

JUST THE TRUTH

A Play in Two Acts

By Gen LaGreca

*Adapted from the novel JUST THE TRUTH by Gen LaGreca*

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*Just the Truth*, a play by Gen LaGreca

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CHARACTER LIST (in order of appearance)  
 10 males, 6 females, 4-6 extras. (With doubling: 8 males, 6 females.)  
 Running time: 2 hours

Gender, age	
M, 60s	SAM QUINN, attorney for Taninger Enterprises
F	CAROLINE DAVIS, assistant to Clark Taninger
M, 59	CLARK TANINGER, CEO of Taninger Enterprises
F, 19	KATE TANINGER, Clark's daughter in college, resembles sister Laura
F, 36	IRENE TANINGER, president of Taninger Entertainment, Clark's daughter
M, 34	BILLIE TANINGER, president of Taninger Sports, Clark's son
F, 29	LAURA TANINGER, president of Taninger News, Clark's daughter, resembles Kate
M	JAMES SPENSER, assistant director of the Board of Elections and whistleblower
M	DENIM, hitman. (His TATTOO: A large snake curling down his forearm with the creature's head on the back of his hand.)
M, 30s	SEAN BROWNE, Miller News Network host, later press secretary to President Martin
M, late 30s	REED MILLER, head of Miller Communications, Laura's ex-lover, alias Frank Foxworth
M	KEN MARTIN, president of the United States
M	ZACK WALKER, senior strategist to President Martin
F	DARCY EGAN, chief advisor to President Martin
M, 60s	BERT FRANKLIN, banker, Taninger Enterprises' board member
F	ERIKA LONGFIELD, Kate's trustee on Taninger Enterprises' board of directors
	EXTRAS: PASSERBY, PARTY ATTENDEES, MESSENGER, PRIVATE EYE

Suggestions for Doubling:

BILLIE / DENIM

SPENSER / MESSENGER / BERT FRANKLIN / PRIVATE EYE

PASSERBY / ERIKA LONGFIELD

PARTY ATTENDEES: BILLIE, ERIKA, CAROLINE, SPENSER, KATE, IRENE

## SYNOPSIS

*A newswoman battles powerful political enemies to keep journalism, a free press—and truth—alive.*

Set in Washington, DC, in the near future, *Just the Truth* portrays the threats to a free press in an era of growing political corruption and the indomitable spirit of one journalist who risks her career, her reputation—and ultimately her life—to uncover a plot to subvert free elections in America.

*Find the truth, wherever it hides* was the slogan of firebrand newspaper mogul Julius Taninger (JT) in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Then, politicians feared his scathing editorials. Now, 70 years later, with JT deceased and his son Clark and grandchildren Irene, Billie, and Laura Taninger running the company, have the tables turned? In modern-day America, does the press—and private citizens, in general—still have the freedom to criticize public officials, or do those officials have the power to intimidate and silence their opponents? Laura Taninger is about to find out.

*Fox...* James Spenser whispers as he lay dying in Laura's arms.

She cannot let Spenser die in vain.

As the president of Taninger News and host of its prime-time television show after the death of her intrepid grandfather, Laura becomes the sole journalist to hold President Kenneth Martin's administration accountable. The signature program of his administration, SafeVote, puts control of national elections in the hands of the federal government, rather than letting the states manage the voting in their own jurisdictions. SafeVote is scheduled to launch with the upcoming presidential election in which Martin hopes to win a second term. Laura suspects foul play when she discovers a \$400 million line item in the SafeVote budget allocated to pay an elusive company for performing undisclosed services.

James Spenser, who was Laura's source within the administration, had vital information for her but was gunned down before he could reveal it. Facing the crushing retaliation of her political enemies against her family's businesses, a smear campaign to destroy her career and reputation, and the intense pressure of her family to give up her investigation, Laura persists in her quest to learn the meaning of Spenser's dying word and the secrecy surrounding SafeVote. As she gets closer to unraveling the mystery, she realizes that the facts point to shocking revelations about the man whose memory haunts her, the 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, Laura is determined to pursue the truth wherever it leads.

