

Celebrity Death Cult

David Conway

PART ONE

THINGS FALL APART

Chapter One

A Twenty-first Century Fable

On a grey September morning at the outset of the third millennium Londoners rose to face another day, sleepwalking through the mundane rituals of metropolitan life like the sedated inmates of a Victorian institution. Apathy in the UK had become endemic, a pathological condition. Superficially it seemed nothing had changed. But subversive undercurrents stirred beneath the surface. And the infamous *A-List Asylum* television program—the last reality show ever made in Britain—would provide the unlikely catalyst for an imminent revolution. The cycle of violence and radical agitation—the unprecedented death toll—associated with the production would become the stuff of legend: a twenty-first century fable and a cautionary tale for such uncertain times.

It was shortly before eight-fifteen am.

Miranda Black was due at the Network 6 TV studios in Euston by eight am. Less than two miles from her destination, she had been stuck in traffic on the Marylebone Road for the past twenty minutes. The cars behind and in front of Miranda's black BMW remained at a standstill. Miranda's television appearance had been scheduled for eight-thirty am. She obviously wasn't going to make it to the studio on time. *So much for the goddamned Congestion Charge!* she thought angrily.

Miranda was booked to appear on the Network 6 breakfast show *Sunny Side Up*—a typical example of the bland entertainment and life-style programs that dominated the daytime airwaves. Fluff. Not that Miranda had a problem with *Sunny Side Up*—its hostess, Colleen Reid—or any of the C-List celebrities, diet gurus and media whores who occupied the show's vulgar pink sofa every morning.

Media whores?

Perhaps that sounded a little...harsh. But Miranda meant it in a *caring* way. Or so she liked to joke. Miranda Black might have been many things—but she was no hypocrite. She was one of those people who dignify their cold-blooded cynicism by describing themselves as *realists*.

We're all whores, Miranda reminded her staff at their regular meetings. We all sell ourselves. We just haggle over the price—that's all. It isn't a matter of morality. It's a simple question of economics. We're all feeding at the same trough. But some of us have our snouts in deeper than others.

And Miranda should have known. She considered herself one of the highest paid whores in the business—and took pride in the fact. As the editor-in-chief of *Glitz* magazine Miranda Black was important. She didn't think of herself as important in the same way some people think of a doctor, lawyer or even a politician. She was much more important than that. A genuine celebrity in her own right, she wielded the power to dictate *who's hot and who's not*.

In the business Miranda Black was known as the Guru of Gossip. She'd been running *Glitz* for ten years. Under her stern regime it had become one of the most successful publications of its kind. *Glitz* regularly outsold the likes of *Hello* and *OK*. And Miranda made frequent TV appearances too. She was one of the judges on the talent show, *Stardust*, which consistently attracted over ten million viewers on ITV1.

And then, of course, there were the books.

Miranda's first book, *Celebrity Babylon*, topped the bestseller list for three months and had gone through a dozen reprints in less than five years. The follow up, *Cosmetic Revolutions*, even outdid those sales figures. Her latest book, *Celebrity Century*, was due to hit the bookshelves the following week. Advance orders already exceeded both previous books. *Move over, JK Rowling*, Miranda thought smugly as she contemplated another hit. Her slot on *Sunny Side Up* to publicize the release of *Celebrity Century* was merely the first of many scheduled promotional appearances.

But here she was—stuck in damn traffic with all the faceless wage slaves.

Miranda was going nowhere. And she knew it.

Miranda fished her mobile phone from her Prada handbag and called Colleen Reid's personal assistant, a rather brittle young woman named Deborah Kelly.

"Hi, Deb," Miranda said. "It's Miranda here."

"Miss Black? You were expected at least half-an-hour ago. Is there a problem?"

"Yes, you could say that. Traffic's a real bitch. I'm stuck on the Marylebone Road. I really don't think I can make it there in less than—oh, let's say, twenty minutes."

“That *is* a problem.”

And screw you very much too, Miranda thought. “Can you let Colleen know I’m on my way? Twenty minutes at the outside. Definitely.”

Silence.

“Deb? Are you still there?”

“Of course. I’ll be sure to inform Miss Reid. But you appreciate we’re working to a very tight schedule here.”

“Sure. I was down for—what was it now—eight-thirty, right? Bump me back to nine and I’ll be forever in your debt.” Even while Miranda was speaking, she’d made it her mission in life to have the supercilious little bitch sacked and make sure she never worked in the industry again. “You can do that for me. Right?”

“Well, we have Heidi Wilde scheduled for nine.”

“Problem solved. Just bring her forward and I’ll take the nine o’clock slot.”

“I *suppose* we could do that. You’re sure you can make it?”

“Scout’s honour.”

“Alright, Miss Black, I’ll let them know. Nine it is then.”

Twenty minutes would be cutting it fine, Miranda realised, as she stared out at the cars ahead of her. If not for the gridlock, she could have been at the studio in less than five minutes. Still, Miranda was pretty sure that Heidi Wilde would be making the most of her absence.

Heidi Wilde was a glamour model—assuming one used the word *glamour* in the loosest possible terms. Her enormous, surgically enhanced breasts had graced the pages of daily tabloids like the *Sun*, the *Sport* and the *Star*—and featured frequently in both soft porn and celebrity lifestyle magazines—for over a decade. Heidi’s inflated assets had paid serious dividends since she first achieved public notoriety at the age of sixteen. Regular television appearances—including a cameo on a popular soap opera and a highly publicized stint on a reality show called *Celebrity in Jeopardy*—had propelled Heidi Wilde onto the A-List. And now she had re-launched herself as a successful writer.

Heidi had already published two autobiographies that topped the bestseller list. Currently she was doing the rounds again, publicizing her latest magnum opus, a novel entitled *All that Glitters*. From pornography to prose—Heidi made the

transition effortlessly. Revelations about her recent bouts with cocaine addiction and depression proved no obstacle to her monstrous ambition. A brief stint in therapy had cleaned up her act. It was pure soap opera—priceless publicity.

