

LESS  
THAN  
INNOCENT

*A  
Lockdown  
Story*



## 9: Revelations

*MJ Foulks*

Rob watched as his mother waved to him from her car, just before driving off. The second the car was out of sight, the roaring of the helicopter starting up left his ears ringing. Popa carefully helped Rob into the helicopter, jumped in himself, and pulled the door hard behind him. Rob grabbed his headset and jammed it on to deaden the noise.

“Well?” Allison said in his ear as she took the metal pod into the sky.

“Well what?”

“Did you do it? Did you tell him you would take over for him like we told you to?”

Rob said nothing, but gazed at the cast on his foot. It was hard for him to believe that, in this moment, getting kidnapped was the least of his concerns.

“He did,” Popa answered for him.

“...Good. Did he buy it? Or are you *actually* going to take over for the Mafia, Rob? Don’t think it hasn’t crossed my mind.”

*I’ve about had it with her raging bipolar disorder*, Rob thought. Popa had been coming around to him. Or, at the very least, he didn’t suffer from Bitchy Bouts Syndrome.

“Mancini was pleased,” Popa said simply. “Rob did well.”

It had been a rather surreal experience. After Rob hugged his mother tight, she and Popa had exchanged what Rob could only describe as a knowing nod.

Once they were in the family room, his grandfather, looking pale and sallow, had shifted himself through the doorway and sat at the table, waiting to be shackled to it.

His voice was hoarse. "Dominic, you have brought me my beautiful daughter and grandson. For this, you will be rewarded handsomely."

Popa, or apparently 'Dominic', bowed in thanks.

"You will stay and enjoy some time with the family." It wasn't a request.

"I'm honoured, Mr. Mancini." Popa had bowed again and took the seat next to Rebecca.

"Hey!" Allison shouted through the head set, pulling Rob out of his recollections. "Don't doze off back there! I need to know what happened."

"Then get it from Dominic over here," he spat, jerking his head in the direction of Popa even though Allison couldn't see him.

"In time, Allison," Popa said soothingly, "it was an intense visit...for all of us."

Allison was silent. Rob watched as Popa lifted the seat next to him and pulled a large, black cloth out from its storage.

"Just for the ride back. I'm sure you understand."

Rob gave a sarcastic grin, and Popa gently blindfolded him. *Good job of it, too.* He couldn't see a thing.

"How is Rebecca?" Allison asked, and Rob felt a sharp sting go down his spine.

"She's well. For now, at least." Popa answered.

~

The Muihtil team were ready to resort to drastic action. If they didn't get their CTO back, no other member of the team could do what Rob did. Cindy was trying hard not to find this admirable. She was supposed to be spying on them after all.

Their only lead was Laurie's, who had reported where she had found Rob's phone.

Cindy opted to go with Laurie and Shannon, further down the trail Rob must have been running that day. She was willing to put up with the presence of Shannon to keep an eye on Laurie. Something about Laurie made Cindy...uneasy.

## Less Than Innocent

Other members of the group decided to go back to Acadia and do some canvassing. Professor Gin Buttons decided to stay at Middleton Hospital, not giving a reason other than 'Someone should be here in case he comes back.'

The trio waited for the cover of nightfall, then took out their flashlights and headed down the empty trail. Cindy had put on Natalie's black beret that had just been sitting unworn in her hospital room. *Keep her close.*

"We should split up," Shannon whispered. "Cover more ground."

"Like hell," Cindy hissed. "Rob disappeared here and you want to split up?"

Cindy didn't have to see Shannon's face to know it was beet red, complete with furrowed brows and a withering expression.

They came to a part of the trail with residential backyards to their left, and fancy, waterfront houses to their right.

Cindy's phone vibrated in her pocket, making them all jump. She pulled it out and looked at the caller ID.

*Mate*

"Excuse me for a second," she said. She stepped a few feet back as she answered the call.