*This play is based on the novel, Just the Truth, published in June 2020.*

## PRODUCTION NOTES AND SUGGESTIONS

There are a number of locales in this play. Four locales that occur frequently may be placed at Upstage and Downstage Right and Left, with other locales occurring in the Center, such as in the diagram below.

Using simple props and movable furniture along with lighting that rises and fades on scenes occurring in various areas of the stage should provide for the seamless transitions between scenes. Suggestions on props are given in the diagram and in the play.

These are just suggestions. The director is encouraged to interpret the settings according to his or her preferences, budget, and theater conditions.

<p>Upstage Right Executive management meeting (conference table with 6 chairs, one scene needs 9 chairs)</p> <p>Downstage Right Laura's TV news show (desk, chair, camera)</p>	<p>Locales in Center:</p> <p>Sam and Caroline in hallway Laura's office Outside Bailey's bar Sean with mic reporting and at podium for briefings Bar table at the Waves President's cocktail party Reed's apartment Darcy's office Gate outside Laura's townhouse</p>	<p>Upstage Left Office of Ken Martin, President of the US (couch, chair, coffee table, laptop computer)</p> <p>Downstage Left Meadowlark Gardens courtyard (lamppost, park bench, large shrubbery that someone can hide behind.)</p>
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## SCENES

Running time: 2 hours

## ACT I

1. Sam and Caroline in hallway
2. Executive management meeting
3. Laura's office
4. Outside Baileys bar
5. Voices offstage
6. Sean with microphone reporting
7. Laura's TV news show
8. Bar table at the Waves
9. Laura's office
10. Laura's TV news show
11. President Martin's office
12. Meadowlark Gardens courtyard
13. Sean with microphone reporting
14. Voices offstage
15. Executive management meeting
16. Laura's TV news show
17. Bar table at the Waves
18. Laura's office
19. Laura's TV news show
20. President Martin's office
21. Meadowlark Gardens courtyard
22. Executive management meeting
23. Laura's TV news show
24. Sean at podium for press briefing
25. President Martin's cocktail party
26. Laura's office
27. Laura's TV news show
28. President Martin's office
29. Laura's office

## INTERMISSION

## ACT II

1. Executive management meeting
2. Laura's TV news show
3. Board of Directors meeting [same setting as for executive management meeting]
4. Bar table at the Waves
5. Reed's apartment
6. Voices offstage
7. Sean at podium for press briefing
8. Darcy's office
9. Gate outside Laura's townhouse
10. Meadowlark Gardens courtyard
11. Sam and Caroline in hallway

THE END

ACT I

**SCENE 1: SAM and CAROLINE.**

Standing in the hallway. CAROLINE carries a laptop.

SAM

You know, Caroline, Taninger Enterprises just isn't the same as it was when Julius Taninger ran it.

CAROLINE

Still pining, Sam? It's been two years since JT died.

SAM

In JT's day, politicians feared his editorials in Taninger News. Now, I wonder if the tables are turned, and it's *we* who fear the politicians more than *they* fear us.

CAROLINE

Clark Taninger knows times have changed. He adjusts. He's not hardnosed like his father, JT, was. Two of Clark's children, Irene and Billie, agree with their father.

SAM

Yeah, and those three form the majority of our management team.

CAROLINE

So when will *you* compromise, Sam?

SAM

After working for decades as JT's corporate attorney, I know he'd say that there's one thing you can't compromise: your integrity.

CAROLINE

Is there any integrity left in the world?

SAM

I'm glad JT's favorite grandchild runs the news division. Laura Taninger understands JT's motto: *Find the truth wherever it hides.*

CAROLINE

(Looks at her watch.)

I have to get to the executive management meeting. I'm taking the minutes.

