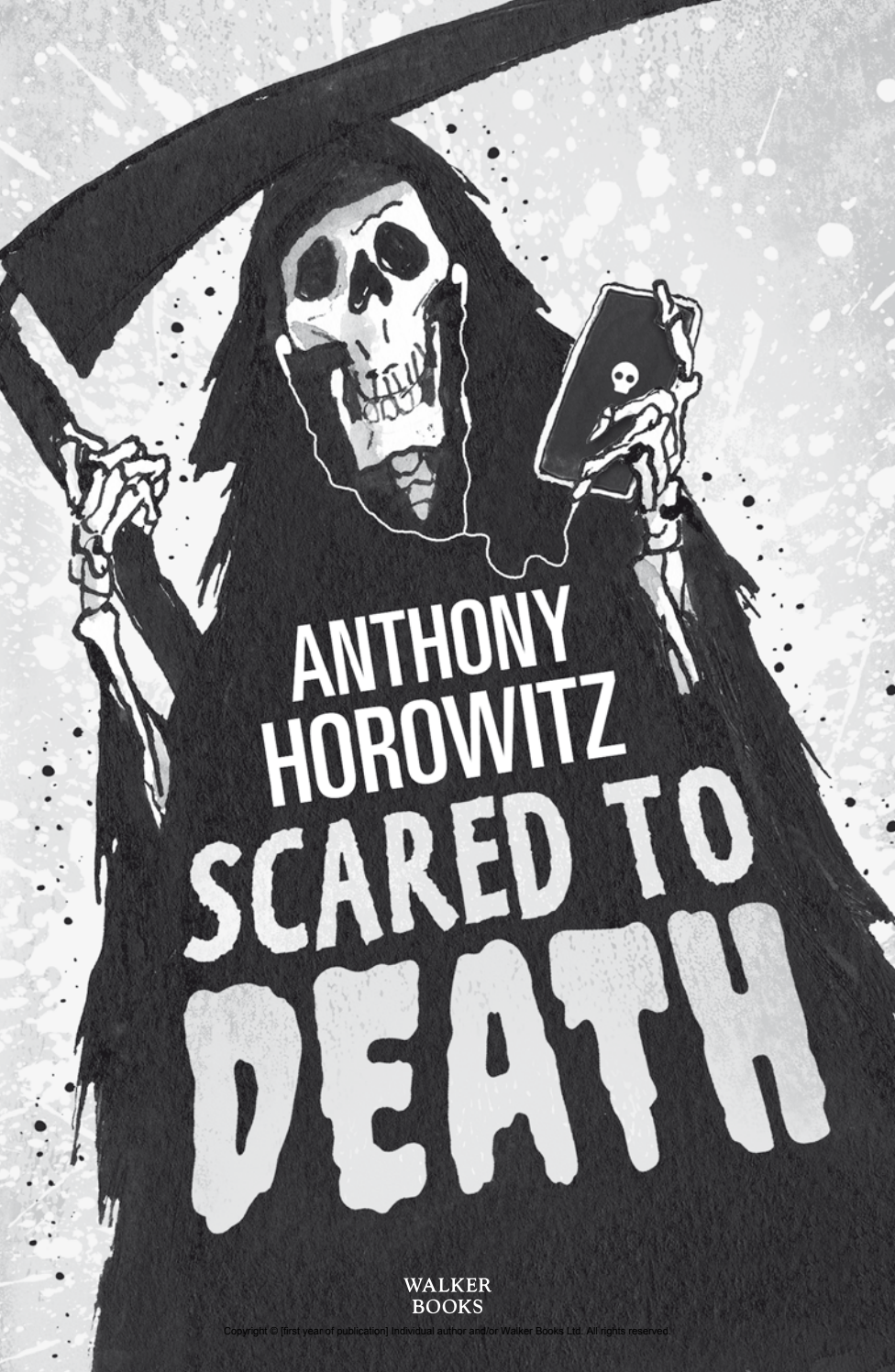


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For Cassian

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A note from the publisher of this book.

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BET YOUR LIFE

IT WAS THE LAST NIGHT, THE grand finale of the quiz show that for three months had, in the words of the *TV Times*, "gripped the hearts, the minds … and the throats of the nation". Thirty million people had watched the semi-final. Even the royal wedding had attracted fewer spectators.