"No, go ahead," Shannon muttered. "It's not like we're on a harrowing rescue mission or anything."

Laurie snickered.

A dog appeared from nowhere. He came up behind Shannon and startled her. He was friendly, wagging his tail as she smiled and petted the top of his head. Laurie took a second to pet the sweet little guy herself.

"Sorry," Cindy said, shoving her phone back into her pocket.

The sweet dog went from Jekyll to Hyde, his hackles raised and his bark ferocious. Lights began to filter through windows one by one...he was waking the residents.

"Tippy? Tippy!!" They could hear a woman shouting.

"Hide!"

They darted for the nearest patch of trees and and climbed as

swiftly and silently as they could.

Cindy watched a pretty blonde woman come out to greet the dog. She looked around briefly, then headed out of sight, with 'Tippy' following behind.

Cautiously, the girls climbed back down to the ground and resumed their search, trying with difficulty to put Tippy, and his many teeth, out of their minds.

Laurie stared into the darkness into which the woman and her dog had disappeared. "I have a hunch," she whispered, motioning for them to follow her.

To Cindy's great surprise, Laurie's hunch was right. There, sitting calmly on someone's back deck, was Rob.

"Quick, turn off your flashlights!" Laurie commanded.

"Why?" Cindy asked, but the why became clear right away. A man who was nothing but muscle had just appeared on the back porch, carrying a tray with a plate of food and a glass of water. He set them down on the table and went back inside. Without a single sip, Rob dumped the water out onto the deck.

The girls acted.

"Rob!" Shannon whisper-shouted once she was close to the deck.

Rob turned his head, and his mouth fell open. He looked around for a second, as if checking for his captors, then hobbled to the banister just above them. *A cast*, Cindy thought. *Great*.

"How did you find me?" he muttered with his back to them.

"Never mind that. Let's get you out of here," Laurie whispered urgently. "Just throw yourself over the edge. I'll catch you."

"Are you insane? My ankle—"

Do you want to stay here?" Cindy snapped.

Rob looked to the back door. Then he rose and clumsily threw himself off the deck. In an amazing show of strength, Laurie successfully caught him. Then Cindy, not to be one-upped, carried him on her back all the way back to their car.

"You guys are—"

"You're welcome," Shannon smiled from the front passenger seat.

## Less Than Innocent

"I'll be so happy to be back home," Rob breathed as he closed his eyes and let his head fall back onto the headrest.

"You're not going home. Not yet," Cindy said.

"...where am I going?"

"To Middleton Hospital," she replied gravely. "There's someone there you need to see."

~

Rob found the room he was looking for down an eerily empty hallway. After taking a deep breath and adjusting his mask, he entered. The room was shrouded in darkness, save the glow of monitors and blinking lights. No one was there except the patient, his biological father.

Rob let the door close behind him with a little click. Doug's eyes opened just the smallest bit.

"Rob?" he croaked, trying to lift his head.

Rob rushed to his side. "Don't overdo it."

Doug gave a weak laugh, one that sounded like a death rattle.

Rob hooked his finger into the loop of his mask and removed it. He knew the risk, but was willing to take it.

"There's... so much... I need to—"

"No, you don't," Rob breathed. He could feel himself shaking as he heard the heart monitor start beeping faster, and saw Doug's eyes well up with tears.

"You know," Doug managed to say.

"I know."

"I'd give anything...for more time...with you..."

"It's okay...*Dad*," he whispered soothingly, grabbing his father's IV-less hand.

A nasty coughing fit made Rob jump a bit. He'd never heard anyone cough so hard. Cindy had said he had cancer, and likely wasn't going to make it out of the hospital this time.

"Listen, I don't have...much time. Please...grab my phone. I need you to do me...one little favour..."

"Anything."

Rob fumbled around, looking for a phone. When he had it, Doug gave him the code and he unlocked it. The screen immediately went to his most recent calls....most of them to Rob's lost cell phone.