**SCENE 2: Executive management meeting.**

CLARK TANINGER and his four children are already seated at the conference table, with BILLY and IRENE TANINGER together, LAURA and KATE

TANINGER together, and CLARK in the middle. CAROLINE rushes in, takes her seat beside CLARK, and opens her laptop, ready to take notes.

CLARK

Friday, August 18<sup>th</sup>. The executive management meeting of Taninger Enterprises will come to order. As CEO, I'll preside. The heads of our three divisions—Irene, Billie, and Laura Taninger—are present, and I see that our persistent observer (gestures to KATE) is here, too.

KATE

I'm not just an observer. I'm JT's heir, too. Grandfather gave me an equal share in the company with my two sisters and brother and with you, Dad.

IRENE

(Testily) Do we always have to remind you that your share is in trust and you can't be involved in the company management until your twenty-first birthday in two years?

CLARK

Since you insist on coming to these meetings, Katie, let's hear *your* status report first.

KATE

School's about to start. I'm now a junior at Collier University, majoring in journalism.

CLARK

After you graduate, will you want to join your sister Laura at Taninger News?

KATE

Maybe I'll take *your* job, Daddy. Won't you be retiring by then?

(LAURA laughs. IRENE and BILLIE look at KATE warily.)

CLARK

Now, we'll hear from the presidents of Entertainment, Sports, and News. Irene will go first.

IRENE

Taninger Entertainment is getting its biggest contract ever. Our network will broadcast the movie industry's major event of the year, the Pinnacle Awards!

(Oohs and aahs from the others.)

The head of Pinnacle, Mort Bennett, will kick off the ceremony along with (pauses to build suspense) *Ken Martin!*

KATE

The president of the United States!



BILLIE

How did you swing that?

IRENE

Mort wants facetime with President Martin in a friendly setting so he can lobby against the bill to increase taxes on movie theaters. And with President Martin's reelection this year, he wants to appear in a welcoming venue before a huge audience. So there you have it!

CLARK

Brilliant, Irene!

IRENE

We're signing the contract next week.

LAURA

Congratulations!

CLARK

Next, we'll here from Billie, president of Taninger Sports.

BILLIE

Next month, the DC Slammers will start the football season in our *new* stadium. Ticket sales are through the roof. We're on target for record attendance.

CLARK

And are the government inspections of the new stadium in order?

BILLIE

We're in compliance with everything the regulators have thrown at us.

CLARK

Good job, Billie. Now let's here from Laura, president of Taninger News.

LAURA

Our print newspapers, online sites, and TV news network have all increased in revenue. My prime-time show, 'Just the Truth', is now number one in TV news!

CLARK

Very good.

KATE

Laura, you did it! And the three of you said her show would never work.

CLARK

Katie, dear, you needn't reprimand us. I dare say we're glad Laura's show worked out. On the other hand, it is *edgy*. (To LAURA) President Martin's chief advisor, Darcy Egan, called me about you stirring up trouble at the Board of Elections. What's that about?

KATE

Don't any of you watch Laura's show? She's trying to track down a 400 million dollar line item on the Board of Elections' budget to implement the new voting system, SafeVote. The Board of Elections won't say who's getting the money or what job they're doing. It's the only contractor they haven't disclosed.

BILLIE

400 million is chump change.

IRENE

How embarrassing! I'm a fund-raiser for Ken's reelection campaign while my sister attacks the signature program of his first term.

LAURA

With the federal government taking over the voting process in the upcoming presidential election, we have to scrutinize what they're doing. In the coming years, when the Feds plan to control all the national elections—for president, Senate, and Congress—they'll have totally taken away that power from the states. How can you be so trusting?

IRENE

Ken's administration just wants to stop what they see as voter fraud and voter suppression by the states. That's a good thing.

CLARK

(To LAURA) The courts upheld it. SafeVote is now the law. Irene, Billie, and I accept that. Why can't you?

LAURA

We're the media. It's up to us to make sure the Feds are transparent with the election system, and that's what I'm doing.

IRENE

Laura just hates Ken Martin and everything he does.

