

Rooke: The First Witness

A DCI Rooke Prequel Story
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First published in 2026 by Alchiba Press

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This story takes place before the events of the first
DCI Rooke novel

ROOKE

The First Witness

Rain had been falling over the Tyne for hours, a steady, patient drizzle that turned the dockside concrete slick and black beneath the faded lamplights. The industrial docks were easy to ignore. CCTV cameras had long since failed, and the warehouses stood hollow where the river trade had once thrived. It was a quiet shift for PC Davies as he patrolled the dockside roads and estates. At first the body looked like any other — one of the city's forgotten sleepers, his coat pulled tight around him against the cold. Then Davies saw the blood.

He stopped where he was.

“Two-four-eight-two to control,” he said quietly into his radio. “We’ve got a body.”

It wasn't the first body he'd discovered, and he knew it probably wouldn't be his last. He moved closer to the body. Just as he reached it, he heard footsteps running down one of the alleyways. He turned away from the body and shouted in the direction of the runner. At the same time behind him the single headlight of a motorbike shot to life and skidded to position itself heading away from the scene. Davies turned in time for the light to swipe across his face and catch the glint of a metal object pointing his direction. Three loud cracks split the air.

The bullets ricocheted off the metal frame of the warehouse and fencing, as Davies hit the floor. The motorbike sped away too quickly for him to make out a number plate. Still on the ground, he grabbed at his radio and gripped the call button tightly.

“Two-four-eight-two to control, shots fired, shots fired at last location.”

Davies got up but stayed low and made his way in the direction of the footsteps he had heard. His heart pounded against his chest, not knowing if whoever he was following would be armed, but adrenaline had taken control. The side of the warehouse was a dead-end with dustbins and refuse sacks strewn all over the place. As he walked further into the alleyway, he heard a scuff of feet on wet concrete from behind wheelie bin. He clicked on his torch and pointed in the direction of the sound. The harsh light fell on a wet, pathetic looking girl, with blood covering her hands. As she looked up at Davies, he could tell, she'd clearly seen too much.

Blue lights arrived first, then tape, then the slow choreography of a crime scene forming around the dead man. Rain ticked softly against the white plastic cover that someone eventually laid over him.

By the time the unmarked car pulled through the gate, the yard had begun to smell faintly of wet concrete and diesel.

DCI Alanna Rooke stepped out and paused for a moment beneath the open door. The rain caught in her hair immediately.

She ignored it. Two detectives stood near the cordon. One of them—tall, dark-haired, mid-thirties—stepped forward.

“DI Khan,” he said, holding out his hand in polite greeting.

His tone was calm, assessing rather than welcoming. Rooke shook his hand. “Rooke.”

The second detective stood a few paces behind Khan, hands in the pockets of her coat.

“DI Carla Wellbeck,” she said. Her voice was clear, efficient.

Rooke noticed the way both of them watched her for the briefest moment longer than necessary. New command. New senior officer. Everyone measuring everyone else.

“What have we got?” Rooke asked.

Khan gestured toward the loading bay.

“Male. Early thirties. Two gunshot wounds to the chest, close range. No weapon. No ID yet.”

Wellbeck added, “The remaining businesses are closed overnight. Doesn’t look like CCTV from the immediate area is going to be much help.”

“Most of the area is abandoned. Nothing else seems out of place,” Khan added. They already worked in sync. Rooke noted it. It could be a strength or a problem. They would either slot perfectly into the new machinery or their way of working wouldn’t be flexible enough to cope with a new leader.

“Other than the dead guy you mean?” Rooke said. For a second Khan looked wrong-footed but quickly realised she was being playful.

He held up the police tape and Rooke and Wellbeck ducked under the tape and crossed the yard. The body lay partly shielded from the rain by the overhang of the loading bay. The white sheet covering him had already darkened where the blood had soaked through.

A forensic officer lifted the edge slightly when she approached. The victim's face was pale and slack, eyes half open. Rainwater gathered in the hollow of his ear.

Execution distance, Rooke thought. Clean. Controlled.

She straightened again.

"What do you see?" she asked.

Wellbeck went first.

"Looks like an execution."

Rooke was pleased. Wellbeck was sharp. She'd clocked everything that Rooke had.

"Anything else?"

Khan glanced back toward the edge of the yard.

"Oh yes," he said.

Then he nodded toward a police van parked near the gate. Rooke followed his gaze.

"Where did she come from?" Rooke asked.

"Uniform found her halfway down the street," Khan said.

"Covered in blood. Not hers."

Rooke watched the girl for a moment.

"Did she see it?"

"She hasn't said."

Rooke turned and walked across the wet tarmac. As she approached, the paramedic straightened. The girl sat on the bench opposite, wrapped tightly in a silver foil blanket. It crin-

kled softly when she shifted, though she didn't look up. Her hair was dark and plastered to the side of her face where the rain had soaked through it. Someone had tried to wipe the blood from her hands but faint streaks still marked her knuckles. She looked young. But Rooke had learned that looks mean very little. Up close, she put her at seventeen, Eighteen at most.

"She's physically fine," he said quietly. "Shock, mostly."

Rooke nodded.

"Thanks."

The girl looked up as Rooke stepped closer. Up close she seemed even younger. Seventeen, maybe eighteen. Dark hair pulled back into a rough ponytail. There was blood on the sleeve of her hoodie. Rooke crouched slightly so they were level.

"Can you tell me your name?"

The girl hesitated.

"Leah."

"Leah what?"

"Morton."

Rooke nodded once.

"I'm DCI Rooke."

Leah's eyes flicked briefly to the rank badge.

"You're the one in charge?"

"That's right."

For a moment neither of them spoke.

Then Rooke said quietly, "Tell me why you were in that alley tonight."

Leah looked away.

"I wasn't."

Rooke let the silence stretch.

“You were found thirty metres from a man who’s just been shot twice in the chest,” she said calmly. “With his blood on your sleeve.”

Leah swallowed.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“I’m not saying you did.”

Rooke studied her for another moment.

“You running something for someone?”

That got a reaction. Leah’s eyes snapped back to hers. Rooke didn’t soften her voice.

“County lines,” she said. “Small drop. Wrong place at the wrong time.”

Leah didn’t answer. But she didn’t deny it either. Rooke stood.

“We’ll talk about it properly at the station.”

Leah stiffened.

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

Leah’s voice dropped.

“They’ll know.”

Rooke looked back toward the alley where forensic officers were beginning to move around the body.

“They already do,” she said quietly.

Leah followed her gaze.

