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Opening extract from

The Fall

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A Ford Focus pulled up amidst a line of deserted parking bays as a powerful wave crashed against the adjacent sea wall. The spray turned into an ankle-deep wash that swirled across the wooden promenade, while a line of partially submerged huts fought for survival on the pebble beach below.

The man behind the wheel was fifty years old, with a beer gut and a bloodshot face that gave him a look of permanent sunburn. His name was George Savage.

'Some storm,' George said, raising his voice to make himself heard above the rain pelting the metal roof. 'Haven't seen one go off like this in donkey's years.'

The young woman in the passenger seat wore the same uniform as her driver: black trousers and a white shirt with epaulettes bearing the words *HM Customs & Excise*. She pulled a hefty torch out of the glove box before reaching between the seats and grabbing a waterproof jacket out of the back.

'Are you coming with?' she asked, though she already knew the answer.

'No point both of us getting drenched, is there, Vet?' George grinned.

Yvette Clark hated her partner. George was old, lazy, smelled like a night in the pub and took particular delight in never using her proper name. She was Vet, Vetty, Vetto, Vetster, sweetheart and even occasionally cupcake, but if the word Yvette had ever passed George Savage's lips, she hadn't been there to hear it. She could have happily kneed George in the balls, if it wasn't for the dent it would put in her three-month career as a customs officer.

The wind practically tore the waterproof coat from Yvette's hands as she stepped out of the passenger door into the darkness. By the time it was zipped up, her shirt was soaked through and she had a horrible vision of George leering at the black bra that would show through when she got back in the car.

Yvette felt sorry for herself as she stepped up to the sea wall. She'd joined customs straight from university, expecting to spend her days uncovering serious fraud and hunting down drug dealers. The recruitment brochure hadn't mentioned ten-hour shifts patrolling the coastline with an obnoxious pig for company.

And just as it seemed life could get no worse, the wave hit. Bigger than its predecessors, its tip crashed over the wall and kept on coming. Yvette turned to run, but was outmatched and quickly found herself wading in icy water. She lost her footing on the slippery promenade, and grazed the hand she put out to save herself as the receding tide swelled over her shoulders and all but covered her head.

As Yvette gasped from the cold and staggered back to her feet, George triumphantly blasted the horn. It was 1 a.m., but the promenade was illuminated with strings of bulbs and Yvette got a good view of her colleague roaring with laughter from his cocoon behind the flapping windscreen wipers. She wanted to steam over and tell George exactly what she thought of him, but knew that a tantrum would only enrich the story he'd tell everyone back at the office the minute he got the chance.

Close to tears and with salt water burning her eyes, Yvette stumbled back to the wall and slid the powerful torch from her pocket. Anticipating another blast of water, she gripped the railing atop the wall before pointing the beam of light out to sea.

Much to Yvette's surprise, she spotted the very thing she'd come looking for.

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The narrow strip of water between Britain and France is the busiest waterway in the world. At any given moment there are over a thousand ships in the English Channel, ranging from 100,000-tonne supertankers down to one-man sailing boats. With so much traffic, accidents are frequent – and when one of the big boats hits one of the little ones, the little boat always comes off worst.

Three hours before George and Yvette pulled up on the seafront near Brighton, a 15,000-tonne catamaran with two hundred and thirty passengers onboard radioed the coastguard after colliding with a small motor launch. The launch appeared to be damaged and a lifeboat and a French naval helicopter were sent on a rescue mission. Despite the

fact that the launch was listing badly and taking on water, the captain refused help and tried making a run for it. He clearly had something to hide.

The helicopter tracked the crippled boat for ninety minutes as it headed for the safety of international waters, but eventually had to fly back to base for fuel. Under normal circumstances, a naval patrol would have intercepted the launch by this time, stopping it by force if necessary. But the awful conditions had left other boats in distress and resources were stretched to the limit.

As a last resort, the coastguard was asked to track the stricken launch on radar. But tracking a small boat through a stormy sea is close to impossible and the coastguard put out a radio request asking other ships to report sightings of a crippled white launch.

Just after midnight, the captain of a container ship radioed in to say that she'd passed a vessel matching the description. It appeared dangerously close to sinking and was making a desperate attempt to reach the English coast.