LAURA

But I defended him when his political enemies spread lies about his tax returns. I was the first one to find out the truth and report it. Remember that?

(IRENE looks away without reply, rather than acknowledge LAURA's point.)

CLARK

Caroline, do a search for SafeVote and read the headlines, would you?

CAROLINE

(Taps keys on her laptop.) Here are the first 4 headlines. 'SafeVote: A Victory for Voting Rights' 'SafeVote Eliminates State Voter Fraud.' 'Good Riddance to Voter ID Laws with SafeVote.' 'Federal Control of Presidential Election Long Overdue.'

CLARK

Laura, are we the *only* media voice speaking out against this new program?

LAURA

There are suspicious things going on in SafeVote. If no one else is concerned, it's all the more reason for us to be.

CLARK

Why do *we* have to be the ones to attack a popular new program? People will think we're against voting rights for the poor and the disadvantaged.

LAURA

By law, federal agencies have to disclose their contractors and how their money is spent. We should make sure that's being done. Besides, I'm not alone. I have a source who's also suspicious.

CLARK

Who?

LAURA

A high-level person at the Board of Elections. That's all I'll say.

CLARK

Watch your step. I don't want any more phone calls about you from President Martin's advisor. Stay off Darcy Egan's radar.

**SCENE 3: LAURA's office.**

LAURA stands, reading a report. JAMES SPENSER stands in another area of the stage, making a call on his mobile phone. LAURA's mobile phone rings.

LAURA

(Answers her phone.) Hello?

SPENSER

Laura, it's James Spenser at the Board of Elections.

LAURA

Yes, James, what've you got?

SPENSER

(Looks around worriedly.) I feel like I'm being watched. I have information about the contractor who's getting that 400 million dollars you questioned.

LAURA

What did you find out?

SPENSER

That contractor is about to begin programming work on SafeVote. Elections is calling it 'updates and patches'. But the programming on SafeVote has already been finished and certified. By law, no changes can be made to the program once it's certified. So this contractor's updates and patches are illegal!

LAURA

Who is this contractor?

SPENSER

I need to see you. Meet me at two o'clock at Bailey's on the southeast side of town.

LAURA

You mean the bar in that rough neighborhood?

SPENSER

It's out of the way. I can't be seen with you! Come alone. No camera, no crew. Okay?

**SCENE 4: Outside Bailey's Bar.**

Front entrance of saloon with 'Bailey's' printed above the door. SPENSER walks up to the saloon. He looks around worriedly as he waits for LAURA. Suddenly, DENIM enters, wearing a tee shirt. His snake tattoo is visible on his forearm with the creature's head on the back of his hand. He attacks SPENSER. DENIM rips SPENSER's pants pocket and steals his wallet, then DENIM continues hitting his victim. SPENSER fights back. DENIM pulls out a gun and shoots SPENSER (loud gunshot). SPENSER falls.

Just as DENIM exits, fleeing the scene, LAURA enters, shocked. DENIM's face is turned away from her, but she does see the tattoo. She crouches down to aid SPENSER.

LAURA

James!

(A PASSERBY enters, walking along, and stops shocked. LAURA speaks to the PASSERBY.)

Help! Call an ambulance!

(The PASSERBY nods, takes out a phone, and calls for help. LAURA turns to SPENSER.)

James, who did this?

SPENSER

(Weak) Don't know.

LAURA

Why would someone do this?

SPENSER

Don't know.

LAURA

James, hang in there. Help is coming. Hang in there!

SPENSER

(Grabs her collar and pulls her closer.) F .. Fox.

LAURA

What? Fox? Fix? What?

SPENSER

(Wheezing) Fox.

(SPENSER's eyes close and his head falls.)

LAURA

James. James!

(There is no reply. SPENSER is dead. Sirens blare offstage as the stage goes black.)

**SCENE 5: Voices offstage.**

Several reporters give their headlines about the murder.

VOICE 1

News flash from WYDC: This afternoon a man was killed in a random street robbery.