Heidi Wilde was more than just a celebrity. She was a genuine phenomenon. The tarty image and abrasive Estuary accent led some to underestimate her. But she marketed herself shrewdly, amassing millions in the process.

Fifteen minutes passed. The traffic remained at a virtual standstill. Miranda's car had barely moved. Above the noise of stalled vehicles—the persistent drone of engines and squawking car horns—Miranda heard a deep rumbling. It sounded like a violent thunderclap, the harbinger of an imminent storm. She glanced at the sky, congested with grey clouds. A column of black smoke climbed high into the air in the general vicinity of Euston Station. A fire? That was all Miranda needed—another bloody delay. The Network 6 studios were located close to the station. There was no way she would make the nine am slot now. She decided to call Colleen Reid's PA and arrange a postponement. No reply. Swearing under her breath, she tried the number again. Nothing.

Miranda had just shelled out for the most expensive mobile phone on the market and she couldn't even connect with Deborah Kelly less than two miles away. *Somebody up there really has it in for me today*, she thought, casting her eyes towards the heavens. As the smoke rose higher, Miranda switched on the radio.

In the distance she could hear sirens.

Chapter Two

Participants in the Conspiracy

Chaos reigned outside the Network 6 TV studios. Ambulances, fire engines and police cars parked haphazardly across the main thoroughfare of Euston Road—one of London’s major traffic arteries—and up on the pavement itself. Uniformed police officers cordoned off the area. Columns of black smoke poured from the shattered second floor windows of the building. Red and blue lights strobed dramatically over the vehicles, policemen, paramedics and fire fighters. Miranda found the whole situation strange and somehow unreal. She could almost believe that she had just stumbled onto a location shoot for the latest episode of *Casualty*—a television dream of disaster. The wail of sirens grew steadily louder as more ambulances and fire engines approached.

It had taken Miranda twenty-five minutes to walk from her abandoned car to the TV studios. Shortly after she’d noticed the smoke climbing into the sky in the vicinity of Euston Station, a news report had interrupted the regular programming on the LBC talk radio channel. According to the bulletin there had been an explosion at the Network 6 studios. Though no details were forthcoming, it was obvious there’d been casualties. The cause of the explosion remained unclear. But the implication was obvious.

A bomb.

These days everyone always assumed it was a bomb.

As she made her way down Euston Road, as fast as she could in a pair of brand new Gucci shoes with four-inch heels, Miranda put in a call to the *Glitz* editorial office and spoke to the magazine’s associate editor, Samantha Barry. According to Samantha, pictures were already being broadcast on all the terrestrial TV channels, as well as on Sky News and other major satellite and cable networks. Stumbling slightly in her fuck-me heels, Miranda heard the precise combinations of words she’d been expecting.

“It looks like another 7/7.”

Broken glass covered the pavement. A carpet of lethal jewels crunched beneath Miranda's chic high heels as she attempted to worm her way through the crowd of spectators gathered across the road from the TV studios. This was the closest the police would let anybody get. Smoke still rose from the second storey windows. But the fire-fighters appeared to have the situation under control. In fact, there was no real sense of urgency about them. They seemed to be going through the motions mechanically, as if this was merely a simulation and not a real disaster. The police mirrored their attitude. Holding the growing throng of sightseers at bay, the cops looked almost bored.

The BBC, ITN and a few of the more enterprising independent outfits had scrambled their news crews. The newshounds included photographers from the tabloids and broad sheets—even a few *paparazzi*. The presence of so many cameras reinforced the impression that this was nothing more than an elaborate media event. The members of the emergency services—even the faceless spectators—resembled extras in a grim docudrama, knowing participants in the conspiracy. For a moment Miranda almost expected the director—artfully secreted among the cast and crew—to yell *cut* and go for another take.

And then she saw the bodies.

Miranda had never encountered death at such close quarters before. Of course, she'd seen dead bodies—casualties of war, crime, terrorism, natural and man-made catastrophes—on TV countless times. But they meant nothing to her. Television reduced the scale of disaster to the level of soap opera—as meaningless as the weather forecast, less compelling than advertising.

Miranda managed to make her way to the front of the crowd as the emergency services removed the first of the bodies. Some of the corpses exhibited spectacular blast injuries, the result of flying glass and shrapnel. Others had sustained hideous burns. The walking wounded stumbled through the chaos, dazed and confused. Among the injured led away by the paramedics, Miranda recognized the former lead singer of a defunct boy band who was currently struggling to establish a solo career. He wore an expression of horrified bewilderment like the guest of honour at a surprise lynching party. A mass of lacerations bloodied the left side of his face.

Miranda wondered if he'd be permanently scarred.

An explosion of camera flashes greeted the dead and injured. Miranda had instructed Samantha Barry to send one of the magazine's staff photographers to the scene. It wasn't their usual sort of thing—images of death and destruction never featured between the glossy covers of *Glitz*. But this was different.

It involved celebrities.

Miranda scanned the faces of the camera jockeys snapping away as the paramedics carried more stretchers from the studios. It was a regular feeding frenzy. She recognized a few of the *paparazzi* instantly. They did frequent business. But there was still no sign of the photographer from *Glitz*. All the money shots were going to the competition. If she wanted pictures, Miranda realised she'd have to get them herself.

As Miranda tried to cross the street a stocky young WPC wearing a stab vest barred her way. She wondered if a bribe might work. But she doubted it. This burly little storm trooper probably considered herself above that sort of thing. She seemed the type that relished the meagre power and authority that derived from a badge and a uniform. Miranda considered what she might say to get around her when the WPC spoke.

"I know you, don't I?" the police officer said, eyeing Miranda suspiciously.

"You do?"

"Sure. You're Miranda Black."

"Guilty as charged, Officer," Miranda replied lightly.

"So what are you doing here?"

"Well, actually, I was due to appear on Colleen Reid's show this morning. Publicity for my new book—you know the sort of thing."

"You've got a new book out?"

"Yes. This is it—" Miranda reached into her bag and produced the advance hardcover copy she'd been planning to plug on *Sunny Side Up*.

