



Showtime

Melvin Streets

This was either a master stroke that would irrevocably project him to the forefront of his profession or the final nail in the coffin of his demise.

The risk was immense, but the potential rewards were staggering. To say that his job performance over the past six months had been less than stellar was like saying that falling into a snow blower could be a chilling experience, so failure was not an option.

As program director for the "Today in Washington" show it was his job to procure controversial, topical guests each day to be interviewed - grilled would be a better description - by the star of the show- Edward Buchanan.

Buchanan had initiated the style of probing, in your face television interviewing, which had quickly made him a celebrity the viewers loved to watch as he systematically dismembered his guests, accusing them of conspiracy, treachery and loathsome practices of many stripes. His guests, on the other hand, dreaded receiving an invitation to appear on the show but were in no position to refuse. Buchanan had no qualms about announcing that an invited guest had declined to appear. This ruse inevitably resulted in the poor unfortunate guest appearing at a later date to refute what had never actually been categorically stated in the first place.

Inevitably, a desire for vengeance was building. In the guise of a crusader after the truth, Buchanan had accused a senator of evasion of, not only taxes, but also his familial fidelity. As a result, the senator in question found it best not to seek re-election when his term ended just a few months later. Few of his constituents were dismayed at his passing, figuring that where there's smoke, fire most likely will eventually be found. The intoxicating power soon went to Buchanan's head making him a master of innuendo, universally hated by all who worked with him, but nevertheless, the one man in prime time TV to be associated with. His show routinely topped the ratings charts and his chain smoking image had become as famous as any of the celebrities and politicians who were unfortunate enough to appear with him.

Tom Brooke had been with Buchanan since the beginning, first as one of three background researchers, then as the show became ever more

popular, as the program director. At first he had considered it almost a privilege to participate in the exposing of those in the public eye who had come to abuse the trust of those who brought them to power or celebrity. To watch a once proud but crooked politician folding under the piercing gaze and searching questions of the master, or the soft spoken, older character actor exposed as a child molester was justification enough.

As time went on however, it became more and more difficult to supply the needs of a rapacious public intent on seeing the metaphorical shedding of blood on a daily basis.

Tom was reduced to scanning the gossip columns for sightings of aged actresses caught in the wrong place with the wrong man - or woman. The show was reduced to the level of a Daily Enquirer expose where mediocrities were, apparently anxious to renounce their tawdry affairs in a public forum.

The show's ratings had dropped to such a level there was talk, for the first time since its inception, of demoting it to a morning TV slot. Tom, of course, was the object of Buchanan's rage. In his forcibly stated opinion, the fall in popularity was entirely Tom's fault, and if he couldn't find suitable guests for the slaughter, then by God, Buchanan would find someone else who could.

What Buchanan failed to realize, of course was that most fickle of entities - the viewing public - had grown tired of the format. After all, even the ancient Romans had eventually become bored with lions versus Christians and turned to more idyllic pursuits.

The stunning realization had come to Tom one morning in the shower. The party's over, he thought. Buchanan's day is over, and if he goes down, I go with him - unless. ...

The basic theory behind the initial success of "Today in Washington" had been that the public loves to see the mighty fall - especially if the mighty are a little bit shady.

Buchanan had always been careful to stay away from the true idols of today's society - the Michael Jordans who everyone loves despite, or perhaps because of, an occasional chink in the shining armor, but a recent change in government had prompted a return to a more honest, reasoned treatment of our public figures. Certainly the resurgence of ethical values had signaled a radical change in public thinking, and the muck-raking genus of Buchanan's show had become the antithesis of public thinking in this newly enlightened era.

Why not, thought Tom - why not reverse the roles. One final, orgiastic revelation of the truth behind one of today's most public figures. The show

was destined to be cut very soon anyway - might as well go out with a bang rather than a whimper. Keep the guest's name secret right up to the last moment - build the tension until the audience was drooling in anticipation. Bill it as the last performance of the show - one you wouldn't want to miss, one you could tell the kids about - one day.

The more he thought about it, the more Tom felt this was his chance to redeem his recent poor performance - to make a name for himself that the network chiefs would not want to forget - they may even want to fight over him some day soon. Thoughts of fame and fortune filled his head as he drove to the studio that day. A long meeting with the head of Current Affairs programming, follow up meetings with his assistants, then almost a week of intensive research. Finally the day of the show arrived.

Buchanan, as usual only arrived a couple of hours before show time, when all the questions and anticipated answers had been prepared for him. He claimed that he liked to go into action with everything fresh in his mind - not stale after mulling it over for a week. The formula usually worked. His opening comments to his guest generally designed to cause the maximum of discomfort with the minimum of delay.

As show time approached, no sign of the guest. Last minute arrivals were not unusual, given the unwillingness with which most of his guests accepted the invitation. Buchanan was prowling around the stage rearranging chairs, ashtrays and notes exactly to his liking.

"One minute to go"

"Where the hell is he?" shouted Buchanan.

"It's OK" yelled Tom from the far side of the set, "he's here - just get seated, we'll wheel him in right after the opening credits."

Signature music for "Today in Washington II" begins.

Voice over of the announcer who's been doing this job since day one, over seven years earlier ...

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the last edition of 'Today in Washington', and now to introduce our very special guest, here is Tom Brooke. "

Sitting in the interviewer's chair, Buchanan leans forward - eyes bulging from his suddenly pasty face. Tom Brooke strides across the set. Sits down opposite ...

"Mr. Buchanan, - may I call you Edward?"

Edward is it not true that ...