“You saw them,” Rooke said.

Leah said nothing. But that was answer enough.

Rooke turned to Khan.

“We’re bringing her to the station as a witness.”

Khan nodded once. As he moved to open the car door, Leah spoke again.

“You don’t understand,” she said.

Rooke looked back at her.

“What don’t I understand?” Leah’s voice was barely above a whisper.

“They watch everything.”

Rooke held her gaze for a long moment. Then she said calmly,

“Good.”

Leah frowned slightly. Rooke gestured toward the patrol car.

“Let them watch.”

Leah didn’t respond. As Rooke moved away from Leah, Khan was waiting nearby.

“What did she say?” he asked.

Rooke glanced back once toward the open doors.

“She knows exactly who did it.”

“She said that?” Wellbeck asked.

“No.”

Wellbeck looked almost impressed. Khan frowned slightly.

“And?”

Rooke pulled her coat tighter against the rain.

“And she’s more afraid of what happens after she talks than she is of the man who pulled the trigger.”

“So we push,” Wellbeck said.

Rooke shook her head slowly.

“No.”

She looked back toward the dockyard, the white sheet over the body barely visible beneath the floodlights.

“That won’t work.”

A beat passed.

“We need to find out why.”

As they drove away from the site, leaving the uniformed and scene of crime officers to do their work, Rooke could feel something was off. The CCTV cameras of the dockside estates might not have been working, but she knew in her bones they were being watched.

The interview room was warm compared to the docks. The rain had followed them back across the river, turning the station windows into long streaks of reflected streetlight. Inside, the fluorescent lights hummed softly above the metal table.

Leah sat with her arms folded tightly across her chest. The foil blanket was gone now, replaced with a grey station sweat-shirt that hung loosely around her shoulders. Someone had cleaned the blood from her hands but faint traces still lingered around her fingernails.

Rooke came in and sat opposite her. Khan leaned against the back wall, arms folded. Wellbeck stood near the observation window, reading through the short preliminary report the uniforms had filed. Rooke slid a cup of tea across the table.

“You’re eighteen?” she asked.

Leah nodded.

“Just.”

Rooke wouldn’t have believed it if it weren’t for the records that Wellbeck had pulled on the way back to the station. She could have passed for much younger. Pale, thin and in need of a decent meal.

“Anyone we should call for you?”

“No.”

Rooke let that sit for a moment, then she opened the small notebook in front of her.

“Alright, Leah,” she said calmly. “Let’s try again.”

Leah didn’t move.

“You were found near a homicide scene tonight,” Rooke continued. “You had the victim’s blood on your clothes.”

Silence.

“You ran.”

Leah looked up briefly.

“I didn’t run.”

“You were leaving the alley.”

“I heard something.”

“What?”

“A bang.”

Rooke nodded slowly.

“A bang? Just the one?”

Leah hesitated, then she said quietly,

“Two.”

Khan shifted slightly behind her. Rooke didn’t react.

“You went to him after the shots?”

Leah stared down at the table.

“I thought someone might be hurt.”

“And were they?”

Leah’s voice was flat.

“He was already dead.”

Rooke watched her carefully.

“You see anyone else?”

“No.”

“You sure about that?”

Leah’s jaw tightened slightly.

“I didn’t see anyone. Not until the police officer came. I tried to hide again... that’s when...”

Wellbeck finally spoke from the side of the room.

“The next three shots came?”

Leah didn’t speak. She just nodded.

“Who were you delivering to?”

Leah’s eyes flicked up again.

“I wasn’t delivering anything.”

“County lines drop,” Rooke said. “Small package. Ten minutes in, ten minutes out.”

Silence. “Wrong place, wrong time.”

Leah stared at the table again.

“Come on Leah. You weren’t there by accident. Who were you delivering to?”

Leah had no more fight left in her. Tears started to well in her eyes as she looked at Rooke.

“I was making a drop.”

“To who? The victim?”

Leah nodded.

“I heard the motorbike come in. That’s when I hid.”

“You saw who fired the gun?”

Leah shook her head.

“He had his helmet on.”

“Had you seen it before The helmet, the motorbike?”

Rooke pressed.

Leah looked down back down at the table.

“Leah. Help me. Do you know who killed him?”

Leah took a moment. She shook her head. Rooke sat back and sighed in disappointment. She’d seen Leah’s fear before. There was no breaking it. The police could do nothing in comparison to ‘the line’.

“You know what happens next?” she asked.

Leah didn’t answer.

“We’ll run the victim,” Rooke continued. “We’ll pull CCTV from every working camera between here and the river. We’ll identify the line. And eventually we’ll identify the person who pulled the trigger.”

Leah’s breathing had slowed slightly.

“But here’s the problem,” Rooke said quietly.

Leah looked up again.

“By now, whoever did it knows you were there, because you and I both know that the lines watch the estates. They know who comes and who goes. The only reason you’re not already dead is because PC Davies turned up when he did.” The words hung in the room. “They’ll assume you saw something.”

Leah didn’t speak, but the colour drained slightly from her face.

“And when people in that world think someone might talk...” Rooke continued.

She didn’t finish the sentence. She didn’t need to.

Leah swallowed.

"They won't hurt me," she said, clearly not believing it, like a mantra she told herself to keep the monsters away.

Rooke held her gaze.

"Are you sure about that?"

The room was quiet again.

Finally, Khan spoke from the wall.

"Where do you live?"

"Walker."

"Anyone at home?"

"My brother."

"How old?"

"Twelve."

Rooke's eyes sharpened slightly.

"You live alone with him?"

Leah didn't answer.

Rooke closed her notebook.

"Alright," she said standing from the table. "Wellbeck, see if you can pull something on the victim." Wellbeck nodded and left the room. Khan straightened.

"What happens to me?"

Rooke looked back at Leah.

"We're going to let Miss Morton go home and get some rest. She's tired," she said.

Leah looked up quickly.

"I can go?"

"Yes. We'll drop you back home."

"But they'll see." The fear in Leah's eyes was real.

"Then help me out Leah."

“I... I...” Leah was lost. She had nowhere left to turn and no one who was going to help her. Rooke knew the look, and she felt for her. She turned to Khan.

“Team briefing and then we’ll run her home. Unmarked car. Let’s get her a change of clothes, check on the brother. Then we’ll bring them both back here.” Khan left leaving Rooke and Leah alone.

“We’ll protect you... and your brother. But at some point you’re going to have to make a choice, Leah. Finish your tea, we’ll take you back soon.”