"There has never been a programme like *Bet Your Life*," the *TV Times* had continued. "Forget *X Factor*. Forget *Love Island*. This is reality TV taken to new limits, smashing through the barriers, thrilling audiences in a way that they have never been thrilled before."

It was filmed at Pinewood Studios near Iver, north west of London, and security guards had taken up their positions twenty-four hours before, hundreds of them armed with

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sunglasses, walkie-talkies and canisters of pepper spray to keep back any unruly fans. The programme would be seen in thirty-seven countries. But the studio was only big enough to hold a live audience of four hundred people, and competition for tickets had been intense. One ticket had changed hands on eBay for ten thousand pounds. A multimillionaire in Orpington had offered double that sum in an advertisement he had placed in the national press.

As the sun began to set and seven o'clock approached, helicopters buzzed over the studios, huge spotlights were wheeled into place, the world's press corps made final checks in their mobile broadcasting units, and two thousand people gathered around the giant plasma screen that had been erected outside to allow them to watch the show live.

Inside the studio, in his make-up room, Danny Webster was feeling surprisingly calm. At sixteen, he was the youngest ever contestant but, even so, one or two of the bookies had made him favourite to win. He was sitting in front of a mirror, looking at his own face, as a make-up girl dusted his forehead with powder to stop the sweat showing in the hot lights.

With his long brown hair, blue eyes and still very boyish face, Danny was unusually good-looking and all the newspapers agreed that, if he won, he would certainly have a career in TV, either as an actor or as a presenter. But that, of course, was only the secondary prize.

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Danny tried not to think of the black attaché case containing ten million pounds worth of diamonds that would be presented to the winner in less than two hours' time, by far the biggest prize in television history.

Danny had always been good at general knowledge. In fact it was rather more than that. From the earliest age he had demonstrated a photographic memory. He had been able to speak fluently before he was two. He had won a scholarship to a private school and had sailed through all his exams. Although he had never been strong at creative thinking or writing, subjects that essentially required a grasp of facts – biology, physics, geography, maths – had come easily to him and he had gained effortless As throughout.

It had been his father's idea to enter him into *Bet Your Life* when, for the first time, the entry age had been lowered to sixteen. Gary Webster had been a postman until a back injury put him out of work. Since then, he had lived on benefits, punctuating the day with visits to the pub and the betting shop. His wife, Nora, worked as an office cleaner but this only brought in a small amount of money. The three of them lived in a cramped, unattractive flat in a high-rise block in Elephant and Castle. A prize of ten million pounds would completely transform their lives.

Gary had used a mixture of threats and promises to

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persuade his son to put his name forward. The trouble was that Danny was quite shy and didn't like the idea of seeing his name and photograph splashed across the world's newspapers. And there had, of course, been the fear of losing. But in the end, he had agreed. He was a quiet, rather friendless boy. Perhaps his astonishing brain-power, his instant recall, had put other kids off. He didn't like his school very much and, like his parents, dreamed of a new life. His father spoke of a house on the Isle of Wight. The money would make that possible … and more. For his part, Danny wanted to go to Cambridge (*Britain's second oldest university, founded in 1209*). He dreamed of becoming a librarian, perhaps in the British Library (*designer: Sir Colin St John Wilson*) itself. He would read – and remember – a million books. And maybe one day he would compile an encyclopædia, a compendium of everything he had learned.

How many people stood between him and his ambition?

To begin with, there had been over thirty of them. Now just four remained. There was a copy of the *TV Times* lying in front of the mirror and Danny flicked it open. "Know your enemy", as the ancient Chinese warrior Sun Tzu, had written in his great book, *The Art of War* (*Sixth century BC*). And there they were. Each one of them had two full pages with a colour picture on one side and background details on the other.

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RICHARD VERDI (44)

He was the man Danny most feared. Round-headed and bald apart from a narrow strip of black hair around his ears, always wearing black-rimmed spectacles, he was a professor of history at Edinburgh University. He was very serious, completely focused. Nothing ever rattled him. Most of the bookies had made him the favourite to win.