VOICE 2

Breaking news from Washington, D.C.: Today a man was fatally shot outside a bar.

VOICE 3

This just in: A man was robbed and murdered on the southeast side.

**SCENE 6: SEAN with microphone reporting.**

SEAN

Good evening. This is Sean Browne on Miller News Network. Police in Washington, DC, investigate what appears to be a robbery that went terribly wrong today when the victim attempted to fight back and was fatally shot by his assailant. The perpetrator remains on the loose and police ask anyone with information to call their hotline.

**SCENE 7: LAURA's TV news show.**

LAURA sits at the desk on her set and speaks to the camera.

LAURA

Good evening and welcome to 'Just the Truth'. I'm Laura Taninger. The subject of my Daily Memo tonight is: Give Us Justice. Today, yours truly was at the scene of the murder that's shocked our nation's capital. The victim was the assistant director of the Board of Elections, James Spenser. He was shot just moments before he was to meet with me to reveal what he believed were suspicious activities in the programming of SafeVote. Other newscasters are covering this story as a random street robbery gone bad, but while we await the police findings, we can't help but wonder, was James Spenser targeted? What was he about to reveal? 'Just the Truth' will find out.

**SCENE 8: Bar table at the Waves.**

LAURA and SEAN stand at a counter-height bar table at the Waves restaurant, having drinks.

SEAN

We're rivals on opposing networks. So why do we meet like this? Never mind, I know why. Because I like seeing you, and you like getting my leads. Like James Spenser.

LAURA

When Spenser contacted you, why didn't you interview him and run with the story yourself, instead of passing him on to me? Never mind, Sean. I know why. You're hoping to get an exclusive interview with President Martin.

SEAN

I have a good relationship with the president's chief advisor, Darcy Egan, and she gets me access to him. What's wrong with that?

LAURA

What's wrong is that Darcy cherry picks the press that's favorable to the president. She talks to you all the time, but she never returns my calls. I expect Darcy—and the Board of Elections—to deal with me, not blow me off!

SEAN

You look so vibrant when you're fighting everybody in one of your crusades.

LAURA

What about you? Where are your crusades?

SEAN

I left my idealism back in school. Isn't that what we're supposed to do when we grow up?

LAURA

Are we?

SEAN

Somehow you never got the message to tone down your ideals and be more practical. I hope you'll never let anyone kick sand on that wildfire inside you.

LAURA

I don't understand you, Sean. If you like a wildfire in me, why do you keep only a pilot light burning inside yourself?

SEAN

I ignite plenty of fires. I give you leads, don't I? But I wish I hadn't hooked you up with Spenser. I wish I could have spared you the horror of what you witnessed. Are you okay?

LAURA

I'm fine, but I could use help investigating this story. Why was your report on Spenser's murder such a whitewash?

SEAN

I'm just reporting what the police and the Martin administration are saying.

LAURA

So much violence to steal a wallet? Really? Why are you so trusting?

SEAN

I have no reason to think anyone's hiding anything. What's your theory?

LAURA

Maybe the attacker's real motive was to rough up a whistleblower to keep him quiet. The attacker stole Spenser's wallet so no one else would guess the real motive. But when Spenser fought back, the thug pulled his gun, shot Spenser, and fled. That would make the murder a

*beating* that went wrong, rather than a robbery that went wrong. A beating to send a message—without words, just blows. Spenser was a smart guy. He would've figured out the point of the attack.

SEAN

And you told the detectives that?

LAURA

They interviewed me. They were skeptical about my theory, but they took down the basic description I gave them of the killer. His face was turned away from me, but I did notice an ugly snake tattoo on his arm, with the creature's head on the back of his hand.

(SEAN's phone chimes. He takes it out.)

SEAN

It's a text from Darcy Egan.

LAURA

(She leans over to see the screen and reads the text aloud.)

'Interview with the president is yours if we can suggest a few questions and see the final cut before you air.'