The Major Investigation Team offices sat in the basement of headquarters, a vast floor of desks, side offices and whiteboards sectioned into four teams. Rooke had done her time as a DI in a similar setup, but not quite as big. Still, she felt at home as she walked through the doors. A whiteboard had already been cleared and the first printed photographs from the scene were being pinned up. The victim lying beneath the warehouse overhang, rain-dark concrete surrounding him.

Rooke set her coat over the back of a chair and called the room to attention.

“Morning everyone.” The activity in the room ground to a halt. “Some of you will know me already, but for those of you who don’t, I’m Alanna Rooke and as if it were planned, my first day as your new DCI has landed us a murder and someone shooting at police officers.” There was a general mummer in

the room but most of the team had caught snippets from other parts of the station. "This is county lines stuff which means it will move quickly." Rooke could see some of the younger officers looking confused. "For those who need a crash course – county lines drugs distribution works like this. Generally, a London controller, regional distributor, local controller, and last of all... the runners." Some of the old guard nodded along, impressed with the efficiency of Rooke's briefing. "We're pretty sure that Leah Morton is a runner. She's a kid, and last night she saw someone get gunned down. I suspect we're looking for a local controller, but Leah's so terrified, she's not saying anything. So, I need everything we've got on county lines in the Walker area. I'm not interested in the runners: I want the people using them. DIs will assign tasks – any questions to them. Update briefing in two hours." With that the room sprang to life with a renewed vigour. Rooke had made a good first impression on her new team. Wellbeck and Khan walked through the doors just as she'd finished.

"Alright," she said. "Let's start with what we know."

Wellbeck stepped forward first.

"Fingerprints tell us that our victim is Marko Petrovic," she said, pinning up a file photographs. "Low-level courier. Known to move small quantities for a couple of local gangs."

"Drugs?" Rooke asked.

Wellbeck nodded. "Mostly. Sometimes cash. There's soft intelligence regarding firearms, but nothing concrete."

Khan leaned back slightly against the edge of the desk.

"Nothing high up," he said. "Errands. Collections. Deliveries."

"A middleman," Rooke said, studying the photographs. The fingerprints were conclusive, and the file photo told Rooke they had the right man.

"Exactly." Wellbeck continued, "He took two rounds to the chest at close range. No weapon recovered. No sign of a struggle." She gestured toward the crime scene photograph again.

"A message?"

Rooke studied the image for a moment.

"Possible," she said.

Khan didn't look convinced.

"What?" Rooke asked without turning.

Khan shrugged slightly.

"If it's a message," he said, "it's a strange one."

Rooke glanced over.

"Go on."

Khan nodded toward the photograph.

"His pockets."

Wellbeck frowned slightly.

"What about them?"

Khan walked over to the board.

"There was cash on him," he said. "Five hundred at least."

"That's not unusual," Wellbeck replied. "Courier carrying payment. If Leah was delivering it was probably to pay her."

"Maybe," Khan said.

He pointed to another photograph.

"But if someone's sending a message, they usually make it obvious. It's tucked away. Had Davies not been on, it might

have been another few days, even a week before anyone discovered the body.”

Rooke nodded. “Fair point. So, we know that the money wasn’t relevant to motive. So not robbery and not a rival. Whoever killed him just wanted him dead.”

“Maybe they got spooked. Something disturbed them,” Wellbeck said.

“Our witness, maybe,” Khan said again.

Rooke shook her head.

“No. If the killer had been disturbed, Leah Morton would be in the mortuary right now. You don’t put two in the chest at that range and worry about cleaning up after yourself. Phone?”

Wellbeck shook her head.

“Recovered at the scene.”

“Locked?”

“Yes.”

“Anything on it?”

Wellbeck nodded toward the desk.

“The tech team are pulling what they can now, but it looks like a standard burner. I doubt there will be anything useful on there.”

“Well, we might get lucky.” Rooke studied the photograph of the victim again.

The body lay awkwardly on its side, coat pulled tightly around him, as though he had been caught mid-step. Two clean bullet holes in the chest. No visible struggle. No missing items. Neat. Rooke scanned the photographs again. Petrovic had lived in a world where endings came quickly. This hadn’t been ran-

dom. The killing had a purpose. She just needed to find out what it was.

“Right,” she said, breaking her focus from the ever increasing sheets of information being pinned to the boards. “Let’s get Leah home and see what shakes loose.”

The estate was quiet when they arrived. Not peaceful. Quiet in the way places became when people learned to keep their doors closed and their curtains drawn. Rooke had spent a lot of her early days on the job in places like this. People kept to themselves... until they didn’t.

The rain had eased to a mist that hung beneath the streetlights, turning the air pale and hazy. Rows of low brick flats lined the road, their windows glowing faintly in the early morning.

Khan and Wellbeck parked at the end of the street. Rooke and Leah pulled up just behind. Rooke stepped out of the car and glanced up at the building.

“What number?”

“Number fourteen,” Leah said. Rooke’s looked from the estate to Leah. *Poor kid*. A home should have been refuge. Instead, this place felt like a prison. The controllers cuckooing in and feeding off the needy and vulnerable. Leah led the way flanked by Rooke, Wellbeck and Khan and despite their plain clothes and unmarked car, they could be nothing other than the police. If they were being watched, then Leah was already marked.

The stairwell smelled faintly of damp and old cooking oil. Someone had scrawled graffiti along the walls, most of it layered over older tags that had long since faded. They climbed to the

second floor and found number fourteen. Leah went to put the key in the lock, but as she did the door swung inward. It was open. Leah didn't move. From somewhere inside the flat came the sound of a television playing quietly. Rooke pushed past and was followed quickly by Wellbeck and Khan.

"Jamie," Rooke called out. "Jamie Morton."

Leah rushed past them.

"Jamie... oh god... Jamie. They've taken him."

Wellbeck grabbed her and held her back from going further into the flat, allowing Rooke and Khan to do what they needed to. Once they'd cleared the rooms, Rooke came back to Leah and Kahn went outside, already making the necessary calls.

"Leah, listen to me. Could Jamie have gone anywhere else?"

Leah didn't hear Rooke's question.

"Please, you've got to get him back. Please." Leah was bone-tired and whatever restraint she'd shown in the interview room had now gone.

"Leah. I will do everything I can to find Jamie, but I need you to calm down. Leah!"

At that Leah locked eyes with Rooke.

"Please... get him back."

Wellbeck moved her limp body to an old sofa in the sitting room and Rooke crouched down beside her.

"Who watches the estate, Leah. That's all I need to know."

Leah's eyes flicked toward the window.