RAIFE PLANT (30)

The newspapers loved Raife. He was a thin, curly-haired man with a roguish, handsome face despite his broken nose and crooked teeth. Raife had been sentenced to twelve years in jail for armed robbery. The trouble for Danny was that he had spent that time taking an Open University degree and reading hundreds of books. He was a huge fount of knowledge and – with his unconventional background – he was definitely the housewives' choice.

MARY ROBINSON (49)

The oldest contestant, and the only female, was a computer programmer from Woking. Her photograph showed a slim, unsmiling woman with dark hair swept back and very simple gold earrings. Nobody was quite sure how Mary had amassed her astonishing general knowledge. She gave away very little about herself – although she had let it be known that if she

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won, she would give all her money to charity. She particularly wanted to help look after donkeys in Spain.

BEN OSMOND (27)

Ben was the only contestant Danny actually liked. They had met during the audition process and had struck up a sort of friendship. Ben's grandparents had come from the West Indies and from them he had inherited a sunny, easygoing manner, treating the quiz – like the rest of life – as a bit of a joke. He had written poetry, climbed mountains, studied in a Tibetan monastery and campaigned for animal rights. Now he was doing this. He seemed to be enjoying it.

Just four faces left. Five, including his. Danny thought about all the contestants he had met along the way. There had been Gerald, the fat, jolly headmaster from Brighton. Abdul, the taxi-driver who had been so certain he would win. Clive in his wheelchair, hoping to claw something back in a life that had been wrecked by a car accident. Susan, who had complained when she had been asked to share a make-up room. So many different people. But they had all gone now.

And in a couple of hours, there would only be one left.

There was a knock at the door and the soundman came in with the little microphone that he would clip to the collar of Danny's shirt. Danny had chosen jeans and a simple,

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open-necked shirt for the final, although he had been told that the other contestants had been offered thousands of pounds to wear – and promote – designer labels. He had briefly considered doing this himself, but he felt comfortable in his own clothes and that was important. Staying relaxed was half the battle.

"How are you feeling?" The soundman was cheerful as he slid the microphone into place. Theoretically, the technicians weren't meant to talk to the contestants, but Ed didn't seem to care about the rules.

"I'm OK."

"Good luck. I'll be rooting for you."

The make-up girl left with the soundman, and for the next twenty minutes Danny was on his own. He knew he was nervous. He could feel his heart beating. It was hard to swallow. There was a tingling feeling in the palms of his hands. He forced himself to empty his mind and stay calm. A certain amount of nervousness was perfectly understandable. He just had to control it, that was all. He couldn't let it knock him off course.

At last the floor manager arrived. She was a big, smiling woman in her twenties, always carrying a clipboard and with a large microphone curving round her neck. "We're ready for you!" she said cheerfully.

Danny stood up.

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He hadn't let his parents wait with him. They were even more nervous than he was and he hadn't wanted to be distracted. He knew that he wouldn't see the other contestants as he made his way to the set. The studio had been specially designed that way. Just for a moment he felt very alone, following the woman down a tatty, cream-painted corridor with neon lights flickering overhead. It was more like a hospital than a television studio, he thought. Perhaps that was deliberate too.

But then they turned a corner and went through a set of double doors. On the other side, everything was dark; Danny could just make out the great bulk of a wall, made of wood, hammered together almost haphazardly. There were cables trailing everywhere, fastened to the floor with lengths of duct tape. He knew he was looking at the back of the set. Through the cracks, he could make out the studio lights.

The floor manager rested a hand on his arm. "Ten seconds," she said.

The familiar music began. Danny had heard it a hundred times, playing at the start of the show. Although, of course, it had never come up as a question, he knew that it was an adaptation of a piece by Wagner (*the German composer born in Leipzig on 22 May 1813, died 1883*). The music stopped. There was a round of applause. Danny felt a hand tap him on the shoulder and he moved forward, into the light.

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And there was the set of *Bet Your Life*, with five metal lecterns arranged in a semicircle around a central control panel – looking like something out of a spaceship – where the question master would take his place. The lecterns could have been designed for a politician or a lecturer to stand behind when giving a speech. Each one stood on a low, square platform and came up to the contestant's waist, with a television monitor built into the surface. Every question was written out as well as spoken, and the screens would also be used if there was a picture round. The lecterns were black, and polished so that they reflected the studio audience sitting in long rows, facing them. They looked somehow dangerous – but of course that was the whole idea.