"*Celebrity Century*," the WPC said, examining the book. "Looks interesting. You know, I really enjoyed *Cosmetic Revolutions*. Changed my life, you could say."

"Really?" Miranda was intrigued.

"Yeah. I mean I always thought plastic surgery was okay for It Girls like Posh

Spice. But for an ordinary working class girl from Plaistow? Forget about it, right?” Under the circumstances, the WPC’s candid confession seemed wildly inappropriate. “I’d always fancied a boob job. But I never had the guts. Especially being in the police. It’s tough enough being taken seriously as a woman, you know. After I read *Cosmetic Revolutions*—all that stuff you wrote about female empowerment and a positive self-image—I finally worked up the nerve to go for it.”

“Well, good for you.”

“Five grand these set me back—” The hard-faced little copper thrust her chest at Miranda. “Course, you can’t really tell with the stab vest and all—but well worth every penny. Cheap at half the price.”

Miranda found it almost incredible that she’d struck a chord with this stern young woman. She’d initially written her off as a dyke with a chip on her shoulder—a Nazi jobsworth. It was hard not to laugh.

“You need to get through here, Miss Black?” the WPC asked, eager to be of service.

“Well, yes.”

“Follow me—”

The WPC parted the crowd with her extendable truncheon and guided Miranda to the other side of the street where the media contingent gathered. She handed the hardcover copy of *Celebrity Century* back to Miranda.

“Why don’t you keep it?” Miranda suggested.

“Really?”

“Seems like it’s the least I can do.”

“I don’t suppose I could ask for a favour—” the WPC began a little coyly.

“An autograph?” Miranda was already reaching for her pen.

“If it’s not too much trouble.”

“It’s my pleasure. Who should I make it out to?”

“Tiffany.”

Miranda suppressed a chuckle. *Tiffany*? What kind of name was that for a copper? She signed the title page with a magnanimous flourish. It wasn’t every day one got the red carpet treatment at the scene of a major disaster.

Officer Tiffany disappeared back into the crowd, the signed copy of *Celebrity*

Century tucked under her arm. Earlier Miranda felt as if she'd blundered onto the set of a television show. Tiffany's unlikely performance reinforced that impression. But now something shattered the illusion. It was the smell—the smell of death.

She'd heard the expression before, but always dismissed it as a phrase dreamed up by hack writers. It came as a surprise to realize she'd been wrong.

Death really *did* have a smell. It was elusive. Unforgettable. And this was the first time Miranda had ever smelled it. It wouldn't be the last. But right now Miranda wasn't thinking about that. One thing—and one thing only—concerned her.

Pictures.

Chapter Three

Dead Celebrities

The offices of *Glitz* magazine occupied the top two floors of a building in Charlotte Street near the headquarters of Channel Four Television—close to Miranda’s sources in the production teams of the various reality and light entertainment shows that dominated the company's schedules. *Glitz* usually scooped the competition when it came to exposing the behind-the-scenes shenanigans of the celebrities and celebrity wannabes involved in those programs. All the networks spoonfed their viewers a steady diet of celebrity trivia these days. Mediocrity defined the medium. And the Great British Public couldn’t get enough—like addicts craving the fame fix. It had become a national obsession.

So, when Miranda scheduled her regular pre-publication meeting with Samantha Barry, associate editor of *Glitz*, it seemed like business as usual. Except nobody—least of all Miranda—believed that. Something had changed. She knew it.

Everybody did.

The explosion at the Network 6 studios still dominated the media. Two days had passed, but it remained the lead item on every television news bulletin and the front covers of all the newspapers. The fact that it occurred at a television studio struck a chord with both the public and members of the media alike. A taboo had been broken. People considered the medium that beamed images of death and destruction into the homes of millions immune to the catastrophic forces it exploited. The tragedies television trivialized were never supposed to touch the sacred tube. The devastation of the Network 6 studios assumed the symbolic impact of a sacrilegious act. Nobody said so out loud, but everyone felt it profoundly. The eruption of violence exposed a latent anxiety lurking beneath the surface of society.

“You know, no matter how many times I see it, there’s a part of me that still can’t believe it’s true—that it actually *happened*.” Samantha Barry stared at the four large plasma screens arranged along one of the walls. It was just after ten am. All the networks continued running footage of the scene at the Network 6 studios. Though a couple days old now, it exerted an irresistible fascination. It was almost hypnotic.

“Yes, I know what you mean, Sam,” Miranda agreed, lighting a cigarette. “Hell, I was there and it still seems incredible—like a sort of dream. There are times when I still expect to just, y’know, *wake up* at any moment.

“Well, pinch yourself now, Miranda. But you know what they say: *the camera never lies*—” While Samantha spoke, Miranda appeared on all four screens simultaneously. The TV crews hovering over the scene like a pack of scavengers had recognised her instantly. Naturally they all interviewed her. Miranda and Samantha had watched this footage several times. The volume on all four TV sets remained muted. But both women could have recited Miranda’s spiel verbatim by now. In carefully modulated tones—and with a sombre facial expression to match—Miranda employed all the usual platitudes and clichés when discussing the “*tragedy*” and the “*senseless loss of life*”.

The press pack had been excited when they learned Miranda was scheduled to appear on the *Sunny Side Up* breakfast show at the precise moment the explosion occurred. Miranda capitalized on this, writing herself a leading role in the story—even as the emergency workers carried bodies from the burning TV studios. Some were actually dying when Miranda used the expression “*there but for the grace of God...*”

“You know, Miranda, you’re really not kidding there,” Samantha said, lip-reading Miranda’s sanctimonious pronouncement. “Talk about a close shave. I guess somebody up there must really like you.”

“Just a figure of speech,” Miranda replied. “I doubt it was a genuine case of divine intervention. I suppose I was just lucky.”

