; and squelch the media.

Gayle stuffs her new computer into her backpack, gives Susan an urgent, apprehensive nod and heads toward the stairs.

GAYLE

Not sure I want to be part of that.

She and Susan are almost to the door...

BEN

(sternly)

This isn't a game. Time is vital. Your gift for analysis can force things into the open sooner than later, so please decide soon.

The SOUND of their steps echo down the stairs. Ben, Mark and Hoyt are visibly disappointed.

HOYT

They're scared bloody shitless, so don't hold your breaths, lads.

EXT. TWO RIVERS BREWING COMPANY - DAY

Gayle and Susan exit Two Rivers onto the sidewalk.

SUSAN

This is crazy. We need real jobs before our severances run out...

Two figures suddenly appear from behind, roughly bump them, snatch their backpacks and flee to a passing car. The girls are stunned. They angrily watch as the car disappears.

INT. TWO RIVERS BREWING COMPANY - DAY - MOMENTS LATER

Gayle and Susan appear at the door, pissed as hell.

GAYLE

We're in. Is that fast enough?

MARK

Delighted. But why...

GAYLE

Someone just snatched our computers.

Mark, Ben and Hoyt exchange hard, serious stares.

Susan downs her half-filled beer, still on the table.

SUSAN

But we got a license plate, so those assholes are going down.

FADE OUT