"Video...record a video."

Rob turned on the room's lights for a better image and hit *record*.

"My name is Doug Berenson, formerly Henry Williams...I am giving my testimony against my former father-in-law, Mr. Roberto Mancini."

He took a few deep breaths to ready himself once again. Rob was careful to remain behind the camera and silent.

"Mr. Mancini is the current head of a powerful Mafia family. He has committed atrocious crimes...including the killing of an...innocent woman's young child. I personally witnessed him murder Brian Zinck...but there's more...so...much...more..."

Desperate coughing. Hacking. He was growing more pale by the minute.

Doug's testimony went on for twenty painful minutes as he detailed his experience with the family, and with Rob's mother and grandfather. The sick feeling in Rob's stomach, the one that started with his mother's confession and grew when he learned of what happened to Allison's baby, had returned with fury.

Finally, Doug made the 'cut' motion with his hand, and Rob stopped the video.

Doug suddenly began to weep, silently but openly. Rob grabbed his hand once again, feeling tears run down his own cheeks.

"My wife....my dear Mona...please tell her..."

"I will, Dad," Rob managed to choke out. "I will."

"I'm...so sorry...my son..."

Doug's voice trailed off and his eyes closed. He subsided into a deep sleep.

Rob took his phone and pocketed it.

As he hobbled out of the room, a thin, older woman rose from her chair. Her red-rimmed eyes contrasted sharply with her blue paper mask.

## Less Than Innocent

“Are you Rob?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Thank goodness you’re okay,” she breathed in relief. “I’m Mona, Doug’s wife. I guess that kind of makes me like a step-mother to you in some weird way? I’m sorry, I’m rambling, but this whole hidden wife, hidden son, hidden...connections. It’s really getting to me. But I’m so happy you made it out okay. We’ve been so worried since we heard about your kidnapping. What happened to your foot?”

She looked from right to left before leaning in to whisper, “Did the Mafia hurt you?”

Rob couldn’t help but chuckle. Obviously Doug had told her a thing or two. *Did the Mafia hurt me? More than you could possibly know.*

“It’s just a minor strain,” he said. *How sweet of her to worry.* “How are you holding up?”

“You know how it is,” she said with a fake smile visible in her eyes. “Girl meets boy, boy and girl get married, boy hides former family and cancer diagnosis from girl until it’s...”

The rest of her words seemed to have retreated back into her throat.

“You should go see him.”

She nodded and went into Doug’s room, leaving Rob alone with his thoughts. He sat in what had been her chair.

“CODE BLUE,” the PA system shouted after just a few moments. “CODE BLUE. ROOM 108.”

The doctors and nurses were rushing by so fast they didn’t even notice Rob was there. His heart pounded.

Mona was pushed out of the room. Rob stood as she turned to him and their eyes met. She rushed into his arms and sobbed.

“He’s gone, Rob. Oh my God... he’s gone! He’s gone...he’s gone...”

She kept repeating it over and over again, sobbing into Rob’s chest, mourning a man she had thought she knew, the father Rob would now never get the chance to know.

“I yelled at him, Rob!” she cried, forcefully pushing each word out of her body. “I left him alone...it was all so much...and now I’ll



*never see him again..."*

Rob stayed with her...for a minute or an hour, he hardly knew. It was the least he could do for his new sort-of stepmother, to hold her until she needed it no longer.

Then, with no thought to his injured ankle, Rob escorted her to the parking lot. Mona kept her hand clutched to his forearm. Outside were Cindy and a sturdy older woman with a kind face and no mask in the outdoor air.

"Rob?" the maskless woman asked, and he nodded. *Everyone seems to know who I am these days.*

"Cora," she offered in return. "Are you ready to go home, Mona?"

Her eyes glazed over in shock, Mona managed a slight nod. As she let go of Rob's arm, she turned to look at him and removed her sodden mask. *Not like it was doing her any good anymore.*

She reached into her purse for a pen, and quickly scrawled her number onto the back of an old receipt.

