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THE THREAT LEVEL REMAINS SEVERE.

The words flashed in the corner of Grace's eye as she padded through the carpeted hush of the corridor. The letters pulsed, white on green, from the small television screen above the portrait of Lloyd George. Small televisions were attached high up on the wall every few metres all the way down the corridor. They were known as annunciators, announcing as they did the future business of the House and what was happening at that moment in the Chamber. Occasionally they announced the estimated terror threat to the House. In a blink the screen flicked back to THE FINANCIAL SERVICES BILL – MR THORPE (WYRE FOREST) 15.33 15.45, as if the threat level had been a subliminal message. The Honourable Member for Wyre Forest had been speaking for exactly twelve minutes. Grace pressed the brass lift button and wondered whether to take the stairs for the sake of her thighs but, before she had decided, the lift slid into view with a gentle creak and she slipped inside. The threat message had been flashing up for months. It always disturbed her although it was hard to believe that any threat could be severe enough to pierce the layers of protection here: the solid oak lift and the iron struts of its shaft, the labyrinth of warm corridors, the huge stone carapace of the Palace, guarded by policemen with machine guns. Somewhere in the world, faceless conspirators were plotting against Britain, against the symbols of British power. Somewhere in the world, faceless state servants were hunched at banks of computers, decoding the electronic whispers of these plots and sending them to police officers in Scotland Yard, who

were sending them to managers in the House of Commons, who were sending them to the people who typed the messages into the annunciators, messages which reminded Grace every so often that someone who knew nothing about her wanted to kill her.

‘Cup of tea?’ asked Rosemary, as she sat back down at her desk.

‘Yes, please. Lovely.’ Grace passed Rosemary a tannin-stained mug with a teabag inside and immediately forgot the death threat.

While Rosemary was in the kitchen, Hugo shuffled through and stood wringing his hands and peering at the neon-pink stress ball balanced on Grace’s disk drive.

‘New committee specialist starting on Monday,’ he said, without looking at Grace. ‘On secondment from the Treasury.’

‘Oh yes. I’d forgotten. Girl or boy?’

‘Boy. Well, man ... probably.’

‘You’re not sure?’

‘No, no, of course I’m sure – I interviewed him the other week. Everyone looks so young these days though.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Brett Beamish.’ Hugo’s mouth, buried in his beard, twisted a little in amusement.

‘Brett Beamish.’

‘As in “Come to my arms, my beamish boy”’, said Hugo.

‘What’s he like?’ Grace hoped he was good-looking.

‘Australian, I think. Some sort of Antipodean anyway.’ There was a sniff of disapproval in Hugo’s voice. Grace suspected that for him new countries were like new money: irredeemably vulgar.

‘Australian ... yeah, sounds like an Australian name ... Is he very brash and loud?’

‘I don’t know. He didn’t strike me as particularly brash and loud at the interview. However, I would say he’s rather ...’ Hugo

picked up and squeezed the stress ball as if testing its ripeness.
'What is this?'

'It's a stress ball.'

'A "stress ball". Are you stressed?'

'I was given it on that training day last week.'

Hugo placed the stress ball suspiciously back on the disk drive.

'So, the new specialist: you would say he's rather ...?'

'I would say he's rather ...' Hugo looked at the ceiling. '... rather pleased with himself.'

'Who's pleased with himself?' Rosemary pushed through the door backwards with her large bottom, a cup of tea sloshing in each hand. 'Sorry, Hugo, I would have made you one ...'

'Don't worry, I was on my way down to the Terrace ...'

'We were talking about the new committee specialist ...'

'Oh yes. Girl or boy?'

'A young man.'

'Australian,' said Grace. 'His name's Brett Beamish.'

'Brett Beamish. That's a funny name,' said Rosemary, without laughing. 'Why's he pleased with himself?'

