



Hypnotized Excerpt

Book 10 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††
Lucy Carlton, 4th Position

Beta Team:

Noah Harlow, Leader
Rhiannon Murray, 1st Position
Fiona Verbena, 2nd Position
Victor Leventhal, 3rd Position
Matt “Shep” Shepherd, 4th 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

††† [DANCE IN SHADOWS](#), Book 9 of the Incognito Series

“Your boyfriend refused to break,” the lead guard informed her.

Rhiannon Murray didn’t react, even in an attempt to lift her head or open her heavily swollen, bruised eyes. “He told us to go ahead and finish you off—the better to keep your organization’s precious secrets.”

Stay intact. Maintain the brick wall that won’t allow them to get past my defenses or break through. Because Noah won’t break...not even for me.

The guard lifted her head from her chest. In agony, she opened her eyes to mere slits to see him standing close enough for her to attack. She didn’t have the energy. Days had bled into each other until she no longer knew how long she’d been their prisoner.

She and Noah had been taken captive on their mission to find the Remote Command Center—RCC—where nuclear weapon suitcases were being mass-produced by a notorious terrorist group. The hours that followed had seemed endless as they’d been beaten and used against each other under the assumption that they were lovers. Their interrogators couldn’t have known how right they were. But neither she nor Noah had given anything up.

Though she was aware that she and Noah had been moved from one location to another frequently since then, the two of them had been kept separated. They’d tortured her endlessly, each session worse than the one before, but she’d betrayed nothing. Nevertheless, she no longer knew how much more she could take. Her training had taught her that sometime around the third or fourth day, she would no longer feel anything except the desire to make the pain stop. She would be vulnerable if she didn’t resist and fight. Better to die a warrior than a traitor. But she didn’t want to give up hope that the covert organization she worked for, the Network, would consider her valuable enough to extract. *Just hold on a little longer...*

Unfortunately, all she could think about now was Noah. Was he still alive? Would she ever see him again? If only she’d realized that the last time they’d been in each other’s arms was their last time *ever*. *What would I have said to him? Could I have told him he’s the only man I’ve ever loved, the only one I’ve ever really wanted to love me?*

She knew the answers to her questions. Their lives belonged to the Network. That meant they kept their hearts out of their relationships. *The friends I have, I’ve kept them at arms’ length, the way I have most of my life. And Noah...Noah I simply don’t know how he feels and so I haven’t given myself to him the way I’ve wanted to.* Rhiannon stifled a groan, unwilling to provide her captor the slightest satisfaction.

If he told the guards to let me die, did he do it because he believes we'll both be rescued? Or because he truly doesn't care whether I live or die?

The fact that she couldn't answer this particular concern brought a spasm of horror to the surface. Before she knew it, tears had filled her eyes—and this pig guard was seeing her vulnerability.

“He told us you mean nothing to him, *chica*, that *he* was more valuable to your organization than you are, that they will leave you to die here.”

Remember your training: Your captor will do and say anything to break you. Anything. They'll get inside your head, your heart, your weaknesses. Be a brick wall...

“He cares nothing for you, fool. Did he tell you he loved you while you were alone in the dark, in each other's arms? Did he make you believe you were all that mattered to him?” The guard shook his head, and Rhiannon understood that he'd gotten to the heart of her, where she didn't want him to be.

Noah never spoke of his feelings. They took what they could get from each other. Yet *he* mattered to *her*, more than she'd ever allowed herself to admit to him or to herself.

The guard leaned forward a fraction. “Why do you care what happens to him or his precious organization? Have your revenge, *chica*. Get your satisfaction now by telling us what we want to know. We will take revenge for you. We will crush them all in your defense. Don't you deserve that for how worthless you are to them after all your loyal service?”

Another guard entered the room and went to the leader. He spoke quietly to him, then the leader turned back to her. “Your boyfriend, *chica*, he has been rescued by your organization. But here you are, still in our grasp. Do you think they will send anyone for you? They are not here. We are fully intact. Curse them and die while you can!”

She felt him lift her head again, and she opened her eyes to him for an instant. Then she deliberately closed them and worked herself out of his grasp.