Lucky? Miranda realized she’d been more than lucky. Her involvement in the Network 6 disaster placed her firmly at the centre of a media sensation. Money couldn’t buy that kind of publicity. She had already done studio interviews for both *BBC Breakfast* and ITV’s *Good Morning Britain*. And she was due to guest on a popular chat show for Channel Four later that day. Her photograph and comments appeared in all the newspapers covering the story.

“You’re certainly getting a lot of good copy out of all this—” Samantha indicated the morning papers strewn across the conference table. “Maybe it’s kind of tasteless to say this, but that’s got to be good for circulation this month.”

“Tasteless?” Samantha’s remark surprised Miranda. The question of *taste* hadn’t occurred to her. Her publishers had already informed her that advance orders for her new book, *Celebrity Century*, had increased by thirty per cent. But Miranda wasn’t the only one who’d attracted the media’s attention in the aftermath of the disaster.

“Actually, Samantha, on the subject of taste, what do you make of this—?” Miranda picked up a copy of the *Sun* and turned to page three. It featured a topless picture of Officer Tiffany, displaying her surgically augmented breasts. She wore her officer’s cap at a jaunty angle while she handled a truncheon suggestively, simpering at the camera.

“I’m lost for words,” Samantha replied sarcastically.

“You know, Officer Tiffany here told me that reading *Cosmetic Revolutions* changed her life. And, judging from this, I don’t think she was kidding.”

“Whatever *will* the Chief Constable say?”

“Don’t knock it, Samantha. These days the Met can use all the positive publicity it can get.” Miranda read out the caption that accompanied the photograph: “*Meet Officer Tiffany Jones, the plucky heroine of the Network 6 disaster whose bravery ensured that the rescue operation ran smoothly, easing the suffering of the survivors and helping to save lives. Tiffany says—‘I was just doing my job’. The Sun says: ‘you deserve a medal, Tiffany—and we bet there’s no shortage of hot blooded fellas queuing up to pin it on!’*” Absolutely priceless, don’t you think?”

“God, I know they say you’re getting old when the police start looking young. But what the hell are you supposed to think when they start looking like *this*?” Samantha adopted a tone of mock exasperation.

“What’s the matter Samantha? Don’t you approve?” Miranda laughed. “You should have heard Officer Tiffany’s story. It was actually quite touching—an everyday tale of female empowerment. Don’t tell me you’ve got a problem with liberated women expressing their femininity.”

In the media circus generated by the bombing something seemed to have been forgotten. The death toll. There had been sixteen fatalities and dozens of casualties. Some had sustained minor injuries. Others had been maimed for life. Forensic investigators identified the epicentre of the blast as the set of the *Sunny Side Up* show itself. The program’s hostess, Colleen Reid, had been killed outright. And a

number of her guests had died too. The fatalities included Heidi Wilde, the glamour model-turned-novelist, who'd taken Miranda's spot on the sofa. Miranda realised that her lucky escape had less to do with divine intervention than the failure of the Congestion Charge.

According to some reports, Heidi's body had practically disintegrated, indicating that she had been closest to the source of the explosion. Miranda thought about that for a moment. *That should have been me*, she realized. Three members of a girl group called Luscious and a runner-up contestant on the reality TV show *Celebrity in Jeopardy* had died too.

The source of the explosion?

The authorities remained reticent about the actual details. But they admitted a bomb had caused the explosion. So far nobody had claimed responsibility. But somebody would eventually. It was only a matter of time. However, Miranda didn't speculate about the identity of the guilty parties. She only wondered about one thing.

How would *Glitz* cover the story?

Miranda's personal involvement remained the obvious angle. They would play up the '*near death experience*'—the '*trauma*' and '*anguish*' she allegedly suffered. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Miranda was far more resilient than that. She had never personally witnessed the spectacle of violent death before. But she remained untouched by it. She experienced life through a lens, a protective membrane that insulated her from the reality of others' suffering.

While she'd mingled with the press pack outside the Network 6 studios, Miranda had used her mobile phone's digital camera to snap the casualties being hauled from the wreckage. She arranged the photographs on the conference table along with official publicity pictures of the celebrity victims like a macabre '*before and after*' feature. The glamour shots of the saucy starlets from Luscious contrasted horribly with how they looked after the explosion.

"Now that's what I call a *hostile make-over*," Miranda commented. She pushed the pictures around the table like an oracle interpreting a disastrous tarot spread.

"That's one way of putting it," Samantha remarked. "You're not thinking about *using* them, are you?"

“Why not?”

“Not really a sight for the squeamish, is it? Sure, it’s a big story. But maybe it’s *too* big. I can’t really see *our* readers going for this sort of...thing. It’s not exactly what you’d call *sexy*.”

“Not sexy?” Miranda couldn’t believe her ears. “We’re talking about *celebrities*, for God’s sake! And there’s only one thing sexier than a celebrity—and that’s a whole bunch of dead celebrities!”

“If you say so. But maybe this is one for the serious news media. It’s not really an entertainment piece. And the civilian death toll was actually higher.” Samantha used the word *civilian* to denote the non-celebrity status of the majority of the victims.

“Civilians? Come on, Samantha! That’s not news. I mean can you name a single casualty from 9/11 or 7/7? Sure, they were tragedies too. Obviously that goes without saying. But in the final analysis those deaths are just *statistics*. Just look at how people reacted when Princess Diana died. What started out as a modern Cinderella story ended as car crash TV. Literally. And news doesn’t get any sexier than that.”

“So if the 7/7 bombers had targeted the set of *EastEnders*, you’re saying it would have been more important than the actual attacks on the Underground?”

“Exactly!”

Chapter Four

Celebrity Suicide Bomber

Three days after the Network 6 bombing the story took an unexpected turn. Initially the press attributed guilt to Islamic terrorists—despite the lack of evidence or the fact that nobody claimed responsibility. Rumours of arrests persisted. Civil liberties groups made the usual noises about suspects being detained without charge or access to legal representation. Some suggested torture had been sanctioned at the highest level. The majority of the public treated these allegations with contempt. In fact, most *approved* of a return to such medieval barbarity. They believed a state of war existed, declared by an invisible enemy within. Reactionary pundits and opportunistic politicians trotted out tired old clichés about *the end justifying the means*. Their cynical pontifications expressed a popular point of view.