'I suppose he's had rather a meteoric rise ... so I hear ...' said Hugo. 'He's been working at the Treasury, in some sort of advisory role, but he's looking for an "opportunity to broaden his perspective", he's ready for a "fresh challenge".' Hugo's mouth twisted again. 'I do wonder whether he'll find this place rather "slow lane".' He emphasised these two words as if they were a daring piece of modern slang. Big Ben's sixteen-note refrain rang out as the bell worked itself up to strike the hour. Hugo listened to the four bongs with a rapt expression and shuffled off in the direction of the Terrace Cafeteria. He always walked as if he was wearing slippers even when he wasn't.

Grace and Rosemary settled into the downturn towards home time. The hours between four and six were painfully long, even

more so than the other hours in the day, which were long enough. Time taunted them with the imminent prospect of freedom by slowing to the pace of dripping treacle. It was January. The light was already fading, the sky growing purplish over the yellow turrets of the Palace. Their office overlooked other offices across a wide inner courtyard, where other people also sat at desks in front of computers, bathed in epileptic fluorescence. It was cosy peering into warm, bright offices from the vantage of another warm, bright office. They were all so protected, not only by the stone and the guns but by the sheer weight of tradition, the promise of their comfortable pensions and the knowledge that they could work here until their retirement and would never lose their jobs unless they did something truly terrible.

Rosemary opened her biscuit tin and offered Grace a chocolate chip cookie. They indulged in sniggering conjecture about Brett Beamish: 'I wonder if he'll be like Russell Crowe.' 'God, it'd be great if he is.' 'Who's that other Australian actor?' 'I don't know ... Mel Gibson?' 'No. Is Mel Gibson Australian? I thought he was American.' 'Guy Pearce?' 'Who?' 'You know: Mike in *Neighbours*, and then he was in *Priscilla* ...' 'No idea who you're talking about.' 'Nicole Kidman?' 'Don't be silly ... Man! ... I'm talking about a man!' 'Jason Donovan?' 'No!' 'I'll Google him.' 'Jason Donovan?' 'No, Brett Beamish ...'

All that came up was the HM Treasury website, his email address there and his name attached to various reports: *Productivity in the UK 3: Progress and New Evidence*; *Debt and Reserves Management Report*; *Delivering Sustainable Development: HM Treasury Action Plan*.

'I suppose we'll find out what he looks like on Monday,' said Rosemary. 'Non-sitting Friday tomorrow. I think it's you, isn't it?' She and Grace took it in turns to have non-sitting Fridays off.

'I think it is,' said Grace, consulting the chart pinned to the

noticeboard, though she knew full well it was her turn because she had been longing for Friday ever since Monday. She was desperate to be out of the place, to slough off the boredom and tension that clung to her. Full relaxation was impossible at work despite the easiness of her job because she couldn't totally slob out. Although, actually, Gail and Julia, her flatmates, were so picky it was hard to fully relax at home either.

At ten to six, after she had filed some papers, logged some memoranda on an Excel spreadsheet and was about to shut down her computer, Hugo shuffled in and asked if he could dictate a letter. He could type adequately with two fingers himself but she suspected it made him feel grand to pace back and forth beside her desk declaiming sonorously.

'Dear Sir Michael – comma – The Committee – capital C – is very grateful for your letter of 9th of January – comma – put in the little “t-h”, Grace, and the “of”; we're not American yet – regarding the Committee's Report on The International Monetary Fund: A Blueprint for Parliamentary Accountability – capital C, capital R ...'

Rosemary gathered her belongings and was out of the door before Big Ben had finished striking six. It was twenty past by the time Grace had worked out how to print Sir Michael's address onto an envelope and printed off the letter three times – first on the wrong side of the headed paper, the second because Hugo noticed she had put the previous year on the day's date. She threw the third printout onto Hugo's desk and rushed out of the office. At the exit from the Palace to Westminster Station she couldn't find her security pass and had to upend the contents of her handbag onto the floor under the impassive gaze of a policeman. At the Tube's ticket barrier she had to repeat the process to find her Oyster card. Passers-by peered at the items strewn around her crouched form – the book, the phone, the lipstick, the spare

tampon, the screwed-up balls of chewing gum in silver foil, the unused condom with the worn silver wrapping – and tutted at her obstruction to the free flow of traffic. Had it been anyone else she would have done the same.