

## An Interview with Author Gen LaGreca about her novel, *Just the Truth*

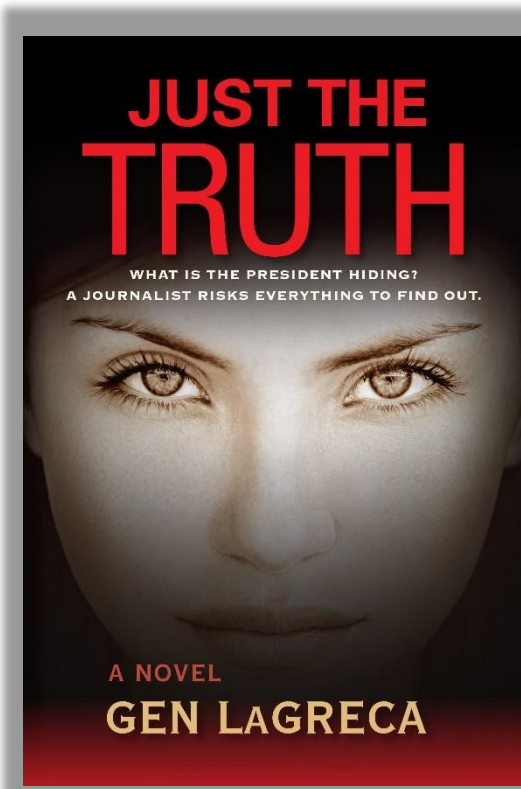
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Can you give us an introduction to your new novel?

*Just the Truth* is a political thriller set in Washington, DC, in the near future. It's the story of Laura Taninger, a journalist who suspects foul play by President Ken Martin in his bid for reelection. Laura is determined to find the truth, while the president's administration is determined to silence her. The story reveals the many covert ways in which unscrupulous public officials can stifle a free press, and how one journalist risks her career, her reputation—and ultimately her life—to uncover a plot to subvert free elections in America.



Laura Taninger is president of Taninger News, the organization started by her grandfather, newspaper mogul Julius Taninger, whom everyone calls JT. *Find the truth, wherever it hides* was JT's slogan in the mid-20th century. Then, politicians feared his scathing editorials. Now, 70 years later, with JT deceased and his four heirs running the company, have the tables turned? Does today's press still have the freedom to criticize elected officials, or do those officials have the power to silence their opponents?



The signature program of President Ken Martin's first term is called SafeVote, which puts control of national elections in the hands of the federal government, rather than letting the states manage the voting in their own jurisdictions. With claims that a federal voting system will better insure fair, unbiased elections, as well as avoid fraud and voter discrimination, SafeVote was passed and is scheduled to launch with the upcoming presidential election in which Martin hopes to win a second term.

When SafeVote pays \$400 million to an undisclosed contractor for work it won't reveal, other journalists aren't concerned, but Laura is suspicious. As she starts to investigate, Laura is faced with the crushing retaliation of her political enemies and their media supporters against her, her family, and their companies.

Laura has a source, James Spenser, who's a high-level person in the president's administration. Spenser has vital information for Laura, but just as

he meets her outside a restaurant to reveal it, he's gunned down before he can speak and the killer gets away.

As Spenser lay dying in Laura's arms, he whispers a curious, final word: *Fox*.

Laura can't let Spenser die in vain. While the police and the media attribute Spenser's death to a random street crime, Laura is convinced it's connected to SafeVote.

As Laura gets closer to uncovering the meaning of Spenser's dying word, the identity of his killer, and the mystery surrounding the new voting system, she realizes that the facts point to shocking revelations about someone unforgettable in her life, a man who was her greatest business competitor and her most passionate lover—until he betrayed her and the ideals they shared. With Election Day looming and the country at a crossroads, and with intense pressure from her family to give up her investigation, Laura is determined to pursue the truth wherever it leads.

As our actual presidential election of 2020 approaches and as questions mount about the integrity of today's journalism and our election process, *Just the Truth* couldn't be more timely.

**Tell us about your main character, Laura Taninger. Who is she and what makes her special?**

Laura Taninger is a journalist who views her profession as a calling. She runs Taninger News by the motto of her deceased grandfather, the company's founder: *Find the truth, wherever it hides*. She's forthright, quietly self-confident, passionate about her work, and true to her ideals. When people try to smear, shame, humiliate, and destroy her, she doesn't buckle. At twenty-nine, she's intelligent and beautiful. There's an honesty and openness about her, which gives others the sense that they're seeing the real person without pretensions.