(She looks at SEAN disapprovingly.)

My grandfather, Julius Taninger, would never let a public official dictate questions or approve an interview before he published it.

(SEAN texts back. LAURA reads his text.)

'Yes to all conditions.' Sean, how could you?

SEAN

There's no harm if I throw in a few of their questions and let them look over the interview.

LAURA

You know they'll want you to delete anything unflattering to them. And you'll do it, too! That's unethical!

SEAN

Hey, that's not fair! Everybody compromises. Even my boss, Reed Miller. Remember him? Your former lover? The man you most admire.

LAURA

(Painfully) The man I used to admire.



SEAN

Even the brilliant Reed Miller, who created Miller News Network and built the worldwide media empire, Miller Communications—even Reed caved to the people in power. So you need to cut me some slack.

LAURA

(Reminiscing) We were so much in love. Then something happened that tore Reed apart.

SEAN

The Bureau of Fair Trade sued Miller Communications for being a monopoly.

LAURA

That was after Reed blasted President Martin's policies.

SEAN

You defended Miller News repeatedly on your show. The chief competitor of Taninger News! Your father almost disowned you.

LAURA

I was defending free speech.

SEAN

Fair Trade said that the good of society is served by a diversity of viewpoints in the public forum.

LAURA

Why should Reed have to provide them on his network?

SEAN

The Feds said he did. He was making huge profits and having an undue influence on public opinion.

LAURA

Meaning the picture he painted of Martin wasn't pretty, so the administration came after him with their pitchforks. I begged Reed to fight them, but he caved. He restructured his network to include reporters and viewpoints he disapproved of, and the Feds dropped their lawsuit.

SEAN

Well, I got a job out of it. That's when he hired me.

LAURA

(Sadly) That's when he lost his passion for his business—and for me.

SEAN

As soon as the Feds stopped threatening his company, Reed no longer needed you to defend him. You stuck your neck out for him, and he walked out on you. That's something I would never do!

(He tries to embrace her. She moves away. She snaps out of her reverie.)

LAURA

I didn't come here to rehash Reed. I came here to ask you something about Spenser.

SEAN

What?

LAURA

His last word to me was Fox.

SEAN

Fox?

LAURA

Did James Spenser ever use that word with you?

SEAN

No.

LAURA

Does the word Fox mean anything to you?

SEAN

No, nothing at all.

**SCENE 9: LAURA's office.**

LAURA and SAM are standing and talking. LAURA holds a document.

LAURA

Sam, I've tried for weeks to get the Board of Elections to reveal details about the contractor who's getting this mysterious 400 million dollars in their budget.

(LAURA shows SAM the item she's referring to on the document. SAM looks at it and takes the document from LAURA.)

SAM

As the corporate attorney, I'll file a formal Public Disclosure Request for Taninger News to get the information. The agency has to comply. It's the law.

**SCENE 10: LAURA's TV news show.**

LAURA sits at the desk on her set and speaks to the camera.

LAURA

Good evening and welcome to ‘Just the Truth’. The subject of my Daily Memo tonight is: Tools of Silence: Stalls and Delays. One way governments try to silence their media critics is by stonewalling journalists who attempt to get information. This program has been trying for weeks to learn who is receiving 400 million dollars from the Board of Elections for work on SafeVote, but the agency has not responded to our requests. We have now filed a Public Disclosure Request to get this information.

(Lights fade on LAURA’s set as the lights rise on the next scene across the stage. When that scene is established, LAURA exits from her darkened scene.)

**SCENE 11: Office of PRESIDENT KEN MARTIN.**

Lights rise on DARCY, ZACK, and MARTIN. They’re watching LAURA’s TV news show from a laptop on the coffee table. The monitor is turned toward them, away from the audience, so the audience can’t see the screen, but they can hear the audio. LAURA is finishing her Daily Memo. DARCY holds a report.

LAURA’s Voice (from the laptop)

Will Elections be transparent? Or will they continue to ignore our request and make us even more suspicious?