But the bomber's true identity took everyone by surprise.

Heidi Wilde.

The glamour model-turned-novelist—a guest on the *Sunny Side Up* breakfast show—had perpetrated the atrocity. It seemed unbelievable. However, forensic investigators had presented a wealth of evidence that established her guilt unequivocally. But something else surpassed even those shocking revelations.

And that was Heidi Wilde's confession.

Prior to the bombing Heidi Wilde had recorded a video—apparently inspired by the suicide videos associated with Islamic extremists. Until recently the British public—obsessed with the freak show antics of the contestants on shows like *Stardust* and *Celebrity in Jeopardy*—regarded these chilling political testaments with indifference. The 7/7 London bombings had altered that perspective dramatically. And Heidi's crime transcended the climate of fear in a way that both confused and horrified an unsuspecting population.

The worlds of the celebrity and the terrorist had collided catastrophically. The media machine went into overdrive. One enterprising tabloid hack coined a term all the newspapers, television and radio channels seized upon.

CELEBRITY SUICIDE BOMBER

Brilliant, Miranda Black thought, the first time she saw those three words in print. It was so simple—so effective. If only *she* had thought of it. What a *Glitz* cover headline that would have made. Of course she fully intended to use it anyway. But being *first* was what really counted. Everybody knew that.

Heidi Wilde's suicide video had appeared on the Internet seventy-two hours after the bombing. It was bizarre—by any standards. Only two years earlier a minor sensation had ensued when an explicit recording of Heidi and her then-husband engaging in a marathon of sexual athletics surfaced on the Net. At the time Heidi blamed a disgruntled employee. But everyone suspected she'd posted it herself. Miranda found it impossible to imagine a more unlikely sequel.

In a macabre touch that recalled the earlier sex tape, Heidi appeared on screen dressed only in a black bustier, panties, stockings, suspenders and high heels. At first Miranda dismissed it as an elaborate hoax cooked up by twisted computer geeks. But it soon became apparent that this was real. One thing clinched it.

The explosives.

The sight of Heidi sashaying around in her underwear seemed all the more perverse when she directed the viewer's attention to the Semtex moulded into slim rectangular slabs wrapped in aluminium foil. Heidi strapped two of the packets to her thighs in an almost suggestive way as if performing a strange and deadly burlesque. Miranda watched as Heidi fastened the lethal garters below the glossy black hems of her stocking tops. Satisfied they were secure, she taped another four packets around her midriff.

How the hell did she learn to do this? Miranda wondered as Heidi attached detonators and a triggering device to the packets of plastic explosive. *Where did she get her hands on Semtex?*

After she finished constructing the deadly webbing that augmented her provocative lingerie like the foundation garment of a lethal suit of armour, Heidi slipped on a black designer dress. Its plunging neckline accentuated her impressive cleavage, while simultaneously disguising the volatile ordnance strapped to her body and thighs. Miranda remembered the stories she'd heard about Moslem women in the Middle East—suicide bombers who hid explosives beneath the voluminous folds of their tent-like *burkhas*. Heidi's camouflage implied an ironic inversion of that

strategy.

Was that deliberate? Miranda wondered.

Had Heidi converted to some fanatical strand of Islam?

The very idea seemed absurd. Whatever motivated Heidi to commit mass-murder, one thing was certain. It had nothing to do with Mohammed.

But even after Heidi delivered her final address, a rambling diatribe against so-called “*dark forces*” and the “*conspiracy that controls the invisible environment*”, Miranda remained bewildered. It sounded like total gibberish: the ravings of a lunatic.

Miranda replayed the final segment of the video. Heidi fixed the camera with a sphinx-like gaze and concluded her insane soliloquy in a psychotic monotone:

“Things fall apart. The centre cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. But the children of the revolution will ride the blood-dimmed tide. When the doors of perception are cleansed, we will see things as they truly are. Infinite.”

There was something familiar about those words, but Miranda couldn’t place it.

Still, that probably didn’t matter. She guessed Heidi was just quoting lines she’d cribbed from another source. After all, she had read Heidi’s trashy little books. In Miranda’s opinion Heidi Wilde was incapable of an original thought.

So then who—or what—had put those crazy ideas in her head?

Chapter Five

Ride the Blood-Dimmed Tide

Albion Arena.

The massive entertainment complex located just south of the river was part of an extensive redevelopment that began with the troubled Millennium Dome—an albatross around the government's neck until the taxpayer subsidised a private buy-out that re-branded it the O₂ Centre. Similar controversy dogged the Olympic village and stadium for the 2012 Games. But Albion Arena had been a success from the start. The enormous building housed a cinema, an impressive gallery and exhibition centre, two restaurants, three bars and a live music venue.

Tonight the auditorium was filled to capacity as the rock group Dream Industries took to the stage for the final gig in a sold-out five-night engagement. Over the past two years Dream Industries had risen from being a moderately successful alternative rock outfit to become an international phenomenon. Their latest album, *Sea of Futility*, had gone double platinum on both sides of the Atlantic. And in their chief songwriter and vocalist, Damien Cain, the band possessed a charismatic performer and genuine talent. His passionate music and anguished lyrics communicated directly with the aspirations and alienation of an entire generation. The media touted Damien Cain as the natural heir to such legendary figures as Jim Morrison, Ian Curtis and Kurt Cobain. His tortured stage persona—not to mention his widely reported struggles with drug addiction and mental health issues—elevated him to similar iconic status. His personal problems frequently landed him in trouble with the law, ensuring his tabloid popularity.

Dream Industries had been on stage for over an hour. From the moment they strapped on their instruments the band had launched into the set with a kind of manic energy, which became more intense with each successive number. The excitement in Albion Arena felt palpable: an elemental force so powerful it seemed to exert its own gravitational field. The relationship between the band and the audience was synergistic, one feeding off the other. The atmosphere was tribal. Pagan.