Laura was hurt deeply by a man, and she still feels the pain from that past relationship. She loved Reed Miller, the self-made man who built a corporate media empire that includes Miller News Network, her company's biggest competitor. She and Reed were lovers who shared the same ideals about speaking truth to power, but Reed betrayed them and walked out on Laura. Reed is the most enigmatic character in the story, and we don't discover the truth about him, his motives, and his feelings for Laura until the end.

Laura Taninger represents the essence of women's independence. She thinks for herself. She stands up to everybody. Her judgment matters to her above other people's views. She has incredible integrity to the truth and trust in herself to see it. She's the role model of a strong woman, who doesn't cave to the mainstream, to pressures, or to the mob. Laura is an especially important heroine this year, which marks the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, giving women the right to vote throughout the United States.

**What are some of the themes that weave through the story? And how do the characters conflict with each other on these themes?**

**One theme is: The importance of a responsible and independent press.**

Laura's friend is fellow-journalist Sean Browne. Unlike Laura, Sean is an opportunistic journalist who is obsequious and overly trusting of the people in power in order to advance his career. In return for his softball reporting on the president, he's offered a prestigious post in the Martin administration. Sean illustrates the danger of losing objectivity when a newscaster has too cozy a relationship with the people he reports on. Because Sean craves recognition and advancement, he fears taking stands that conflict with the mainstream. Yet he's drawn to Laura. He admires her passion and integrity—and deep down he knows he has betrayed his own ideals. When Laura challenges him, he rationalizes his way of practicing journalism by saying that idealism is an adolescent carryover from college, which can't succeed in the adult world.

So the theme interweaving Laura and Sean's friendship is: Do ideals matter? Do truth and moral principles matter? Do they carry weight in our lives, or is everything just pragmatic and expedient? As a journalist, Laura considers it her duty to be a watchdog on the government and to have a healthy skepticism about those in power. But Sean, on the other hand, wants to keep in step with what his peers are reporting and not be an outlier and risk disapproval. Sean cozies up to powerful politicians who can advance his career. So the story raises the question: If journalists have incentives to ignore abuses of power, then who's left to safeguard our freedoms?

**A second theme is: Does the end justify the means?**

We hear this expression all the time. The villains of the story—the president and his two top aides—claim that the reelection of Ken Martin is so vital to the country that it justifies employing any means necessary to achieve that end.

President Ken Martin is unprincipled, power-hungry, and without a moral compass. He condones lying, smearing, cheating, and using federal agencies to destroy his political enemies. After all, it's for a good cause (his own reelection). He fears an investigative journalist like Laura, who can shine a harsh light of truth on his hidden activities and cause his downfall.

Darcy Egan is the chief advisor to President Martin and the most evil character in the story. She pushes Martin to cross lines of corruption never before crossed in the American presidency. Her own lust for power will stop at nothing to insure her place in history alongside the president's. She's so drunk on power that she thinks she can manipulate people into believing anything—and thereby create her own “truth.” She says, “The truth is like clay, and we're the sculptors. We knead it, we work it, we mold it, we massage it to suit our ends.” How many actual politicians think this way? I'm afraid to say, quite a few. Darcy, of course, fears Laura's investigation and will stop at nothing to destroy her.

Zack Walker is the chief strategist to President Martin. He's part of the scheme to, shall we say, “adjust” the voting in the president's favor. Zack's job is to destroy Martin's opponents through smear campaigns, so he constantly lies, engages in character assassination, and plants false stories which his media friends spread through the news cycles. But can Zack be pushed to do even greater evil acts under the notion that the end justify the means? Darcy will test him. She tells him, “Remember, the means are just the mechanics. We mustn't dwell on them because the end is so important, so great, so right. Just stay fixed on our goal of getting Ken reelected!” Zack's main task is to eviscerate Laura Taninger.

So an important theme in *Just the Truth* is a moral issue: Can the end ever justify lying, cheating, destroying good people, violating the rights of others, and losing your own character?

**A third theme is: The intimidation of private citizens by public officials.**

*Just the Truth* examines the danger of public officials using their power to silence political opponents. This is what Laura and her family experience.

Laura is in business with her father, older sister, and brother. The children each run different companies within the Taninger Enterprises corporate umbrella, with Laura running the news operation. Each company faces retribution from the president's administration to pressure the family to fire Laura. Irene's company loses a lucrative contract; Billie's company is found to be in violation of an environmental regulation and forced to incur substantial costs and a public relations nightmare to correct the situation; and the parent corporation is threatened with a federal lawsuit accusing it of being a monopoly that must be broken up.