"Leah – they killed Petrovic and shot at you and a police officer. Jamie doesn't have time for you to be scared anymore.

I need you to tell me everything you know. Help me take these people down.”

Leah looked back towards Rooke and for the first time saw a warmth that had long been missing from her life. It broke the dam.

“If we talk, they take people.”

“Where?” Wellbeck asked.

“They take them for ‘drives’ – and you don’t come back. There’s always someone watching the estate.”

“The guy on the motorbike?” Rooke asked?

Leah nodded.

“Mostly, sometimes it’s someone in a car – but there’s always someone here. We’re never not being watched.”

Khan came back in and nodded his head for Rooke to follow him out.

“I’m just going to step outside for a moment. Carla will get you a cup of tea.”

Rooke followed Khan outside on the second-floor landing of the block where a woman was waiting for them.

“This is Mrs Hanley,” he said.

The woman was in her seventies, wearing a dressing gown, carrying a mug tea.

“I saw Jamie come out,” she said quickly. “Thought nothing of it at first.”

“What time?” Rooke asked.

“About an hour ago.”

“And the car?” Khan said.

“Black one. Parked across the road earlier.”

“Did the boy get in himself?” Rooke asked.

The woman hesitated.

“Well... sort of.”

Rooke’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Sort of?”

“There was a man,” Mrs Hanley said. “He opened the back door.”

“Did he force him?”

“No,” she said quickly. “No shouting or anything like that. He looked like he knew him.”

“Thank you. Why are you talking to us, Mrs Hanley? You know they watch the estate.”

“Couldn’t care less. This used to be a nice estate – till that lot got hold of it. If they want to come after me, let ‘em. But you don’t take a young boy from his home. That’s not right. Poor kids. I’m no fan of your lot... but you don’t mess with kids.”

Rooke almost smiled at Mrs Hanley’s honesty.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hanley.” Rooke said and disappeared back inside leaving Khan to wrap up with the old lady.

Leah was calmer now and seemed more determined.

“Leah, one of your neighbours saw Jamie getting into a car with a man. She said he went willingly. Does he run for the line as well?

“They said he was too young.” Leah’s voice cracked. “I said I didn’t want him mixed up in it. But if they told him I sent them, he’d have gone.”

“Who are we looking for Leah?” Rooke asked, no longer negotiating the situation.

Leah hesitated. Then she whispered it. “Gibson.”

Rooke didn’t react. “Where does he operate from?” she asked.

Leah shook her head. "He moves around."

"Where did you meet him?"

Leah hesitated again.

Then she said quietly: "The car wash."

Khan and Rooke exchanged a glance. Rooke knew the type of place. Cash business. No questions asked. Perfect cover. Kids like Leah got drawn in young and swallowed whole.

"Which car wash, the one down near the dockside?"

Leah nodded.

"Get me everything we have on Gibson," Rooke said turning to go.

Wellbeck was already on the phone to headquarters pulling everything she could.

Rooke turned back to Leah. "We're going to get your brother back."

Leah didn't look convinced.

"Before they take him for a drive," Rooke added. "Pack some up some clothes, Leah. You can't stay here. It's not safe now. Find some stuff for Jamie as well."

Wellbeck and Khan went first followed by Leah and Rooke brought up the rear as they headed down the stairs and towards their cars. The air outside felt colder now that the rain had stopped. Khan continued to walk as he spoke just loudly enough for the group to hear.

"Same car," he said quietly.

Rooke didn't look immediately.

"What car?"

Khan didn't do anything to indicate but kept talking as he walked.

"Dark Vauxhall. Parked there when we arrived."

"Plenty of cars parked on estates," Wellbeck said.

"Maybe," Khan said. "But that guy's been sitting there since we arrived. And now he's just started the engine."

Rooke glanced over. The car's headlights flickered briefly, then went dark again. Whoever was inside had turned the ignition halfway.

"Well," Wellbeck said. "If they're watching her, they're doing a terrible job of hiding it."

"They don't want to hide it," Rooke replied. As they got to Rooke's car Khan opened the rear door and Leah got in. All three stood huddled round the door not acknowledging the man watching them. "Just keep talking. Don't look over. Khan, can you get a number plate?"

"Sure." He used the windscreen reflection of Rooke's car to catch the plate on the car without looking directly at it.

"They're waiting for us to leave." Wellbeck said.

Rooke didn't move.

She studied the flat windows across the road. The twitching of curtains. Mrs Hanley stood defiantly on her door step, cup of tea still in hand.

"They're not worried about us." Khan said.

"No," Rooke said. She turned back toward the block of flats. "They're worried about her. They know she's talking. The longer they keep the boy, the riskier it gets."

“What will they do?” Wellbeck asked.

“Best guess? They can’t do anything in daylight. They’ll be seen. They’ll keep him somewhere safe until tonight – closer to the river the better – then they’ll take him down to the Tyne in the early hours...”

A grim look appeared on all their faces. Time was not on their side, and they knew it.

“Let’s get Leah back and safe. That’s one less thing to worry about.”

The ride back to the station was faster this time. The morning’s traffic had thickened across the city into a lunchtime jam, red brake lights stretching along the wet roads like a ribbon of dull fire, but the blue lights of the unmarked car cleared a path with ease. Rooke drove with one hand on the wheel, the other resting lightly on the gear stick.

Wellbeck had already gone ahead in car and was no doubt already halfway through a deep dive on Gibson and Khan stayed with Rooke and Leah. Rooke glanced in the rearview mirror at Leah sat in the back seat. She hadn’t spoken since they left the estate. Khan turned slightly in the passenger seat.

“You’ve seen this ‘Gibson’ before,” he said gently.

Leah didn’t answer.

“DI Wellbeck is already pulling records,” Khan continued. “If he’s operating a line in this area he’ll have come up before.”

Leah’s eyes stayed fixed on the window.

"They'll kill him," she said quietly.

Rooke's eyes darted to her in the rear-view mirror.

"Not if we get there first."

Leah didn't look convinced.

The police station came into view ahead, impressive yet incongruous against the historic buildings that Newcastle had to offer. Rooke pulled into the car park and cut the engine.

Inside, the Major Incident Room had fully woken up. Phones rang across the desks and officers moved between whiteboards carrying folders and printed reports. Wellbeck was coordinating data and pulling records at lightning speed. If Rooke had had the time she would have been able to admire the work ethic. She stayed near the door with Khan and Leah. Khan handed Leah a cup of water from a nearby machine.

"Drink," he said.

She took it without speaking. Her eyes had widened at the bustle of the room.

