



## Dance In Shadows Excerpt

Book 9 of the Incognito Series

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### The Network

The Network is the world's most covert organization with underground headquarters in Chicago beneath a front technology company called ETI. Having unchallenged authority and skill to disable and destroy criminals, the Network takes over where regular law enforcement leaves off in the mission for absolute justice. The price for that justice is high, requiring the life of every man and woman who serves. For them, there is no life and no love, only duty.

### Organizational Hierarchy

#### Oversight Committee:

#1 (1st in Command): Captain Shannon McKee, Head in Washington, D.C.†  
Chase Giovanni, Committee member

#### Level 1 Operatives:

#2 (2nd in Command): Angelo Pluzetti, Liaison between Oversight and the Network

#3 (3rd in Command): Captain Ron Blair, Head of Operations†

#4 (4th in Command): Hunter Savage, Master Strategist^^^

#5 (5th in Command): Kirsten Ulrick, Head Team Leader/Mission Coordinator\*\*

#5 (5th in Command): Roan Emory, Head Team Leader/Mission Coordinator  
(KIA)^

#### Level 2 Lead Operatives:

Jocelyn Dominica, Psychiatrist

Rockwell "Vlad" Vlademar, Weapons Master

Cara "Inspector Gadget" Ross, Technology

Justine Fielding, Comm & Systems Analyst^^  
Dr. Celine Savage, Medical

**Level 3 Operatives:**

Lona Reznik, Head of Analysis  
Susana Ortega, Analysis Team^^^

**Level 3 Field Operatives:**

*Alpha Team:*

Ashton Barnett, Leader\*\*  
Dez Luttino, 1st Position††

*Beta Team:*

Noah Harlow, Leader  
Rhiannon Murray, 1st Position

**Level 4 Field Operatives:**

Kyle Vincent, Red Team Leader (MIA)\*  
Natalie Francis, Green Team Leader\*\*\*

**Level 5 Field Operatives:**

Nova Granger, 2nd Position, Green Team††  
Reb Porter, 3rd Position, Green Team\*\*\*

\* [NO ORDINARY LOVE](#), Book 1 of the Incognito Series

\*\* [UNTIL DEATH DO US PART](#), Book 2 of the Incognito Series

\*\*\* [BOUNTY ON THE REBEL'S HEART](#), Book 3 of the Incognito Series

^ [DEAD DROP](#), Book 4 of the Incognito Series

^^ [UNDER THE SPELL](#), Book 5 of the Incognito Series

^^^ [RENEGADE'S ROSE](#), Book 6 of the Incognito Series

† [UNDERCOVER ANGEL](#), Book 7 of the Incognito Series

†† [HARD TO HANDLE](#), Book 8 of the Incognito Series

## Chapter 1

*January 1*

Angelo Pluzetti paced the floor of his office. Occasionally, he stopped and looked out the floor-to-ceiling glass walls, down to the Communications Department, where a mission was in progress. Hunter Savage, Master Strategist, and the Head Mission Coordinator, Kirsten Ulrick, ran the operation from the compound with the Comm

leader, Justine Fielding. Just moments ago, the teams on site had intercepted the bomb they'd been alerted to only hours ago—set to go off at the winter home of the President of the United States. The country's leader was currently enjoying the holiday there with his family.

“Anything?” Angelo questioned, using the comm unit on the long, black credenza built against the overlooking window.

“Ash's team is disabling the bomb now,” Kirsten repeated calmly.

Angelo didn't wonder how the two terrorist groups had placed the device and gotten it past the President's heavy security. Revolutionary Echelon Defenders—R.E.D.—and their smaller ally, New Horizon, had plagued the country for long years with their malicious attacks. The Network was a white hat, covert organization devoted to disabling criminals in a way few others could. In the last few years, realizing the Network could frustrate their individual objectives indefinitely, the two terrorist groups been working together to target highest-level operatives. Fortunately, neither faction had been able to locate or penetrate Network headquarters, located in a secret underground bunker beneath a legitimate technology corporation known as ETI. The corporation was situated in Chicago and was a front that designed innovative equipment for both public and internal use.