On one side of the stage, there was a giant television screen. On the other, a strangely old-fashioned clock-face would count down from fifteen to zero. Inside the zero was a cartoon of a human skull.

Danny had already been told which platform was his. The numbers had been drawn completely at random so that nobody would have a psychological advantage. Raife Plant was number one. Richard Verdi was two. Mary Robinson was three. Ben Osmond was four. Danny was on the edge at number five. He was glad to have Ben next to him. He had studied recordings of the other contestants, trying to work out as much as he could about them, the way they played

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the game. The professor and the computer programmer had been the most worrying. He had been struck by how grim and professional they were. And Raife Plant, with his easy smile, seemed somehow untrustworthy. He would feel less intimidated next to Ben, who was, after all, the closest in age to himself.

All five of them were appearing at the same time, walking in through separate entrances, dazzled by the studio lights which formed a barrier between them and the audience. Danny could just make out the security guards in their silver *BYL* anoraks. There were half a dozen of them, huge men, standing with their backs to the stage, their arms crossed, their job being to make sure that nobody came close. The Wagner was playing, pounding out of a bank of speakers. Danny could sense the tension in the air. He could smell it. The heat of the lights was unforgiving, sucking out all the emotions of the crowd and keeping them trapped in the closed, windowless place.

He reached his platform and climbed onto it. At once, one of the floor managers – a young man in a black T-shirt – came forward and shackled his ankles into place. Now he couldn't move. He would be forced to stand behind the lectern until the game, or his part in it, was over. In the beginning, this had worried him. Now he was used to it. He moved one foot and felt the steel chain jangle against his shin. The other four

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contestants had been locked in place, just like him. He didn't look at them. He didn't want to meet their eyes.

The music changed. A circular trapdoor had slid open in the middle of the stage and clouds of white smoke were pouring out. As the audience increased their applause, many of them whistling and cheering, a figure rose up from below, carried by a hydraulic lift. He was dressed, as always, in a black suit with a black shirt and a silver tie. His black hair was slicked back and his black beard neatly trimmed. Against all this, his skin was unnaturally pale. His teeth, a perfect white, seemed almost electric. Wayne Howard, the compère of the show, had arrived.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," he began when the applause had finally died down. "And welcome to the final episode of the most dramatic, the most exciting quiz show on TV. The five people who stand before you tonight have completed an epic journey but only one of them can walk away with the biggest prize ever offered by any television programme anywhere in the world. And just to remind you what it is, let's take a look. Ten million pounds in diamonds. Bridget … bring them on!"

A blonde-haired woman, dressed only in a silver bikini with thigh-high boots, walked out of the wings carrying a simple, leather attaché case. She stopped next to Wayne and opened it. As one, the audience rose to their feet. The

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diamonds seemed to catch the light and magnify it a thousand times so it was as if Bridget had opened a portal into another world. There they were. A scattering of stones, each one a different cut and a different size, glittering brilliantly on a cushion of dark velvet.

"These stones can be carried anywhere in the world," Wayne explained. He had said the same many times before. "They can be spent anywhere. And tonight, one person is going to walk out of this studio carrying them. Will it be Mary, who hopes very soon to look after donkeys? Will it be Richard, whose career as a professor could soon be history? Will it be our poet, Ben? Or how about Raife? We know he's gone straight – but is he going straight to the diamonds? And finally there's Danny, our youngest contestant, just starting in sixth form. Could he be the one? It's time to find out on … *Bet Your Life*!"

More music. Searchlights sweeping back and forth. Wayne Howard took his place behind the central control desk, facing the contestants. The quiz began.

The format was actually very simple. Each round was a series of questions on a specialist subject, randomly generated by a computer and fed to Wayne. Each contestant had fifteen seconds to answer and if they didn't know, they had three lifelines. One of these was a "pass", which meant that their question was passed on to the person standing next to

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them. The next was a "second chance", which they could play once the question had been asked. It meant that if they guessed incorrectly, they could try again. The last was called "toss of the coin": they would be fed two possible answers and would have to choose between them.

Wayne reached out and pressed a button on the console. The single word SCIENCE came up on a giant screen above the stage. Danny smiled to himself. Science was one of his favourite subjects. It was a promising start.