He swore violently at her continued unwillingness to break. “Cut her down. Put her in the ground. We move out in five minutes.”

Two of the guards grasped her tied legs—a lesson they'd learned early—while another reached up, grasped her wrists, and cut through the thick rope that held her hands over her head. He left her wrists bound. The leader's words came back to her—“*Cut*

her down. Put her in the ground...—when the three guards carried her backwards. Without ceremony, they dropped her. Rhiannon felt herself falling into darkness. When she landed, it was on hard-packed earth quite a few feet from the surface. An instant later, she heard a noise like a machine, a bulldozer. Then dirt fell on her, heavy and thick. They're burying me. Alive.

Even with her hands and legs tied, she fought, trying to push her way up through the mounds of dirt falling into the hole on top of her. But it was coming in too fast and heavy, pinning her.

“Put her in the ground. We move out in a few minutes.” *I'm completely alone. I'll die here.*
“Do you think they will send anyone for you?” *Noah has already been extracted, but they won't come for me. I'm not worth the risk.*

There was no air, no way to breathe in anything but the compressed dirt. *Even if Noah knows I'm still lost, he won't come for me. He never loved me, only the Network...*

Without air, she gave herself up to the thought and the blackness...

* * * *

“Rhiannon...”

She drew agonizing breath.

“Rhiannon, are you intact?”

On instinct, she moved her hand in the required signal to tell the operative that her captors hadn't broken her. The Network's secrets were intact.

When she became fully conscious again, she gasped for breath, clawing her way desperately.

“Rhiannon,” a soft voice called and gentle hands held her firmly.

Opening her eyes, she blinked in shock at the bright lights she saw over her. She struggled to make her eyes squint against them, and a figure formed, a familiar face. “Celine,” she coughed out, her throat tormented and hoarse. Her doctor, Celine Savage, stood over her, her expression even more tender than usual.

“You’re all right, sweetie. You’re back here in the compound. It’s over. We have you.”

“Buried...alive.”

“I know. But the team that extracted you said you weren’t there long.”

“I...died.”

“You’re alive, sweetie. I promise you.” Celine brushed back her hair. “You must have been terrified. But you didn’t break.”

“Noah?”

“He was extracted as well. He’s fine.”

“First.”

“What?”

“He was extracted first. He was...more valuable.”

Celine shook her head, her long, angel blond hair swaying gently. “It was a matter of timing, Rhiannon.”

“Did he...come after me?”

“He couldn’t. He was tortured, too. He wasn’t in any shape, honey. I’m sure if he had been, he would have come after you. He’s your team leader.”

Yes, Noah was her team leader, the more valuable of the two of them. If he’d come after her, he would have done so because he didn’t leave anyone on his team behind, ever. *He doesn’t love me. He never did. These past ten years...*

Rhiannon suddenly realized how little she knew of Noah Harlow. They’d never talked about their lives before the Network, *outside* the organization. The few times she’d asked him, he’d said that his life belonged to the Network. Nothing else mattered. They made love, they spent free time together when they could escape detection, took downtime together. But they’d never spoken of love or even caring for each other. *He had needs. I fulfill them. His heart belongs to another, just like all the other men who’ve used me. Only Noah’s loyalty is to the Network.*

“I was scared, Rhi,” Celine said softly, and Rhiannon looked up at her in surprise. “I know you don’t want anyone to get too close, but I don’t want to lose your friendship. I thought I’d lost you and then I wished...”

Rhiannon had spent years believing the rhetoric Noah spouted at every opportunity. If you open up and leave yourself vulnerable, you give your enemies a place to strike. Even within the Network, any hint of weakness could be exploited. The only way to survive was behind fortified walls. Nothing got out, no one got in.

“Are we friends, Celine?” Rhiannon asked a woman who was unlike anyone else inside this place. Celine wasn’t a warrior. She wasn’t an unfeeling machine. She was delicate and emotional. *She’s my friend.*

“Yes. I’m your friend, Rhi. I’ve always wanted to be. You’re...you’re different.”