And at the centre of it all stood Damien Cain.

A lightning rod concentrating the cathartic release of primal emotion, Damien resembled a twenty-first century shaman channeling apocalyptic visions. To his fans Damien Cain assumed the role of a wild-eyed messiah leading his legions of lost children through the wilderness of despair to the Promised Land.

And Damien Cain played the part to perfection. Tall and extremely thin with straggly blond hair, he had a pale complexion, fine bone structure and large blue eyes. Peering out from beneath his sweat-drenched fringe, he transfixed his audience with the baleful gaze of an insane prophet. Enormous video screens magnified his face hundreds of times, imbuing Damien Cain with the overbearing presence of a fascist demagogue. Other screens depicted images from the band's controversial videos, which had been censored—and in many cases banned outright—due to their explicit sexual and violent content. Immense lighting rigs illuminated the stage like the nave of an incandescent cathedral. Pyrotechnic and laser effects suggested the stark pageantry of a torchlight parade. When he wasn't thrashing away frantically at his guitar, Damien lurched against the microphone stand, his emaciated body twitching in a way that suggested the aura phase of an imminent *grand mal* seizure. His eyes remained fixed on some beguiling mirage.

In ancient times some might have called him *possessed*.

The band was halfway through one of the key tracks on their new album, a scathing indictment of consumerism entitled *One-Dimensional Man*. The nine-minute epic featured a number of key and tempo changes, an approach once associated with the worst excesses of 1970s progressive rock. However, *One-Dimensional Man* avoided those pitfalls since Dream Industries played it with such verve and passion. And Damien's intense performance ensured there was nothing remotely pompous or self-indulgent about it. *One-Dimensional Man* captivated the audience.

It was an anthem.

Most of the crowd knew every word by heart. During the quieter passages they would mouth the lyrics, singing along with Damien Cain like a congregation of the faithful delivering the liturgical refrain. But tonight was different.

Damien began to improvise.

The synthesizer produced an ominous drone, suggesting the eerie ambience of a

haunted catacomb. The bass guitar throbbed rhythmically, pulsating like an immense heart. An electronic drum pattern completed the bleak, aural sculpture. Damien hunched over his guitar, picking an evocative skeletal melody from its taut strings. He whispered the final lines of the middle-eight bridge into the microphone, delivering them with the grave solemnity of a magical incantation. Then he changed key drastically and began to strum the opening phrase of a different song.

Ride the Blood-Dimmed Tide.

The other members of Dream Industries exchanged surprised glances. Damien had become notorious for the erratic behaviour that characterized his personal life. Not only had he been arrested a number of times during the previous eighteen months on charges relating to the possession of narcotics and a series of public order offences, he had also received a suspended prison sentence after being found guilty of assaulting a police officer at a Free Tibet rally outside the Chinese embassy. However, when it came to performing, he was never less than professional. Damien Cain was universally regarded as the real star of Dream Industries. But he didn't play the prima donna. The modern Cult of Celebrity—and its mediocre exponents—disgusted him. He frequently expressed his views—and his contempt for specific individuals—in the most vitriolic terms.

After a moment's hesitation the rest of the band followed Damien's lead and ploughed into the intro of *Ride the Blood-Dimmed Tide*.

As the first verse began, Damien walked away from the microphone towards the front of the stage. And then he launched into an impromptu guitar solo. Damien had always been a gifted guitarist—an instinctive musician who relied more on inspiration than technical proficiency. One critic had described his style as *Fauvist*.

While the band played on regardless, Damien delivered a blistering sonic assault from his black Stratocaster. The music oscillated wildly between the discordant and the melodic. It was a phenomenal performance. It almost seemed as if Damien were communing with some sublime muse, the sacred agent of transcendental rapture. The audience watched and listened in silence, utterly transfixed. This wasn't the bombastic grandstanding of an arrogant show-off, eager to hog the limelight. This was something entirely different.

But nobody really understood quite *how* different.

Coaxing a sustained chorus of harmonic feedback from his guitar, the aching melancholy of an Orphic hymn, Damien Cain sank to his knees at the front of the stage. The front rows of the audience—almost close enough to touch their idol—watched with wide, adoring eyes. With the guitar cradled in his lap, he adopted the lotus position. The guitar’s mournful lament faded gradually, submerged beneath a wash of reverb. As the final echoes dissolved on the air a moment of perfect stillness descended on Albion Arena. Holding his hands open, palms facing up, Damien interlaced his fingers in what appeared to be a symbolic gesture.

And then he burst into flames.

Seconds passed before anybody reacted.

As Damien’s body ignited violently, the audience watched in silence. There was a smattering of applause—even a few cheers and whistles—as some assumed they were witnessing a dramatic pyrotechnic effect. But the illusion was short-lived. The stench of burning flesh dispelled it.

Then the crowd panicked.

Those closest to the spot where Damien’s body continued to burn like an enormous Roman candle recoiled in horror. The young girls with their wild manes of dyed hair, dark clothes and cadaverous make-up screamed, their voices as shrill as startled banshees. A stampede broke out as the front rows surged back into the main body of the crowd. A tide of humanity forced its way towards the exits. Cries and screams pierced the air as people were knocked to the floor and trampled underfoot.

And Damien Cain continued to burn, his body wreathed in a halo of flames like the inaugural angel of a cosmic holocaust. The stage was bathed in light, an apocalyptic altar. As they boiled in their orbits, the singer’s liquefying eyes observed the chaos benignly. The other members of Dream Industries remained paralysed with fright, like imminent roadkill dazzled by the headlights of an approaching juggernaut.

Time ceased to have any meaning.

It seemed as if an eternity had passed before members of the security crew managed to battle their way on stage with fire extinguishers. But by then Damien Cain had transcended celebrity and the vulgar trappings of fame.

He had become immortal.