"Is all this...for Jamie?" she asked. There was a desperate disbelief in her voice as if she and her brother didn't warrant the effort. Rooke turned to her.

"I told you... we're going to get him back."

Across the room Wellbeck was leaning over a computer terminal, speaking quickly with one of the analysts. She clocked the arrival of Rooke, Khan and Leah and moved towards them holding a printout.

"Gibson," she said. "First name: Darren. Mid-thirties. Known associate of a London network operating county lines across the North East."

"Record?" Rooke asked.

“Possession, assault, intimidation. ABH, theft – a mixed bag of nastiness. Never anything big enough to warrant locking him up and throwing away the key but enough time inside to make some unsavoury contacts.”

Wellbeck handed the sheet to Rooke.

“Two vehicles registered to known associates. One is a black Vauxhall Astra.”

Rooke didn’t need to look up.

“The one from the estate.”

“Likely,” Wellbeck said.

“Address?” Khan asked.

Wellbeck shook her head.

“No fixed address. But he’s been picked up twice near the Riverside Industrial Estate.” Rooke frowned slightly.

“Near the car wash?”

Wellbeck nodded. “Exactly.”

Khan exhaled slowly.

“That’s got to be his base.”

“Or at least one of them,” Wellbeck said.

Rooke studied the printout for a moment.

Industrial estates were good places to hide operations like that. Noise. Trucks. People coming and going during the day and practically abandoned at night. No one asking questions. Perfect for moving product. Or people.

“They’ll hold him there until dark.” Rooke looked up again. “How long to get an armed unit down there?”

Khan checked his watch.

“At this time of day for a full unit? Twenty – thirty minutes?.”

Rooke shook her head.

“Too long.”

Wellbeck looked at her.

“You’re not planning to walk in there with just the three of us.”

Rooke folded the sheet of paper once and slipped it into her coat pocket.

“No.”

She turned toward the door.

“We’re planning to get there before they realise, we know where they are.”

Khan smiled faintly.

“That sounds optimistic.”

Rooke was already moving.

“Let’s go. DS Dixon...” Rooke called. A grumpy looking man in his late forties looked up from his desk. Rooke had worked with Dixon on a few occasions. He was old school – tough exterior but soft and cuddly underneath, as long as he didn’t have to do too much. “Could you look after Leah please?” Dixon was already on his way over. When he saw that the task wouldn’t take him too far from his desk, he warmed to the idea.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Get her something to eat. Something warm from the canteen. Try and locate parents or family.” Rooke, Wellbeck and Khan went to leave.

“You won’t find them.”

Rooke stopped in her tracks – but understood what Leah meant. The buzz of the room had somehow proved comforting.

"Haven't seen my dad in years... mam left about two months ago..."

"Where did she go?" Rooke asked.

Leah shrugged. "I don't know... she never says... she's never been gone this long."

Rooke's heart broke. Leah's hard shell had cracked and all that was left was a frightened little girl.

"Please," Leah said quietly. Rooke stopped. Leah stood with the rush of Rooke's MIT room to her back.

"They'll take him for a drive," she said.

Rooke held her gaze for a moment. Then she nodded once.

"Not today."

The Riverside Industrial Estate sat on the far edge of the city, where the Tyne bent away from the centre and the roads widened into long stretches of warehouses and repair yards. Most of the occupied buildings were already open for the day. Delivery vans moved slowly between units and the air smelled faintly of diesel and damp concrete.

Rooke slowed the car as they turned off the main road.

"The car wash is at the far end," Khan said, checking the map on his phone.

The building appeared a few moments later. A wide corrugated unit with two open bays facing the road. Steam drifted from the pressure hoses and a radio played somewhere inside. Three cars sat in the yard.

Rooke drove past without slowing.

“Black Astra,” Khan said quietly.

Rooke had already seen it.

“And a motorbike.”

It was parked beside the building, still wet from the rain.

“Anyone inside?” Wellbeck asked.

Khan leaned slightly toward the window as they rolled past.

“Two men,” he said. “Maybe three.”

“Jamie?” Rooke asked.

“Didn’t see him.”

Rooke drove another hundred metres before pulling into a side road between two storage depots. The car engine idled.

For a moment none of them spoke.

“Well,” Khan said eventually, “that’s definitely the car.”

Wellbeck nodded.

“And if Gibson’s running the line from there, he’ll have watchers.”

Rooke glanced back toward the road.

“Probably.”

She checked her watch.

“How long for backup?”

Wellbeck had already pulled out her phone.

“Uniform units are on their way. Eight minutes, maybe ten.”

Rooke looked back toward the road again.

Eight minutes was a long time.

Long enough for someone to decide the boy was a liability.

“Alright,” she said finally.

“We’re not waiting.”

Khan looked at her.

“You’re planning to walk in there?”

“No,” Rooke said calmly.

She shifted the car into gear again.

“We’re going to buy ourselves some time.”

Wellbeck frowned slightly.

“How?”

Rooke turned the car back toward the yard.

“With a conversation.”

Khan gave a small, resigned sigh.

“This should be interesting.”

The car rolled slowly back onto the industrial road. Ahead of them, the car wash came back into view. One of the men inside had stepped out into the yard now, cigarette in hand. He looked up as the unmarked car approached. Rooke pulled in beside the Astra and killed the engine. The man flicked the cigarette away and straightened slightly.

“You lost?” he asked.

Rooke stepped out of the car.

“I don’t think so,” she said.

Her eyes moved once across the yard. Two men near the wash bay. A third inside the building. No sign of Jamie. Yet. Rooke looked back at the man in front of her.

“I’m looking for someone,” she said.

The man smiled faintly.

“Yeah?”

“Darren Gibson.”

The smile faded.

Behind her, Khan and Wellbeck stepped out of the car.

For a moment the yard was completely still.

Then the man said quietly:

“You’ve got the wrong place.”

Rooke didn’t blink.

“No,” she said.

“I don’t.”

The man’s smile disappeared slowly. For a moment he didn’t move. His eyes flicked briefly past Rooke toward the other two officers getting out of the car. Then he laughed once, a short breath through his nose.

“You police?”

Rooke didn’t answer the question.

“Darren Gibson,” she repeated calmly. “Is he here?”

The man shifted his weight slightly.

“No idea who that is.”

Behind him, one of the other men inside the wash bay had stopped working. The hose hung loosely in his hand, water spilling across the concrete floor. Rooke let the silence stretch. She had learned early in her career that most confrontations were decided in the first few seconds. Whoever appeared more certain usually won.