With nobody available to intercept the boat at sea, police, customs and coastguard units along a ten-mile stretch of coast were told to head for the seafront and search for the stricken motor launch.

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George Savage sounded put out as his dripping colleague leaned inside the car. 'Bloody hell, are you sure?'

Typical George, Yvette thought. He was clearly annoyed that his peaceful night had been spoiled.

'There's a boat tied up at the end of the jetty. It fits the descriptions and it's listing badly.'

'Could just be moored there,' George said thoughtfully, as he dragged a finger over his stubble.

'There are lights on inside, George. I think it's the one . . . I mean, you'd *have* to be desperate to moor a boat outside of a harbour in this weather.'

'We'd better wait here. I'll call for backup.'

This pushed Yvette over the edge. 'For all we know they've only just tied up,' she screamed. 'The bad guys could be out there *right now*.'

'Smugglers carry guns, sugar plum. We don't know what we're up against.'

Sugar plum . . .

'I'm sick of you!' Yvette yelled, as she banged her hand on the top of the car. 'I tell you what, George; you sit on that giant arse of yours and wait for backup. I'm going to walk up there and try doing my job.'

'Temper, temper.' George grinned, as he reached for the radio mic. 'I've been at this game a lot longer than you . . .'

Yvette knew she'd only get madder if she stood around listening to another lecture on the benefits of thirty years' experience. She flicked the torch on and set off briskly down the promenade towards the steel jetty.

The rusting structure went fifty metres out to sea and was less than three paces wide, except at the head where it widened out to enable a ship to come alongside. The jetty had been built decades earlier to accommodate pleasure cruisers, but nowadays it only served anglers and a few brave swimmers who used it as a diving platform.

Despite the foul weather and the sheets of water

crashing over the jetty, the lampposts that ran its length were working and Yvette had a decent view of the boat. It appeared to have been hurriedly lashed to a single mooring point.

The crew had scarpered without even turning off the lights, leaving the raging water free to slowly wreck the launch. The windows along one side were shattered and the rear jutted out of the water, as if the bow was flooded. Only the length of rope lashing it to the jetty kept it above the water.

Part of Yvette wanted to encounter the crew and make her first arrest, but her sensible side was relieved to find the baddies long gone.

And then she heard a scream.

Yvette thought she was imagining it, but the noise had coincided with a particularly fierce wave engulfing the head of the jetty. She heard the high-pitched noise again when the water cleared away.

'Hello,' she yelled. 'Is anybody out there?'

A gust of wind ruined her chance of hearing any response, but her shout had apparently reached an audience. Yvette sighted a skinny figure with her arms wrapped around a lamppost. It looked like a child, no more than twelve years old.

'Holy Father,' Yvette said to herself, panicking as she fumbled for her radio. 'George, are you out there? There's a young girl at the end of the jetty. She's holding on to the railings for dear life, too scared to move.'

'I'm coming down,' George shouted. Even he couldn't ignore a stricken child.

But Yvette couldn't imagine her partner being of much help. 'What about our backup?' she asked.

'Negative,' George said. 'At least, don't hold your breath. There's tiles coming off houses, trees down in the road and the nearest cop car is dealing with a major accident on the A27: articulated lorry turned over by the gale. Serious injuries.'

'Roger that,' Yvette said. 'I'll have to go get the kid myself.'

'Keep your head on your shoulders and wait till I get there,' George said. 'That's a *direct* order.'

But despite thirty years in the service of Her Majesty, George had never been promoted and had no authority over his partner.

Yvette was drenched and knew she ought to be shivering, but the tension made her face burn. She wrung her hands as she watched the raging tide, trying to pick a moment to run on to the jetty. She imagined that it might be like the video games she played with her young nephew, hoping for some magical pattern that would allow her to run along the jetty, grab the child and escape unscathed.

But there were no breaks. All Yvette could do was set off quickly and grab the handrail when the waves tried to knock her off. Figuring that bare feet were better than her flat-soled shoes, she slipped them off along with her socks and raincoat. She was already soaked and the waterproof fabric would drag as it billowed in the wind.