Rhiannon saw tears form in Celine’s eyes. *I almost died. And I would have died with no one caring one way or another, except Celine—and I’ve never even given her much reason to care about me. I would have given my life for loyalty to an organization that sees me as valuable only when I’m performing my duty. Even then, I’m not as valuable as some.*

In sitting up, Rhiannon felt every bruise, every lash. Ignoring them, she leaned forward and clasped Celine’s hands. “We’re friends, Celine. We have each other. Thank you for caring about me.”

I’ll ask for a transfer from Beta Team as soon as I get out of Medical. I’ll tell Noah that it—whatever we’ve been doing together in the shadows—is over. I’ll start my life, such as it is, all over again. Without the illusions I’ve been foolishly harboring.

Chapter 1

Four years later...

The locker room was buzzing the way it always did with a mission going out. Noah Harlow pulled on the Kevlar jacket, glancing across his locker section to the next one, where two of his team members, Rhiannon Murray and Matt Shepherd, were suiting up. He recognized Shep’s comments to her as flirtation—an unnecessary practice he had no personal experience with and grimaced about now. With any available female, Shep seemed to enjoy flirting like the act was as natural as breathing. *I’m not imagining that Rhiannon seems to enjoy the frivolous byplay more than she used to.*

Noah glanced away from them to see his other two team members nearly ready. Fiona Verbena and Vic Leventhal were heading toward Weapons to pick up their equipment. Noah followed Rhiannon and Shep to the department, unwilling to reprimand either of them for their flirtations. His team always got serious when it was time to get serious. Out in the field, he trusted them to put their duty first. Besides, much as he didn't appreciate their interactions, he knew they were harmless. Rhiannon hadn't broken up with him for another man.

Noah remembered her parting words with a clarity that bothered him even now.
"What we had isn't enough for me."

Four years ago, Noah and Rhiannon had been extracted after being kidnapped by a terrorist organization that had since been all but disabled. Following the extraction, Rhiannon had spoken the last words he'd ever expected from her. She'd told him their relationship was over on anything beyond a professional level, and that she'd requested to be assigned to a different team. She'd walked away, not waiting for his response, and they hadn't spoken of the severing again in the years that followed. He'd seen to it that her requested team transfer was denied each time she'd brought it up with their superiors, and, when she'd been allowed to move to another Network apartment building in Chicago, he'd also requested a transfer to the same building, on a floor far above her. As far as he knew, she had no idea he was living near her again, the way he had to—needed to. He couldn't explain the requirement beyond that. While he'd wordlessly accepted her refusal to see him privately anymore, he'd never recovered from her rejection. Because the physical and emotional desire to be near her hadn't abated inside him one iota.

As the world's most covert organization, established to take over where regular law enforcement left off, the organization was anonymous to all but the highest officials in the White House, and a select committee called Oversight, which acted as liaison between The Network and the American government. The underground headquarters in the city were beneath a front technology company called Expanding Technology Industries (ETI). When Noah had been told he would have no life, no freedom, only duty, he'd accepted the offer willingly. He'd seen an opportunity to make a difference with his career.

Unfortunately, he'd never expected to meet someone like Rhiannon Murray. From the first time he'd been assigned to mentor her in her training, he'd realized he couldn't keep himself behind the fortified walls he'd erected to protect himself. Even after he'd realized he couldn't be indifferent to her, he knew he couldn't risk more than that. Most operatives believed that changes within the organization—namely,

loosening of former restrictions in regard to personal relationships—meant that they could openly pair off, even indulging in mock wedding ceremonies.

Noah refused to trust to the calm that surely preceded the storm. His beliefs that revealing weakness gave enemies a place to strike had proven true four years ago. Even within the Network, any hint of vulnerability could be used against them. He refused to expose and endanger Rhiannon. If it meant she believed he'd been willing to let her die four years ago, if it meant he had to accept only being near her as a shadow, he'd endure. Unless he was called away on a mission, he was never far from her. Still, their relationship was nothing like it used to be, the way he wanted it to be now between them.