Terrorists had been concentrating on defeating the Network and its personnel for so long, Angelo wondered if his top minds had neglected the possibility that the criminals possessed another directive. The notorious leader of R.E.D., aptly nicknamed the Black Pope, had relegated all of his resources to destroying the Network and Hunter Savage. As long as the groups stayed focused on that, Angelo had been assured they could protect the country while thwarting those seeking to rob the population of justice for all.

For the first time in countless years, his past served up the painful reminder of his high school sweetheart and young wife, murmuring sweetly, “Have patience, darling. You've taken care of everything. Now trust those in your service to carry it out.”

The gentle tone of Carly's voice in his head, and the reassurance that he'd overlooked nothing, made him close his eyes now as he perched on the credenza. Her lovely face filled his mind, shocking him with the level of agony that gripped him. *Thirty years...thirty years ago, Carly got the babies secured in their car seats. I leaned into the back seat of the van and kissed their angelic faces. Only a year old, Anya already looked sleepy. Two-year-old Jacob giggled when I tickled him under his chin. When I drew back and kissed my beloved wife, the center of my world, she wrapped her arms around me. Dear Lord, every kiss was a celebration. Then*

*I stood back to watch Carly drive out for a day at zoo. At the end of the block, the left turn signal blinking, the vehicle had exploded as soon as she eased into the turn. Even from the distance, I was knocked back. Enemies of the CIA, my enemies, had destroyed my family with that car bomb.*

“It’s done,” Kirsten said on a pent-up sigh of release. “We have two of the terrorists in custody.”

Angelo opened his eyes, swallowed when he saw his office, not the asphalt he’d crawled forward on until he got the strength to get to his feet and run...run toward his family, knowing he couldn’t save them and it was all over. *Thirty years ago, I lost everything and so I gave up my life to the Network, to Tom McKee’s relentless urging to join the fledgling organization he and the then-President were forming with the mission of taking over where regular law enforcement left off. I wouldn’t join before that. Not when it meant leaving my family behind. But when they were taken from me so violently, there was nothing else for me.*

“There’s an...anomaly,” Kirsten added, sounding uncertain.

“What is it?” Angelo demanded.

“There’s something on the bomb casing... Hold on. I’m getting confirmation now.”

Angelo stood, looking down at his lead operatives below.

Kirsten glanced at him from Comm. “It’s a fuzzy picture. Of you. One of your former identities.”

No doubt when he’d been Master Strategist and primary recruiter for the Network instead of second in command. During a time in his life when he’d actually left these dark halls and emerged into the sunlight often instead of seeing it only from the tower of the ETI skyscraper far above the bunker. The protective insulation was part of the package in ascending to the top of the chain of power. He’d been working up the chain for three decades. Angelo fought an urge to laugh at the ridiculousness of the terrorists targeting him with the bomb.

“Withdraw your teams,” Hunter ordered the primary team leader. “Bring the device back to the compound. I’ll see that Jocelyn is ready to interrogate the prisoners.”

“Wounded?” Angelo asked.

There was a pause, then Kirsten nodded up to him in the roost. “Secondary teams had some injuries during infiltration.”

“What’s the ETA?”

“Under forty-five minutes.”

“I’ll have Celine’s medical team standing by at Airlock 2,” Angelo said. “Justine, have Head of Operations establish a sat link with Shannon and Chase at Oversight in the briefing room. Hunter and Kirsten, meet us there with Jocelyn and Ron when you wrap up the mission.”

Angelo called down to Medical, hoping to talk to Dr. Celine Savage about the injuries. He was told she was in her fourth-floor suite in the skyscraper. Disappointed at the thought she might be avoiding him again, he put in the order to have the med teams on standby.

Hunter, Kirsten, and Captain Ron Blair, Head of Operations, were already waiting for him in the briefing room on the lower level.

“Jocelyn will be here as soon as she finishes with the prisoners,” Kirsten told them.

From the monitors at the end of the circular table, the top two members of the Oversight Committee in Washington, D.C., Captain Shannon McKee and Chase Giovanni, greeted them.