Clark Taninger, Laura's father, has long-ago abandoned the dedication to truth of his father, the company's founder. Clark is pragmatic, conciliatory, and compromising toward those in power in order to avoid confrontations with them. He sees himself as a modern, effective businessman who doesn't stand on principles, which he views as rigid and outdated, but who instead adjusts to changing times. As Taninger Enterprises' CEO, Clark orders Laura to end the investigation that's rattling the Martin administration. Laura's brother and older sister side with their father. What will happen if Laura defies his order?

Laura's only ally in the family is her younger sister, Kate, a college student. Kate passionately supports Laura's investigation into corruption at the highest levels, and she calls out her family for their timidity and cowardice. But even Kate gets embroiled in Laura's controversy when her campus newspaper viciously attacks Laura, claiming that she's racist, bigoted, and elitist for being a critic of the new voting system. The attacks are launched by a partisan campus group that backs the president. When Kate writes an editorial defending Laura, she becomes the target of a squad of activist students, unstopped by an ineffective dean, who try to force Kate to recant or be expelled. Will Kate give in? What will happen if she defies the mob?

*Just the Truth* shows how the Martin administration is covertly behind all of the attacks on Laura and her family. The novel is a cautionary tale about how the tentacles of government, if left untrimmed, can spread to reach all of us and strangle our freedoms.

The themes in this novel hit on real issues occurring in America today. There are reams of news stories questioning the integrity of today's journalists, the veracity of the news we're getting, and the flagrant overstepping of federal agencies to stifle political opposition. There are also reports questioning the accuracy of our elections with calls for the federal government to exert more control over the states' voting programs. *Just the Truth* is a shocking, eye-opening tale that everyone should read in order to understand better the times in which we live and the threats we face.

Is there something that compels you to write? And do you find writing helpful in achieving a clarity about yourself or ideas you've been concerned with?

Yes! I love fiction's power to dramatize ideas and to clarify important issues. This has been true throughout history, starting with ancient mythology and continuing to modern times. For example, in the 1850s, it was a novel— *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—that galvanized people against slavery. During the American Revolution, when our troops suffered great hardships at Valley Forge, George Washington turned to fiction. He defied a Congressional order banning the performance of plays during wartime and had the highly influential play of his time, "Cato, A Tragedy," performed for his troops to motivate them to fight on. This play is about Cato, Ancient Rome's champion of republicanism, who opposed the growing tyranny of Julius Caesar.

In our own times, Ayn Rand's epic philosophical novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, as well as her other novels, have greatly enhanced the understanding of the role of the individual's free, creative mind and productive activities as the generator of human progress. These novels have inspired millions to oppose statism and embrace limited government, capitalism, and the glory of freedom.

People turn to fiction for inspiration, for a refueling of their spirit. That's why good novels are treasures. Once I discovered fiction writing, I knew there was nothing else I wanted to do more than to write novels. The work is what I call a sweet torture.

What has your journey as an author been like? Was there ever a defining moment when you suddenly realized "now I am an author"?

Yes, there was! I once worked as a management consultant. One of the things I did for clients was to write and produce videos for staff training. I found that these videos were becoming more and more imaginative and plot-oriented. Finally, one of my clients, the publisher of a magazine for the foodservice industry, said to me, "Gen, I can't have romance in this video about restaurant sanitation!" That was when I thought to myself, "Hey, I ought to try writing a novel." And so I did.

Does *Just the Truth* contain an underlying message? What do you hope your readers will take away from it?

The broad message of all of my novels is that good people, who have courage and passion, and who want to live to the fullest, can fight for their world and win. I want to entertain people and leave them with hope. Although grim things happen and there are villains in my novels to be sure, my focus is on the heroes and the great potential of people in the exciting adventure of life. I want to inspire and enlighten people.

*Just the Truth* is an entertaining murder mystery that weaves wider social and moral issues into the story. Without mentioning any actual political parties, persons, agencies, or events, this nonpartisan drama is addressed to everyone concerned with these issues.

The underlying message of *Just the Truth* is: Independent thinking can't exist when government gets too big. There's always a new tax, or a regulation, or an investigation that public officials can use to threaten anyone who speaks out against them. It's the job of journalism to maintain objectivity and expose corruption. If journalists are lured into favoring the bad players, as Sean Browne is, then we're doomed. Journalists must speak truth to power, and Laura Taninger shows us the way.

What are you working on right now?

I wrote a stage play adaptation of *Just the Truth*. I hope to have it produced and to start a new trend, a *theater of ideas*, which entertains the audience with suspenseful, well-crafted plays while shining a spotlight on important issues that we need to be discussing.

Where can our readers discover more of your work or interact with you?

Here's my contact information:

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