MARTIN

Mute it, Zack.

(ZACK touches a spot on the laptop and mutes the sound. MARTIN points to the monitor.)

We have to do something about Laura Taninger.

ZACK

I worked for Taninger News until that witch canned me. Even though I helped defeat the very candidate that Taninger News opposed, Ms. Holier-Than-Thou rejected my tactics.

MARTIN

Like what?

ZACK

Like character assassination, smears, snipes, innuendos, spreading rumors, quoting anonymous sources, not vetting information, and publishing material that turns out to be false.

MARTIN

We like that stuff here. Don’t we, Darcy?

DARCY

What Ken means is, our ends our noble, so it's okay to use any means to achieve them. Laura should have promoted you, instead of canning you.

ZACK

(Gloating) I got even with her. I cultivated friends in her office, took them out for drinks, and kept in touch, so I could inquire casually about Laura. That's how I found out she was having a fling with Taninger News' biggest competitor, Reed Miller. Then when the Feds dismissed the monopoly lawsuit they had on him, my insiders found out he dumped her—after she was his biggest supporter. I embarrassed Laura and her family big time with the stories I planted on that wild affair.

MARTIN

Now you have *our* friends at your disposal to deal with her. They're inside agencies that have more power than you can imagine.

DARCY

Our friends in the agencies know how vital it is for Ken to be reelected.

ZACK

(Scheming) Hmm. They can be very useful in stopping Laura's attacks on SafeVote and her nasty rumors about Spenser's death.

MARTIN

Speaking of friends, the police report said Spenser's death was a random crime and nothing more. Say, Darcy, is our friend, the D.C. mayor, solid?

DARCY

We shared with the mayor that she's on the shortlist for an appointment at the Bureau of Justice in your second term.

MARTIN

Good.

DARCY

But I'm afraid Laura Taninger's attacks are hurting us. There's growing uncertainty about SafeVote and voters are deserting us.

(She holds up the report she's carrying.)

Our internal polling shows that your public approval rating is at an all-time low.

(She hands MARTIN the report. He steps away to read it, absorbed.)

ZACK

(Aside to DARCY) What the hell happened with Spenser?

DARCY

(Aside to ZACK) I was as shocked as you were. I expected him to be roughed up, nothing more.

(MARTIN hands the report back to DARCY.)

DARCY

Even if Zack can neutralize Laura Taninger now, a lot of damage has already been done. You're in a tight race, Ken. And extreme times call for extreme measures. It's time for ... Operation Topcoat.

(The men look at each other and at DARCY ominously.)

Well?

MARTIN

Is he ready?

DARCY

He's ready. We've already announced at the Board of Elections that more programming will be done on SafeVote. We described it as updates and patches.

MARTIN

Can he do it in time?

DARCY

He assures us he can.

MARTIN

Do we have the money set aside to pay for it?

DARCY

We have 400 million dollars budgeted for it.

ZACK

I don't know. It's more daring than anything we've ever done before.

DARCY

As the president's senior strategist, you need to be onboard with this, Zack.

ZACK

(Defensively) Oh, I am. I am, Darcy. Don't get me wrong.

DARCY

The upcoming election is a turning point for our country – and for us. Will we gain our rightful place in history as the visionaries who launched a bold, new America? Or will we end up in the ash heap because we let our enemies defeat us?

(The laptop screen catches MARTIN's attention. He points to it.)

MARTIN

This looks important.

(ZACK puts the volume back on.)

LAURA's Voice (from the laptop)

This just in. The latest National Vision Poll has President Ken Martin losing reelection by ten points!

(The three viewers are stunned. ZACK mutes the sound.)

DARCY

(To MARTIN) *Now* do we get the green light for Operation Topcoat?

MARTIN

It's showtime.

**SCENE 12: The Meadowlark Gardens courtyard.**

A lamppost, a picnic bench, and large shrubbery behind which a person can hide define the courtyard of an abandoned housing project. DARCY and ZACK are waiting for their contractor.