Right now, she was very certain.

“Call him out,” she said.

The man looked amused again.

“Or what?”

Rooke tilted her head slightly.

“Or this becomes a much bigger problem for everyone standing here.”

The man glanced toward the road. Khan saw it too.

“Waiting for someone?” he asked.

The man didn’t answer. Instead, he turned slightly toward the open bay.

“Oi,” he called.

A second figure stepped out from the shadows inside the building. This one was older.

Mid-thirties. Lean. Close-cropped hair. He took one look at Rooke and stopped walking.

“Well,” he said quietly.

“Morning.”

Rooke studied him for a moment.

“You Darren Gibson?”

The man smiled faintly.

“Depends who’s asking.”

Rooke reached slowly into her coat pocket and produced her warrant card.

“DCI Alanna Rooke.”

Gibson glanced at the card. Then back at her.

“That so?”

Rooke slipped it back into her pocket.

“We’re looking for a boy.”

Gibson’s expression didn’t change.

“No kids here.”

Behind him, Khan’s eyes were moving across the yard. There was a small office at the side of the building. Door closed. Curtains drawn. He caught Rooke’s eye and nodded slightly. Rooke saw it.

Then she looked back at Gibson.

"Black Astra," she said. "Registered to one of your associates."

Gibson shrugged.

"Lots of Astras around... and I've got a lot of friends."

"Well," Rooke said calmly, "one of them collected a twelve-year-old boy from an estate in Walker about twenty minutes ago."

The yard went very quiet.

Gibson's smile faded slightly.

"You accusing me of something?"

"I'm asking where the boy is."

Gibson took a slow step closer.

"You got a warrant?"

"No. But I'm wondering why a man like you would have an interest in a twelve-year-old boy. Twelve's young, even for your lot. Not a good look, Mr. Gibson."

"Fuck off."

Behind Rooke, Khan shifted slightly. Two of the men were watching him now. Not aggressive. Just measuring. Gibson lowered his voice.

"You come onto my property making accusations like that..."

Rooke cut him off. "The boy's name is Jamie Morton."

For the first time, something flickered in Gibson's expression. Just for a second. That was enough. Rooke leaned slightly closer.

"You know who I'm talking about."

Gibson smiled again, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"You've got nothing."

Rooke glanced once toward the road behind them.

In the distance she could hear it now. Sirens. Still a few streets away. But getting closer. Gibson heard them too. His jaw tightened slightly.

“You planning to arrest me?” he asked.

“That’s an armed response unit you can hear Mr. Gibson. In about three-to-four minutes this place is going to be crawling with officers who are bit pissed off that one of their own got shot at this morning.”

“Don’t know anything about that.”

“Well, then it’s not going to be a problem then, is it? Because the tire treads from that motorbike won’t match those at the crime scene and there won’t be any firearms on site... will there Mr. Gibson.”

Rooke turned slowly toward the small office beside the wash bay. Gibson moved immediately, stepping into her path.

“You’re not going in there.”

Rooke stopped. For a moment the two of them stood only a few feet apart.

“You going to stop me?” she asked quietly.

Gibson hesitated. Behind him the sirens were louder now. Much louder. The men in the yard were looking toward the road. Rooke leaned slightly closer.

“Here’s the problem you’ve got,” she said softly. “If that door opens and there’s a boy inside...” She let the sentence hang. Gibson’s jaw tightened. “...this whole operation becomes a kidnapping.”

The sirens were very close now. Gibson glanced once toward the road. Calculating. Rooke stepped past him. This time

he didn't move. She crossed the yard and reached the office door. Khan was beside her a moment later.

"Ready?" he murmured.

Rooke nodded once.

"It's not a kidnapping if the boy came willingly." Gibson shouted after them.

Then she opened the door.

Inside the small office, Jamie Morton sat on a plastic chair.

He blinked.

"Leah?"

Rooke crouched slightly.

"No," she said gently.

"Police." Khan stepped forward and helped Jamie to stand up.

Jamie stood. He still didn't seem to have registered what had happened to him, but had a nasty bruise on the side of his face.

"You alright?" Khan asked.

The boy nodded quickly.

"Yeah. I'm okay."

Rooke stood again and looked back toward the yard. Gibson was still standing where she had left him. Sirens echoed across the industrial estate as two patrol cars turned onto the road outside. Gibson gave a small shrug.

"So what's Jamie doing here then Mr. Gibson?" Rooke asked as the armed response unit pulled into the yard. Gibson put his hands on his head – he knew the drill – and his compatriots followed suit.

"Work experience." He snarled as he got onto his knees.

Rook stepped behind him and started to cuff him.

“Darren Gibson, I’m arresting you on suspicion of kidnapping, attempted murder and murder. You do not have to say anything. But, it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence.”

Rooke lent in as she put the second cuff on and whispered into his ear.

“You shouldn’t have taken the boy.”

Three months later the file landed back on Rooke’s desk. The Major Incident Team was quieter now than it had been that morning in early autumn. Most of the team had moved on to other cases. The whiteboards had been cleared and replaced a number of times since then. Rooke, Khan and Wellbeck made their way from the MIT floor to the hallowed halls of glass where Detective Superintendent Gaunt was waiting for them.

“Heroin overdose?” Wellbeck asked, doing nothing to hide her disbelief.

“Mm-hmm.” Khan nodded.

“Gibson didn’t use drugs. He just sold them.” Rooke added.

The trio made their way down the hall to DSU Gaunt’s office. He waved them in, and they all took their seats as he finished up his call. The phone went down.

“Well... looks like the Morton kidnapping is closed,” Gaunt said. Gaunt had the kind of stillness that came from decades in the job. Late fifties. Greying hair. The kind of presence that filled a room without raising his voice. He tapped the folder lightly.

“Darren Gibson,” he said.

“Arrested three months ago following the recovery of a kidnapped minor. Remanded in custody awaiting trial for kidnapping, attempted murder, and murder.”

“Found dead in his cell at HMP Durham last night.” Wellbeck added. “Heroin overdose.”

“Anyone believe it?” Khan asked.

Gaunt shifted his gaze to him and shrugged slightly.

“Drugs are in the prisons. There’s not much that can be done about it these days. We’ve got bloody drones flying them in.”

Khan raised an eyebrow.

“Does it matter if we believe it?” Wellbeck added.

“It matters to the Mortons.” Khan chimed in.

Gaunt leaned back in his chair. “The Crown Prosecution Service will mark the cases as closed. It means neither Jamie or... what’s the name of the sister?”

“Leah.” Wellbeck offered.