“What did the team find?” Shannon asked, her face showing concern. Angelo had the feeling she’d gotten an earful from the President’s security team leader. Only the highest officials in the White House, including the President and a couple of members of the CIA, knew about the existence of the Network. They trusted the organization to administer absolute justice where other law enforcement agencies couldn’t. And that usually meant no one got near the President. This time, R.E.D. and their little buddies had gotten too damn close for anyone’s comfort.

“Ash’s team found an anomaly—a poor quality photograph of Angelo in his Samuel Crawford identity,” Hunter said, calling up the digital shot the Alpha Team leader, Ashton Barnett, had sent.

“It was another trap,” Angelo said simply. “This one with a purpose. They wanted to show us how easy it is to get to our country’s top man.”

“And how easily they’ll get to *our* top man,” Shannon finished, adding, “They’re targeting ‘The Immortal.’”

Angelo bristled at the nickname he'd gotten after thirty years of Network service. The operatives here had also started calling him "The Immortal" because he hadn't seemed to age at all during his time here. He looked the same now as he had when he came on board. But how did their enemies know about his annoying sobriquet?

Shannon's tone was harsh. "They *intended* us to intercept the bomb and prevent the assassination in order to get their message across. I guess they figure they can't get to you, Hunter, so they've changed their target."

And damn them for it. Angelo knew for a fact that the new threat would have his operatives and Oversight on alert concerning his safety. As if he wasn't already a prisoner inside this facility. *Be careful what you wish for.*

Jocelyn Dominica, Network psychiatrist, entered the room and took a seat at the table. "I'd like to spend more time with our guests when I'm done here," she started, "but both of our prisoners are members of New Horizon. Apparently, R.E.D. betrayed them with this operation. They didn't bother telling them to pull out once the bomb was planted, and so these two were captured. The rest of the New Horizon team were killed by our operatives. The alliance between R.E.D. and New Horizon has been fractured. And New Horizon will want revenge at any price."

## Chapter 2

Angelo had expected Celine to be with her medical contingent when he got the notice that the teams were arriving with their injured. She was nowhere to be seen when he walked down to Airlock 2 to greet them.

"Did you page her in her suite?" Angelo asked a senior member of her staff.

"Several times, sir. We've had no communication with the doctor for several hours."

Grimacing, Angelo turned away. Much as he'd wanted to see the bomb's message, his worry overrode his instincts. For weeks now, he'd noticed the change in Celine. She'd been ignoring work, calling on her staff to handle things for her. She'd even been distracted when they had dinner together in the tower. Worse, she'd been uncommunicative. *And that's never good. If Celine doesn't share the details of her daily life and talk about her emotions, she represses. The damage becomes both internal and external.*

At twenty-nine, Celine was an emotional creature, moody and sensitive. From the first time they met, he'd seen the dramatically needy side of her. He'd dealt with it on and off for years by upping his doting on her in the form of personal gifts and private

times in his suite. In the last few weeks, he'd realized that, when she crashed, it would be worse than ever.

Lately, the Network had been going through major changes. A little personal freedom had had a negative effect on Celine. Unlike the other operatives who'd used the relaxation of certain rules to pursue monogamous romantic relationships in ways they never could have before, she'd become volatile and unpredictable in all her endeavors. *Self-destructive. And I don't know how I can keep rescuing her.*

Taking a deep breath, Angelo nodded decisively at Ron. "Take care of this," he said.

The Head of Operations nodded back, his gaze penetrating. Angelo didn't give him time to ask questions. He turned and walked back to Comm Central, where he asked Justine to page Celine in her suite.

A minute passed, and Justine glanced up at him, brushing back her red hair. "Nothing, sir. She's not responding. You sure she's there?"

"Try Medical."

Angelo anticipated the headshake he received from Justine a moment later. Frowning again, he glanced across the cement floor of the compound toward the Weapons Department. For some time now, he'd been aware of the rumors that Celine had been dating the sixty-something-year-old Weapons Master, Rockwell "Vlad" Vlademar. Angelo hadn't been surprised by the rumors either, because he knew they were true.