ZACK

(Uncomfortable) Did you have to pick the courtyard of an abandoned housing project for our meeting? I can see rats picking at the garbage around the buildings.

DARCY

These are challenging times. They call for unusual methods.

ZACK

I can't believe we're paying this guy 400 million bucks. Not too long ago, he was our avowed enemy.

DARCY

He's a programming genius, and we had chips to cash in with him. You know his background. He's indispensable to Operation Topcoat.

ZACK

I don't trust him. This whole thing could backfire.

DARCY

Grow a spine, man. Remember, we're saving the country. Our ends are noble.

ZACK

How could something noble include him?

(REED enters, overhearing them.)

(REED's face is seen, but he's not identified by name. The audience doesn't know that the accomplice in Operation Topcoat is REED until Act II, Sc. 5, when LAURA goes to REED's apartment.)

REED

And so it does.

ZACK

We have to line your pockets to save our country. That's outrageous!

REED

(Contemptuously) And so it is. Your ends are the highest, while mine are the lowest. You want to save the country, while I just want to line my pockets. How is it that we share the same means to these wildly different ends?

ZACK

You mock our ideals when you have none. You mock our public service when you give none. Why do we put up with you?

REED

Because you need me. There are others who can do the job, but they won't because they have scruples. You need someone who can do the job and has no scruples. That narrows the field and raises the price.

DARCY

We decided to go ahead with Operation Topcoat.

REED

Of course, you did. What took so long?

ZACK

We gave it careful consideration. Unlike you, we have scruples.

REED

You had to deliberate, of course. It takes time to convince yourselves that black is white.

DARCY

We're here to engage your services, not your big mouth!

REED

And your boss is in on this?

DARCY

He's in.

REED

When do I meet with him to confirm that?

DARCY

He won't be seen with you.

REED

I'll have to talk to him at some point.

DARCY

You'll deal with us if you want the job. Now, tell us the plan.

REED

Well, okay for now. Here's the deal. I'll concentrate on key undecided districts in swing states. I'll make a minimum of adjustments, but they'll profoundly affect the outcome. The interventions will be highly subtle, yet enormously effective. That's the beauty and brilliance of my plan! I've got it all mathematically worked out. I know exactly what to do, how to do it, and how to hide it in thousands of lines of computer code so no one will ever find out. With my fixes now, and in future elections when you incorporate Senate and congressional races into SafeVote, you and your buddies will be in power for the next hundred years.

DARCY

Exactly what we want to hear!

ZACK

What about secrecy?

REED

I'm handling the bulk of the work myself. Any programming I need from others will be broken into small fractions of the total job. No one I work with will know who the client is or be able to piece together the whole picture. It's only from your end that an outsider can learn anything. Is your side tight?

ZACK

I'm sure you're aware of the busybody news anchor who's pressing us for information. She filed a Public Disclosure Request.

REED

Stall, stall, stall. String out any eager beavers till the election's over. (Derisively) After your boy wins, you can rescind the Public Disclosure Laws. It'll be for the good of the people to suppress the unpatriotic troublemakers, won't it?



ZACK

(To DARCY) Let's walk out now. I can't stand this jerk.

DARCY

(To ZACK) Don't let him rattle you.

REED

Who knows about this at the Board of Elections?

ZACK

They know only that a company is coming in to do updates and patches. There will be just one tech specialist on the inside who'll know more than that. You'll work with him.

DARCY

We've got your fake identity all set up. From now on, we'll refer to you by your code name: the Fox.

REED

Hmm, the Fox. I like it.

DARCY

You're Frank Foxworth, the president of Integrated Foxworth Technologies, a phony company we set up overseas. That protects us and you.

ZACK

Are you sure you'll be super careful and not let any of this get out?

REED

Of course. I'll get right into my new persona. I'll burrow underground and dig my den out of sight. Foxes hide in foxholes, and I'm as cunning and sly as they are. You didn't name me the Fox for nothing.