“...that’s it – Leah. They won’t need to give evidence. They can move on. Put it all behind them.” For a moment no one spoke. Then Gaunt looked at Rooke.

“You’re quiet.”

Rooke finally opened up the file she’d been carrying. Gibson’s photograph stared back from the front page. Mid-thirties.

Lean. Close-cropped hair. Exactly as she remembered him from his arrest and the subsequent interviews, which were a waste of everyone's time. 'No comment' to all questions.

"County lines networks don't like loose ends," she said.

"No," Gaunt said. "They don't."

"I don't like it. Gibson didn't take drugs, sir. He sold them. He pushed them onto other people, and he got kids like Leah and Jamie to do the work. I think someone got to him."

Gaunt took a deep breath through his nose and nodded.

"You're probably right. But HMP Durham's got enough on their plate at the moment without adding a full investigation into the mix. So unless the inquest comes back with foul play... we stay away. Understood?"

Khan and Wellbeck nodded. Rooke knew Gaunt was right. Politics was his forte, not hers. She trusted his judgment. His eyes remained locked on hers, waiting for her to tell him she understood.

"Yes, sir." She said, knowing not to push it any further. She looked down and closed the file.

"Safeguarding tells me the Mortons have been permanently relocated."

Rooke looked up.

"Where to?"

"Northumberland somewhere," Gaunt said. "New school for the boy. Social services support in place."

Khan nodded slowly.

"That's something."

Gaunt gave a faint smile.

"She's now Jamie's legal guardian."

Rooke allowed herself the smallest nod.

Gaunt stood.

“Good work,” he said, bringing the case to a close.

Khan and Wellbeck gathered their notes as they stood. As they reached the door, Khan glanced back. “You really think someone helped him along?” he asked.

“I think whoever he was reporting to has a lot to lose if he ever got to court.”

“Well,” Khan said, “at least someone else is doing the paperwork.”

Wellbeck rolled her eyes faintly and pushed the door open.

They stepped back into the corridor and headed to the lift. Rooke remained behind for a moment longer.

“Gibson was part of something bigger, sir.”

Gaunt nodded.

“I don’t disagree, Alanna... and I don’t think this is the last time we’ll have to deal with a case like this... unfortunately.”

“So, why not chase it down now?”

“Too many other priorities. Gibson was a small fish. There are much bigger catches that the MITs need to focus on. Anyway, how are they working out for you?”

Gaunt nodded towards Khan and Wellbeck as Rooke followed his gaze and saw them waiting for her at the lift.

“They’re strong. They work well together. I think we’ve got a good rhythm going.”

“Good. You’ll need them. They trust you, Rooke. You’ve earned it.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Gaunt's phone rang, and he left Rooke by the door to go and answer it. She caught the beginnings of what was probably a very high-level conversation. There weren't many people Gaunt had to call 'Sir'. She walked towards her two DIs, who'd waited dutifully for her, and stepped into the lift with them.

"So, next case then?" Khan said with a smile.

"There's always another one to close." Wellbeck added.

Rooke allowed herself a satisfied smile and pressed the button for the offices below.

"Let's see what the city's got for us today."

THE END

Continue with DCI Rooke

Rooke: The First Witness is a standalone prequel that takes place before the events of the first **DCI Rooke** novel.

Three years after the case you've just read, another investigation begins — one that will pull Rooke and her team into something far bigger.

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Rooke

PROLOGUE

A bullet always has the final word. Nicky Baxter stared at the gun barrel and felt his world narrow to a cold circle of steel, a finger whitening on a trigger and the pulse that kept thudding at his temple like it was trying to escape. There was nothing left to argue. He had begged at the start, then raged, then bargained with himself and with whatever passed for mercy at moments like this. Now there was just the end, walking toward him in a straight line.

Pain had been his only company for hours. It occupied every room in him. Broken bones sent dull thunder through his chest when he breathed. A ligament in his shoulder was torn and kept twitching like bad wiring. His fingers were slick where the ropes had sawn the skin, and his legs had gone from fire to ice to a faraway numbness that worried him more than the heat had.

He shifted a fraction to test the range of what was still his, and the chair creaked against the floor, bolted fast so he couldn't throw his weight. The movement cost him, but it reminded him he was still here for a few more seconds. The man with the gun didn't look like he wanted to be there. Nicky saw that straight

away. His eyes were flat, businesslike. He knew that look; he had lived that look countless times.

There was a difference between liking the work and accepting it. Billy enjoyed it. Billy always had. On the other side of the table, on the other side of the muzzle, Billy would find a smile, a little curl at the corner right when the last bit of hope left a man's eyes. Not this lad. This lad wanted it over, same as Nicky. The smell told him as much about where he was as the place itself. Damp and cold had crept into the brick. Oil, old water, rust and the bitter tang of salt – dock air that bounced off the corrugated metal panels of the warehouse and never really left your clothes. Somewhere near the river. Gateshead, he thought.

There were hundreds of these places tucked between trading estates and the Tyne, and they all had the same dead echo when you breathed too loud. Behind the gunman, a corrugated roller door hunched like a closed eyelid. Locked. Even if the door went up now and ten uniforms flooded the space, they wouldn't make it across the concrete in time to get between Nicky and the bullet. He knew that, and so did the man in front of him. He tried to find a smile.

Irony, that was the taste in his mouth. Irony and old blood. If it hadn't been for the shared grandparents, Billy might never have learned his name. That was the truth of it. For the Baxter family, succession was a religion. Anoint the head, close the ranks, keep the faith. Nobody left. If you tried, there was no coming back. Nicky had lived in Billy's shadow since he could stand up straight, and that shadow felt like the North

East weather: inescapable, something you learned to live with. Fifteen years between them, a lifetime's worth in power.

Nicky had taken the brown envelopes and the new trainers and the weekends that ran on into Tuesdays. He had opened sports bags full of cash without looking at the numbers and told himself that the world was built this way and he was just playing by its rules. He told himself he wasn't Billy. When the job called for it, when someone had to put a permanent end to a problem, he'd done what was asked. Not because he wanted to, not with the slow relish Billy could never quite hide, but because that's what bought you a place at the table.

Detaching the person from the act was how you lasted. Count the breaths, follow the steps, don't think about their mam... their children. They cried anyway. He'd seen it again and again. Screaming up until the very last second, then a quietness would come, and the crying would start. The soft, awful, child-like kind. They'd call for their mums mostly... wives sometimes. He'd never held that against them. The body turned on itself when there were no more stories left to tell. Men pissed themselves. That wasn't shame. That was plumbing. He was pretty sure he'd done the same tonight, but his legs were wet with other things and the ropes bit hard enough that he couldn't tell what was what anymore.