The fact that Vlad had a daughter who was only slightly older than Celine didn't matter. Vlad had been a womanizer for as long as Angelo could remember. Unfortunately, if he'd been looking for a simple sexual liaison with Celine, he hadn't gotten it. The relationship had reputedly been combustible—because of Celine and her ever-shifting emotions. *She got involved with him to punish me. She told me about her relationship with Vlad often, in far too much detail, to inspire something I can't give her. I closed my eyes to that because I can't be the man she needs. I never could. And she can't accept that, especially since the rules around here have relaxed.*

Celine had never been attracted to males her age. Even men a *little* bit older than her weren't her type. Thirty-year age difference seemed to suit her. And Angelo didn't like to think about *why* that was the case. She'd told him long ago that she'd never been attracted to men her age, partly because her father had been so much like her brother Hunter—young, hard-looking, supple and muscular. Hunter had smothered her with his overprotective care-taking all her life. She'd never had a father figure in appearance and deed that fit the description of tender, gentle, kind. Naturally, she

ascribed those traits to a lover. Unfortunately, she also had a taste for the ruthless attributes she saw in the warriors all around her.

Only Celine knew Angelo's true age of fifty-six. Everyone else incorrectly assumed he was in his mid-forties. He'd believed from the beginning of his time in the Network that aging would cause the operatives to doubt his ability to make wise decisions, so he'd been determined to keep himself at the peak of health. He controlled what he could control. The rest, involving cosmetic and medical treatments, solidified the belief that he hadn't aged in three decades.

Angelo strode to Weapons, calling for Vlad, who emerged seconds later from the back room. The man's long hair, tied back with a leather strap, remained black with a few streaks of silver here and there. Tall and muscular, Vlad nevertheless had been showing signs of his age in the past several years—not that most of the female recruits were bothered by his age—accompanied by deep lines on his face, especially around his eyes. Combined with his natural charm, his looks meant he could get any woman he wanted, for whatever he wanted. *What does he want with Celine? His relationship with her hasn't been brief, like most of his torrid flings.*

Angelo didn't want to know Vlad's intentions with her. "Have you seen Celine?" Angelo asked, carefully dispassionate.

Immediate tension crept into Vlad's ebony eyes. "I left her in her suite about an hour ago."

"Anything wrong?"

Vlad swallowed, his gaze clearly upset, but he only shook his head. Celine and Vlad's fights were almost as notorious as their make-ups. Even in his insulated place at the top of the organization, Angelo had heard more than he cared to about the fiery interactions between them.

Celine wasn't allowed to leave the compound without a security team. The only place she *could* be was Medical or her suite. Since she'd last been seen in her suite, Angelo walked quickly to the private elevator in his office, punching for the fifth floor impatiently. His chest felt too tight—dread, he knew. He'd been through many episodes, rescuing Celine Savage from herself, and he recognized the signs leading up to another one only too well. *Damn you, Celine. Why do you punish yourself to punish me? I never made any promises to you. I couldn't. You know why, too. My family—Carly, Jacob and Anya—was my one weakness. And that's where my enemies struck. Punished them to punish me. I won't let it happen ever again. I won't let myself be weak. And I won't let you take the fall.*

His heart thick and full in his throat, he overrode the security codes to get into her suite. His gaze took in the champagne flutes, half full, melting ice in the silver bucket with the expensive bottle of bubbly, the fresh roses. A soft blues song played from the stereo. He could smell the old man's familiar cologne. Vlad had been here. And he'd gone...gone before she put his flowers in a vase, before they finished a single glass of champagne.

"Celine," he called as he moved swiftly from room to room, certain all the while she wasn't there. He knew where Celine went when she was lonely, when she was afraid and needy. He'd given her and her alone unsupervised access codes to the tower as soon as he'd been promoted to second in command. She'd come to him day and night. To talk—about work, or personal matters. To eat. To share a drink. Just be together. And lately, she'd come to him in the dead of night as well. He'd been aware she'd come from Vlad's bed to his, aware she'd made love with the other man knowing Angelo wouldn't give her what she needed. Yet he'd never forbid her from coming to him. Nor had he fulfilled her desires since she started the bad habit. He'd simply held her all night, then slipped out of bed early the next morning long before she woke.