"Keep in touch, son," she said in a near-vacant tone. "Text me and let me know you're okay."

Deeply touched, Rob lowered his own soaked mask. "I will. I promise."

Then Mona was gone and Cindy was beside him with a hand on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Rob."

"Just...take me home. Please."

But Cindy seemed hesitant.

"Come on, don't mess with me. I've been injured, kidnapped, sedated, my biological father...I just want—"

"I need you to visit one more room. It won't take long."

Out of her bag she produced a fresh paper mask and handed it to Rob, but he just looked at her like she had completely lost her mind.

"Please...it's important. To me, at least."

Rob let out a sigh. "I suppose you did just rescue me."

Cindy hugged him.

~

## Less Than Innocent

Allison was in bed, but far from asleep. Her thoughts drifted from the visit to the prison, to Rob's reluctant cooperation, to Popa's unwavering loyalty...to Amie...Mr. Mancini strung up by his neck...

A loud knock pounded on her bedroom door. In the dark, she fumbled for her robe and slipped it on before opening the door just a crack.

Light from the hallway streamed in, but she still saw Popa through squinted eyes.

"Rob is gone," he declared. "They came and took him."

Allison's mouth curled into a smile. "Perfect."

~

Cindy's heart leapt when Rob agreed to go with her. She hadn't been to see Natalie since the day her father had popped up out of nowhere. For some reason, his presence had begun to make Cindy worry more. Something about him just didn't sit well with her, though she couldn't quite put her finger on it. He had seemed cold in the presence of his gravely-injured daughter, as if he couldn't be bothered to care whether she lived or died. *So why on earth was he there?*

Darcy Mayne...even the name sounded made up. Clearly a false name. Perhaps Natalie actually was a spy, not just some silly little girl with cabin fever from COVID isolation. And if that were the case, who was this 'Darcy', really? She wouldn't be surprised if they were both spies. *The Muihtil team is crawling with them, for crying out loud.*

Their progress toward Natalie's room was maddeningly slow, given the pace at which Rob was limping. She wanted to scream at him to move faster, her insides squirming as they inched their way toward her lovely little mystery.

Cindy adjusted the black beret atop her head.

Just after they had left the elevator and turned down the hallway, Professor Gin Buttons had appeared, coming toward them.

"Professor! We—"

"Found Rob? Yes, I can see that. Good. Very good."

And with a nod and a wave, he was gone into an elevator. Rob and Cindy exchanged befuddled looks.

"Come on." She pushed him impatiently, not wanting anything else to distract her from seeing Nat.

Once they finally reached the room, a jolt went through Cindy at the sight of the closed door. Hanging from the knob was a black T-shirt...the same kind of shirt she had seen on the riverbank at the failed Ice Boats Race. Cindy wasn't sure what it meant, but something deep in her gut told her it wasn't good.

Cautiously, she opened the door. 'Darcy Dark One' was nowhere to be found. She gazed at the beautiful face of her beloved.

Natalie's head rolled from side to side, and Cindy let out an audible gasp. She took her hand, and Nat slowly began to open her eyes, but her eyelids seemed heavily weighed down.

"Cindy..."

She had never loved the sound of her own name more. Without letting go of Nat's hand, she reached over the bed rail and pressed the call button.

"I'm here, Nat," she cooed.

"Brother....brother...John...need John...want Momma..."

A nurse knocked twice, then entered the room.

"She's awake!" Cindy exulted. "She said my name and rolled her head, and she mentioned a brother."

The nurse went to Natalie's bedside and called for another nurse to come in. Cindy stepped back to let her do her job and stood beside Rob, beaming.

"Sorry to drag you here," she offered, though she didn't mean it. "This is—"

"Natasha," Rob said in a hollow voice. "Natasha Mayne."