Chapter Six

Celebrity Death Cult

Damien Cain's body resembled a monstrous effigy, a burnt offering on the altar of a primitive religion. His skin had turned black like charcoal as his meagre body fat fuelled the flames, reducing his emaciated frame to an almost skeletal state. Pale clouds of carbon dioxide vapour condensed around his smouldering remains. Carrying fire extinguishers, three burly men wearing black T-shirts with the word SECURITY printed across the chest in bold white letters circled the body. They had doused the flames. But nothing more.

All at once everything came to a standstill. The security men remained motionless. Icy carbon dioxide formed static patterns in space.

Freeze frame.

“And that was the incredible scene on stage at Albion Arena precisely one week ago tonight when Dream Industries' final concert at the end of a sell-out five-night engagement came to an abrupt and terrifying end—”

Poppy Mason, the host of BBC2's popular cultural review program, *Media 8*, sat in front of a bank of large plasma screens that formed the studio's backdrop. The set resembled the hi-tech lair of a James Bond villain: a surveillance-obsessed paranoiac with a rampant god complex.

Poppy Mason was twenty-eight years old, attractive, with an engaging personality. She had long blond hair, a slim figure and the vaguely bohemian air of a reformed hippy. Focus group surveys indicated that she scored highly with a significant proportion of the show's target demographic: young men in the eighteen to thirty-five year old age group. And she had become a role model for a particular type of hip, fashion conscious young woman. The camera loved her—a media darling.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. And welcome to tonight's special edition of *Media 8*—” Poppy treated the television audience to a beguiling smile, mingling girlish sincerity with coquettish charm. She twinkled on demand—a true professional. “Tonight we're taking the unprecedented step—a first for *Media 8*,

since we originally aired two years ago—of devoting the entire show to a single topic. In light of recent dramatic events—namely the Network 6 bombing and Damien Cain’s horrific suicide on-stage at Albion Arena—we will be examining this latest, violent twist in what the media has come to call the Cult of Celebrity”

As Poppy spoke, the images on the screens behind her changed. As well as the scene of Damien Cain’s spectacular self-immolation, there were stills from Heidi Wilde’s suicide video, which showed her strapping explosives to her body. Another screen depicted the immediate aftermath of the Network 6 blast—black smoke pouring from the windows of the television studios, the grim procession of the dead and injured. The violence seemed more shocking and surreal because it occurred in an entertainment environment. A fortnight had elapsed since bloody carnage erupted during the *Sunny Side Up* breakfast show. And even now the reality had barely sunken in. Damien Cain’s suicide suggested Heidi’s strange dream of madness was not unique. But what did this irrational death-impulse signify?

Poppy Mason seemed determined to find out.

“In order to examine this baffling phenomenon in greater depth, I’m joined by two guests who have their own unique—and I daresay rather different—insights to share,” Poppy adopted a more serious tone, conscious of the images illuminating the screens behind her. Damien Cain’s charred corpse and Heidi Wilde’s voluptuous body—provocative black lingerie and Semtex—crystallized the symbolic elements of a psychopathic fantasy. The potent associations of sex and death implied a new kind of pornography tailor made for television.

“First, a lady who needs no introduction. But she insisted on one anyway,” Poppy said with a hint of irony. “Miranda Black is the editor-in-chief of *Glitz* magazine as well as being the author of *Celebrity Babylon*, *Cosmetic Revolutions* and her latest, *Celebrity Century*, which is currently number one on the bestseller list. And, of course, most of the audience will be familiar with Miranda from her appearances on ITV1’s popular talent show, *Stardust*, where her feuds with fellow judge, Jeremy Quisling, frequently overshadow the acts themselves. Miranda, welcome—”

“It’s a pleasure, Poppy,” Miranda replied graciously. Her long blonde hair cascaded around her slim shoulders, shimmering in the studio lighting. She was

wearing a green silk Dolce and Gabbana dress. It was low-cut enough to accentuate her bust without being vulgar, enhancing the curves of her shapely thighs as she crossed her long legs. In her late-thirties, Miranda Black had the kind of figure many women half her age envied. And she knew it.

“My second guest tonight is a prominent psychiatrist whose views have frequently been described as *unorthodox* and whose controversial approach to therapy has in the past led to conflict with the medical establishment,” Poppy continued. “She has been described as a visionary by some and an irresponsible charlatan by others. Her books, *Mediocracy*, *Empire of Desire* and *The Politics of Identity and the Phoenix from the Flames* have been hailed as ‘*the most relevant meditations on the nature of modern culture in the past thirty years*’ and the author herself has been lauded as ‘*a McLuhan or Marcuse for the Millennium.*’ After all that it only remains for me to say welcome to *Media 8*, Dr. Phaedra Lake.”

“Thank you, Poppy,” Dr. Lake responded. “I’m happy to be here.”

Miranda glanced at the woman sitting in the black leather swivel chair beside her. Dr. Lake was in her late forties. She was tall and slender, dressed in a chic black trouser suit whose cut recalled the geometric tailoring of the 1930s, her black hair styled in a Louise Brooks bob. Dr. Lake’s elegant bone structure and porcelain complexion exuded the luminous aura of a charismatic siren. Her slanted, green eyes lent the psychiatrist’s features a decidedly feline aspect.

Miranda knew of Dr. Phaedra Lake and her trenchant criticism of Celebrity Culture, but she’d never seen her before. She’d imagined a frumpy academic, a stern headmistress type or a hirsute dyke in dungarees. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Dr. Lake looked as if she’d walked straight out of a German Expressionist movie. Miranda took an instant dislike to her.

“Miranda, if I could turn to you first,” Poppy said, opening the discussion. “It’s been widely reported that you were due to appear on *Sunny Side Up* on the morning the bombing occurred. In fact, it was only because you were delayed in traffic that you weren’t there when the bomb exploded. In all probability you would have been killed. So I suppose it’s true to say that this story has a rather more personal dimension for you than the rest of us. I can’t imagine how a close call like that must make you feel—”

“Well, obviously, it does lead one to contemplate one’s own mortality,” Miranda lied. “And I have to admit that I have lost some sleep over it.”

“Really?” Poppy responded. “That could be Post-Traumatic Stress, you know. What do you think, Doctor—?”