He wanted her. Dear God, had he wanted her. The sexual desire he'd considered extinct for decades persisted with Celine. Despite the fact that the former rules had lapsed *en force*, he wouldn't allow himself to fall in love with her. Yet he'd never forget the one night they spent together two years ago. He'd never forget how violent his needs had been nor how eagerly she'd responded to them. Their intensity had surprised him after so many years of burying, forgetting. And Celine had been there. Anyone else, and he could have resisted. Anyone else, and he could have prevented himself from falling in love.

In the morning, nothing had changed. For him. He couldn't let it. He'd always been stronger than she was, and that strength had served him well. One night hadn't cooled his passion for her. Not even after smelling another man's cologne on her skin. Not even when her lips no longer tasted like her own. But Angelo Pluzetti was nothing if not self-disciplined.

His anger rose now as he rushed back to the elevator and rode it impatiently to the tower. Knowing where he was going now, where she was, he ran through his luxurious suite to the bedroom. In the low lamp light, he saw her sprawled across the black satin sheets, dressed in a slip of indigo nightgown. In contrast, her body looked as pale and transparent as a ghost. On the floor beside her were a spilled bottle of whiskey and a small plastic pill bottle. Angelo grabbed the smaller bottle, noting that it didn't have a label. The lid was gone. There were no pills inside.

“Damn you, Celine,” he muttered, reaching toward her supine form. His fingers found a slow, thready pulse. She was alive. But the fact that she’d downed the contents of an unlabeled bottle told him she’d gone out of her way to prevent them from saving her. She’d been serious. She wanted to die.

Turning, he punched in the code for Medical on the nightstand comm unit. “This is Angelo in the tower. I need your best team members in the isolation unit immediately. Keep this quiet. Do *not* alert Hunter, whatever you do. Be ready to treat an overdose, probably of depressives. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“We’ll be ready for you.”

Jamming the pill bottle in his pocket, he scooped Celine off the bed. She seemed to weigh almost nothing in his arms. She felt more like a lifeless bird than the woman he’d cared for since she was a child.

Carrying her, he flew out of his suite, to the elevator, and through the most indirect routes within the compound to Medical. He couldn’t risk running into Hunter. The situation was complicated enough as it was without having her brother charge in.

As Angelo had ordered, the best medical personnel was assembled in the isolation unit, their equipment at the ready. He laid Celine on the gurney and they swooped in the instant he stepped away. Angelo handed over the bottle to a nurse.

“It was empty.”

“We noticed an hour ago that we were missing a small stock of depressives here in the isolation ward drug cabinet. She must have taken them and didn’t bother to cover her tracks.”

The codes to get inside the carefully controlled and monitored drug cabinets within Medical changed every day, and, as head of the Medical team, Celine would have them. Angelo knew the team would change those codes immediately so she couldn’t get inside again if she recovered. Until she was better—and Angelo thought now, maybe even afterward—she wouldn’t be given access to any codes. “So you can save her?” he asked.

“It depends on how long ago she took them. If they’ve already been absorbed...”

Angelo stopped breathing with the trailed-off sentence and the helpless look in the doctor’s eyes.

“We’ll do everything we can, sir.”

“You do that. And if it’s not enough, I want a miracle. Don’t give up on her. She wouldn’t give up on any of you.”

The doctor nodded, urging him to leave them to do their work.

Angelo’s head felt dizzy as he demanded answers of himself. *How could she do this? Why?* But, damnably, he already knew the answers. And then he couldn’t help realizing that this could have been prevented.

*With love.* The love she’d needed from him, but he’d believed he couldn’t give her without leaving himself vulnerable. That one night they’d shared led her to believe he loved her—led her to believe the truth. But instead of admitting to her or even himself, he’d backed off and left her alone with her feelings. Now he could lose the very soul he most wanted to save.