Nicky hadn't got anyone to cry for. He had not known his own mother. He'd been told that she'd 'gone' not long after he was born. His dad had officially died of a heart attack when Nicky was five – a neat reason to put on a form. Later, when he learned how lies sounded, he stopped believing in the paperwork. There hadn't been a funeral he could remember. No

grave anyone ever took him to stand beside. He'd been absorbed into Billy's house, where there was food and rules and the kind of love that felt like ownership. Billy was out most of the time by then, building what would become the thing people whispered about. Nicky grew into the space left behind.

You don't rat on family. He had known that since he was old enough to be useful. You could be pardoned for many things in the Baxter clan. Turning the family over to the people in charge of files and charge sheets was not on that list. But there comes a day when you see the damage from another angle. He'd watched Billy's 'business' spread like a spill on water, touching the same estates Nicky had walked as a kid. He'd seen a lad younger than him used as a message and left to be found. He'd seen lives bend and not right themselves.

And then someone contacted him. They were careful and almost kind in the way they'd approached. They were someone who knew where the holes were in the Baxter armour, who knew what kind of stone you had to wedge into the works to crack the machine. It hadn't needed much talk. He'd said yes because saying no felt like stepping off a building you were already falling from. He'd told himself he was making something right, even if it was only one thing. He'd told himself he could take the cost. And he had.

The first click came. A short, crisp notch under the gunman's finger. Two-stage trigger. He knew the feeling: that pause before the end of a sentence. It sounded loud in the empty warehouse, but everything sounded loud in here if you listened the right way. The gunman's face didn't change. Nicky's did. He felt the shape of the smile he wanted to leave on his face. It

wasn't forgiveness and it wasn't peace. It was an acceptance with teeth in it.

He hadn't said the name. That was the important thing. That was something he could still wrap his hands around. He'd kept his mouth closed when bones were cracking, when fingers were bent back and counted out, when nails were prised clean and the room spun through sweat and light. He had swallowed the name and kept swallowing it. Maybe they never really thought he knew anything anyway. Maybe tonight was as much for sport as it was for information. But they had asked, and he had kept the answer where it belonged. Whoever had reached out to him still had their chance. Whoever had made a plan thorough enough to frighten Billy would still be moving on the board, hidden in plain sight.

Perhaps Nicky had known nothing that mattered. Perhaps the people he had trusted had been careful in turn, feeding him only what he could carry without giving the family an obvious trail to follow. Perhaps the beating had been for show, a performance to please the part of Billy that liked his truth with bruises on it. It didn't matter, not in the mathematics of this night. Even if Nicky had spoken, the end would have been the same. There was no path back to the cliff's edge once you had stepped off it.

He took in the place with a clarity that surprised him. The brain does that, in the very end. It applies itself. His peripheral vision sharpened. The cracked panes high up where dawn would find them later if it bothered to look. The damp ladder marks on the far wall. The scuffed rectangle where a pallet had rested for years and been moved as if making room for this

moment. The gunman's boots had a tear at the front of the right sole. Strange what you notice.

He thought of Billy. Not as the uncle stand-in he'd once been, not as the idol so many of the lads liked to be seen around. He saw him as a man who had built a city inside the city, with its own couriers and favours and silent handshakes, all of it polished to look like inevitability. He pictured that inevitability cracking, not with a bang, but with the slow loss of control that had you looking over your shoulder at empty air. He pictured Billy in a grey tracksuit with a prison stamp. He pictured the cheap mattress with the blue cover, the stale breath of corridors you could never air. He pictured the way Billy would try to smirk and how the smirk would look when there was no audience to practise for. He pictured silently, and in the picturing, he found the courage to let the smile show.

The finger on the trigger moved, and the second click arrived like a clock striking the hour. In a fraction of a second, he understood the order of things. He'd known it every time he'd stood where the gunman stood. You reached a point where there was nothing left to do but finish the job. He watched the gunman's chest rise, then held. He watched a tiny tremor pass through the hand that would end him. He admired the steadiness that followed. It is a strange relief, the moment when choice drops out of your hands. His muscles loosened for an instant in anticipation of that relief. The air was cold enough to sting. The floor was dusty enough that it had adopted his blood and made it its own.

The gunshot came like a bright white door opening. The muzzle flared. Something slammed him back, and the chair

rocked within whatever bolts held it. The crack of it bounced off the walls and came back around. He couldn't say whether he heard it twice or once. He couldn't say anything at all. He was busy leaving. The pressure he'd been carrying in his ribs lifted. The pain stepped back from him as if it had been ordered out of the room. His head snapped and then settled. He felt, for a breath too brief to count, light. In that sliver of time that was less than a blink but more than a nothing, he held on to one thought that was entirely his. He had kept his promise. He had done something the right way and stuck to it. He had gone down on his own terms, as much as anyone ever does in a place like this. If there was any justice left in the world, it would be in the simple fact that the thing he had protected would go on to do damage where it needed to.

Blood ran out behind him in a dark fan, met the grit and the dirt and the threads from the frayed rope, and made patterns he would never see. His neck gave up, and the weight of his head rested against the back of the chair. The air around him felt as if the tide had gone out. The noise of the world dimmed in a way that was not silence but absence. The last sense to leave him was not vision or hearing. It was shame. Odd, the things you carry until you don't. He let it go, and the room receded.

In the dark, after the sound had faded and the dust had settled, the echoes of that choice went on. They would reach places Billy Baxter did not control. They would find people Billy did not pay. They would meet a detective whose patience had been worn down to the wire but had not snapped. They would bump into a prosecutor who had just enough old-fashioned belief left in the law to keep turning up. They would wake sleep-

ing loyalties and annoy complacent ones. They would become a crack you could put a crowbar into. Nicky Baxter would not see any of that. He would not be thanked for it. His name would be spoken in the ways men like him get spoken about – half with pity, half with contempt, mostly with caution. But he had done something the story did not allow for. He had taken his ending and folded a secret into it so it could not be unpicked in time.

Nicholas ‘Nicky’ Baxter died with a smile on his face. A bullet always has the final word. But tonight, Nicky had made sure there was a reply waiting for it.

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T.G Hofman is a writer, theatre director and cultural producer whose work spans theatre, historical fiction and contemporary thrillers. He regularly works across the UK in theatre production, writing and cultural development.

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Rooke is the first novel in the DCI Rooke crime series.