“It’s a possibility,” Dr. Lake commented.

“Perhaps a consultation might be in order,” Poppy suggested.

“I don’t think that’s necessary.” Miranda winced at the idea.

Dr. Lake said nothing, but her silence seemed to convey...*something*.

“But what really puzzles everyone is the fact that someone like Heidi Wilde, hardly a revolutionary type by any stretch of the imagination, should do something like...well, *this*—” Poppy gestured at the screens that depicted Heidi strapping the Semtex to her body and the aftermath of the devastating blast at the TV studios. “Miranda, you knew her—at least in a professional capacity. I know this is something of a stretch, but was there ever anything about Heidi that suggested there might have been more to her than met the eye?”

“Do you mean a *dark side*?”

“Something like that, I suppose.”

“To be frank, Poppy, I’d have to say *no*,” Miranda replied. “My impression of Heidi was that what you saw was what you got, if you catch my drift. If you’d ever read any of her books, I don’t think you’d have mistaken Heidi for a deep thinker. If anything, it was more a case of *hidden shallows*, if that’s not too glib.”

“I take your point,” Poppy said. “It’s quite interesting to note, in fact, that since the bombing and the subsequent release of her suicide video, the sales of her latest novel, *All That Glitters*, have been going through the roof. Actually only your book, *Celebrity Century*, is keeping it off the number one spot on the bestseller list. How would you account for that, Miranda?”

“Are you asking me about the success of Heidi’s novel or my own book?”

“I think you know what I’m getting at, Miranda.”

“Well, it’s a cliché, I know. But the old saying *there’s no such thing as bad publicity* is demonstrably true,” Miranda elaborated smugly. “Obviously Heidi’s book was going to do well. But after what happened people are absolutely fascinated. I think what accounts for the boost in sales is simply that people who

ordinarily wouldn't have dreamt of reading one her books are looking for something—a clue—that might explain what Heidi did.”

“Have you read it?”

“Yes.”

“And what's your take on it?”

“Honestly?” A sly smile crept across Miranda's red lips. “It's just the usual kind of thing. Sex and shopping—you know what I mean. No revolutionary manifesto, I'm afraid. Of course, it's well-known that Heidi had been suffering with some mental health and addiction issues following the death of her husband...”

“You're talking about the rock singer, Harry Rimbaud, of course,” Poppy interjected. “His career pretty much fell apart in the mid-nineties and he'd been struggling to rebuild it ever since—attempting to establish a solo career, I believe.”

“That's right, Poppy,” Miranda agreed. “They met on the reality TV show, *Celebrity in Jeopardy* and were married a fortnight later following the proverbial ‘whirlwind romance’. Of course, Harry's problems continued to dog their marriage. We covered it all in *Glitz*. He was briefly institutionalized, you know. At one point he was actually diagnosed as schizophrenic. And then, of course, he died of a drugs overdose.”

“Schizophrenia?” Poppy mused. “I wonder if that might have had any bearing on Heidi's subsequent behaviour. I mean—whatever her motivation—she was clearly delusional. What about it, Dr. Lake?”

“Is madness contagious?” the psychiatrist responded.

“Uh, I'm not sure I'd put it quite that way. But something must have influenced Heidi's behaviour.”

“Of course, that's the crux of the problem,” Dr. Lake agreed. “But perhaps we're in danger of overlooking something else.”

“Really?” Poppy asked, intrigued. “And what's that?”

“The explosives,” Dr. Lake said bluntly. “Semtex, I believe. Not the sort of thing a girl picks up at Harvey Nichols. It's generally regarded as the urban guerrilla's explosive of choice. Two questions occur to me immediately. How did Heidi acquire it? And where did she learn to use it?”

“Are you suggesting she didn't act alone?”

“It’s certainly worth considering.”

“Wait a minute,” Miranda interrupted. “According to the police there is no evidence that Heidi Wilde belonged to some kind of...group. They searched all her homes and found no incriminating evidence of that kind. Even her e-mail accounts turned up nothing.”

“What would you expect them to find, Miss Black?” Dr. Lake replied. “The collected works of Frantz Fanon, Kropotkin and Trotsky, *The Anarchist Cookbook* and a fully paid-up Al-Qaeda membership? Or did you expect an autographed photo of Osama Bin Laden, perhaps? I think that’s a little naïve.”

“Really?” Miranda snorted.

“Even ignoring the incongruity of the Semtex and Heidi Wilde’s obvious expertise with explosives, one cannot overlook the fact that this was hardly what you’d call *an isolated incident*”

“You’re referring, of course, to the events at Albion Arena,” Poppy anticipated.

“Naturally.”

“And you infer a connection between what Heidi did and Damien Cain’s death?”

“The similarities are obvious. They both involved explosives and were staged as public events. In Damien’s case it was napalm—homemade apparently. A small incendiary device triggered it. Very effective.”

“You believe they were intended as some kind of demonstration?” This line of reasoning clearly appealed to Poppy.

“Well, consider Damien Cain’s death. The act of self-immolation is highly symbolic. It’s a form of martyrdom, really. At the height of the Vietnam War Buddhist monks incinerated themselves as an act of protest. And consider the posture we see here—” Dr. Lake indicated the screen displaying Damien’s carbonised remains like a scene from a horror film. “He’s adopted the lotus position, obviously. But the hand gesture is very significant too—”

“How exactly?”

“It’s known as the *mandala* gesture.” Dr. Lake interlocked her slender white fingers, imitating Damien. “It’s considered a sign of supplication. Sometimes it’s associated with an act of atonement.”

“You make it all sound very...*political*.”

“What isn’t? Especially nowadays—” Dr. Lake remarked cryptically.

“Let’s—just for the sake of argument—suppose you’re right, Doctor,” Poppy continued, warming to the subject. “Let’s take for granted that—incredible as it sounds—Heidi Wilde and Damien Cain were part of some kind of...let’s call it a *sect*. How would you characterize a group like that? What should we be calling it?”

“A celebrity death cult.”