"And the first question is for Raife," the quizmaster announced. "What chemical with the symbol NaCl is found in the sea and in the kitchen?"

Danny knew the answer to that one. It was sodium chloride – or common salt. Unfortunately, Raife knew it too. But that was hardly surprising. All the questions in the first round were deliberately simple. They would become harder as the evening went on. Sure enough, all five contestants answered their questions on science without any trouble.

The next round – ENTERTAINMENT – passed without much incident but in the one after – POLITICS – there was a moment of drama when Ben had to use his "pass". He had been asked who became President of the USA in 1969, and for some reason he couldn't think. The same question went to Danny, who suddenly found himself sweating as the hand of the clock began its journey. He had just fifteen seconds to find

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the answer, the time pressure making it all the more difficult. Thinking on his feet, he decided to play his "second chance" lifeline. And it was just as well he did. His first attempt – John F. Kennedy – was wrong but that didn't mean he was eliminated. With four seconds left, he remembered the correct answer. Richard Nixon. His mouth was so dry by then that he had to force himself to spit out the words.

Richard Verdi had a bad round with FOOD AND DRINK, using his own "second chance" to answer the question "What alcohol is used as the basis of a *mojito*?" The answer, which he got right the second time, was white rum. He also had to use a "pass" in the next round, WILD ANIMALS, so that after fifteen minutes (and the first advertising break) he was looking distinctly rattled. Danny noticed that so far the computer programmer hadn't so much as hesitated. She could have been reading the answers straight out of a book.

The first upset came in the next round – FAMOUS FILMS. Raife Plant was asked the question "Who had the title role in the 1931 film of *Frankenstein*?" and – with a trademark wink and a grin – he answered immediately, "Boris Karloff".

There was a long pause. Then Wayne Howard shook his head – and immediately the audience broke into a mixture of gasps and whispers. It was the wrong answer! Danny realized at once what had happened. This was one of the traps that the quiz programme was famous for. It was absolutely

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true that Boris Karloff had starred in the film as the monster created by a mad inventor. But the film had been named after the inventor, Dr Henry Frankenstein, not after the monster, which actually had no name at all. And the inventor had been played by a much less well-known actor called Colin Clive.

"I'm sorry, Raife," Wayne said. He reached down. Behind him, the audience began a chant, as they always did. "Go, go, go, go, go…" Wayne brought out a sub-machine-gun. It glimmered in the spotlights as he checked that it was loaded. Then he rested it against his shoulder and fired a hundred rounds into the unfortunate contestant.

Danny could only watch in silent horror. Raife, chained to his lectern, seemed to be trying to leave the stage in six directions at once. He was almost torn in half by the bullets. The noise of gunfire was horrendous. The stench of gunpowder filled Danny's nostrils and throat.

At last it was over. The audience shouted and clapped its approval. Raife slumped forward, his hands hanging down. Silently, his lectern was lowered out of sight, carrying the corpse with it.

So now there were just four left.

Forcing himself to turn his attention away from the square opening in the stage – Raife Plant's grave – Danny searched for his mother and father in the audience. They had been

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given VIP places in the front row. Gary Webster was trying to smile, feebly waving a hand at his son. It looked as if his mother had been sick. She was slumped in the seat next to her husband. Her face was pale.

Richard Verdi answered the next question correctly. So did Mary Robinson. When it came to Ben Osmond's turn, he seemed rattled after what had just happened. "What was the name of the character played by Sir Ian McKellen in the first *X-Men* film?" Ben hesitated – and came up with the right answer, Magneto, with only seconds left.

Danny liked films but he was forced to use his precious "pass" when his turn came. "Who produced the original version of *The Italian Job*?" In the back of his mind he knew – somehow – that the remake had been directed by someone called F Gary Gray. But the original had been shot in 1969, almost thirty years before Danny was born. The question went to Richard Verdi.

And with a thrill, Danny realized that the history professor also wasn't sure. He could, of course, have passed the question on to Mary Robinson but he had already used his "pass" in the WILD ANIMALS round. Would he use his last lifeline, "toss of the coin"? Danny glanced his way and saw the beads of sweat on the bald man's head.

"I need an answer," Wayne Howard said.

The clock was ticking. Five … four … three … two…

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