'Hold on there, sweetheart,' Yvette shouted, as the wind caught the abandoned coat and whipped it into the air. 'I'm coming to get you.'

She took a deep breath and considered a prayer, but George was coming towards her in the Focus. She didn't want him to stop her, so she settled for a quick kiss of the gold cross around her neck.

When the swirling tide dipped, Yvette vaulted the three steps at the front of the jetty, grasped the metal railing and began to run. The first wave to hit barely broke over the wooden decking, but the fierce wind gave it impressive force and Yvette had to curl her toes into the gap between planks to stop her legs being washed away.

The next wave was huge and swept across the jetty from the opposite direction, pressing her back against the metal railings as the surging water forced its way up her nostrils. She hacked and spat as a break in the wave allowed her to dash another thirty metres, almost making it to the head of the jetty before the next blast.

When the water cleared, the stricken boat was less than five metres away and the child was in clear view. It was a girl, with long blonde hair. She wore leather boots, leggings and a soggy polo neck. Although the girl had been too petrified to let go of the post and make a dash towards the shore, she'd managed to protect herself by wedging her leg into a gap between the post and a rubbish bin.

'Are you OK?' Yvette shouted.

The girl shook her head and said something in a language Yvette couldn't understand. The girl's pale skin and cheap but warm clothing suggested that she hailed from Eastern Europe.

Yvette realised that the runaway boat had been smuggling illegal immigrants. The terrified girl must have become

separated from her companions as they escaped along the jetty, and they'd either thought she'd been washed out to sea or not cared enough to go back and rescue her.

Yvette's next move was the hardest: the head of the jetty was designed for boats to dock and had no handrail. She'd have to wait for a break in the waves and then dash to the girl, grab her and run back. If she timed it wrong, she'd be swept away to certain death: either drowned or brutally smashed against the legs of the jetty or the sea wall.

The sea looked black and the erratic gusts made it hard to time the waves. Yvette tried giving the youngster a reassuring smile, but as she crouched down holding on to the last section of railing, her heart banged like it was trying to hack its way through her chest wall.

She dipped her head as a massive wave reared up. The metal structure made a groan like whale song, then shuddered as the launch strained at its mooring post. Its plastic hull thudded into the side of the jetty.

'Here I come,' Yvette shouted.

It took less than three seconds to reach the girl and wrap an arm around her waist. The youngster's teeth chattered and her skinny body felt eerily cold. Yvette realised that the girl was in the early stages of hypothermia and would be unable to support her own weight.

As Yvette twisted the girl's leg out of the gap, she saw a colossal wave break over the end of the jetty, almost at head height. The water knocked her on to her back, but she managed to keep one arm around the girl.

Yvette felt pure terror as the water lifted her body off the

wooden decking and shoved it towards the edge. She heard the hull of the boat slam again, then something heavy hit the decking directly in front of her.

'Grab hold,' George shouted.

Yvette reached out for the object, which she now realised was a tethered life preserver. George had one leg wrapped around the railings and the nylon rope coiled around his chunky wrists. He struggled to hold on as the wave tried to push the two females over the edge.

Yvette and the girl both screamed, coming up for air as the last of the wave drained between the wooden planks. Still clutching the girl, Yvette rolled on to her chest and was horrified to see how close she'd come to going over the side.

She rushed towards George and the relative safety of the railings.

'I told you to wait,' George shouted furiously, before they all ducked down, grabbing the railing as a modest wave washed over the deck.

'I didn't want you to stop me,' Yvette said, close to tears and coming to the awkward realisation that she now owed her life to a man she detested. Maybe she'd never like George, with his sexist jabs and nicotine-stained fingernails, but he'd proved himself to be a better man than she'd realised.

As more water rushed over them, Yvette huddled herself around the girl and felt oddly reassured by the fat hand pressing against her shoulder. The nylon cord had sliced George's wrists and blood streamed along his fingers.

When the last of the water had drained away, Yvette

looked through the railings and saw that the sea around the jetty had taken on an eerie calm.

'Lull before the storm,' George said hurriedly. 'Spot of high pressure, but the big buggers will come back in a minute.'

The wind howled against the structure of the jetty as the break in the waves gave them a clear run back to shore.