His jaw tightened as he watched her gathering her equipment. Her dark, cat-like eyes focused intently on checking her weapon. Always the competent, cool, unflinching operative. Yet he never forgot that Rhiannon wouldn't allow any other man to be with her the way she she'd once allowed him. He resisted a sudden urge to touch her shoulder-length, mahogany-colored hair that moved like a bell when she was in motion. Running his hands through her hair was like fingering silk. He'd gotten as much pleasure from caressing her from head to toe as she did from his attentions. Her skin had been as soft and smooth as a peach, a golden tan color.

How many scars did she walk away from that kidnapping with? I never got a chance to see them, love them, heal them. Maintaining an imaginary inventory of those scars had been the only way he could bear the knowledge that she'd been hurt. He'd seek out each one, kiss it whisper-soft until she sighed.

Never again can I heal and love her. But I can keep her safe. I can watch over her day and night—on missions and when we're off-duty. She doesn't need to know I'm there.

She turned to see him nearby, watching her, and her wide, full lips pursed. She averted her gaze, taking on that unapproachable expression he'd come to hate because she'd used it just for him in the last few years.

Why did I think she would understand why we have to keep our relationship hidden? Why did I think she was different from the others? Because she was. But he knew she wanted love, wanted to give and take it openly and without inhibitions. She hadn't always needed that. Or she kept the fact that she needed more hidden from me.

When she walked away, he picked up his weapon and pivoted to check it, but his gaze rebelled and instead followed her down the corridor. Even in the full armor they

wore, he responded to the sashay of her slim hips, her long stride and straight back. Shep whistled after her.

She disappeared around the corner to transport, and Noah got his gear. Annoyed, he didn't let himself look at the kid's fresh face, eager to get the mission underway.

Rhiannon responds to his flirtations now. She didn't before. It shouldn't matter. But I've spent four years waiting for her to change her mind and come back to me. I can't let her go. I won't. I haven't. And I refuse to let another man step into the place she made only for me.

Shep picked up two of the duffel bags with the equipment they'd need for the mission, and Noah grabbed the last two, following the younger man to the waiting conveyance. When he got inside the van, he saw that Shep had squeezed in close to Rhiannon on one of the benches.

Focus on the mission.

Only ten minutes ago, they'd gotten word that a suicide bomber was staking out Temple Square in Salt Lake City, making demands that the FBI was claiming they would fulfill—given enough time. Network teams were mobilized without delay and the aircraft would have them on-site soon.

Noah cleared his mind during the flight, periodically checking the situation at the comm station within the aircraft. The FBI was pacifying the bomber, who was just a young kid, maybe fourteen or fifteen years old. The satellite transmission revealed that the boy was drugged, not entirely lucid, as he repeated over and over that he had a message for the nameless organization—for the Immortal. The Network's 2nd in Command, Angelo Pluzetti, was referred to as the Immortal because he never seemed to age. Pluzetti been involved in the development of the Network nearly from its inception.

As soon as the aircraft touched down in Salt Lake City the teams approached the gardens surrounding the headquarters of The Church of the Latter-day Saints, where the bomber had made his stand. Once there, Noah ordered the FBI to evacuate. Operatives moved into position outside the perimeter, restricting access to all but their own team.

The suicide bomber was even smaller and frailer than he'd appeared on satellite vision. He looked nearly starved beneath the vest of explosives he wore, his skin the pale gray of one who hadn't seen sunlight for a long time. He didn't seem to be in control of his faculties. *Drugged and brainwashed. I can't save him. Not if he won't save himself.*

Noah called, “We are the nameless organization. The Immortal is listening. State your demands.”

The kid’s head turned toward the sound of his voice. It was as if some kind of switch had been flipped. He spoke calmly, without hesitation, like a device playing back a recording. “I have a message for the Immortal. My name is Dr. Sherry Mansfield. I’m sure you’ll remember me, as you once tried to recruit me for my special talent. I’m currently being held captive by a terrorist group called Black Sky. If you can figure out that this was the only way I could possibly get this message to you, you’ll realize why Black Sky kidnapped me, and what my husband, who is their leader, is forcing me to do.”

Noah saw the teenager’s hand move a fraction toward the explosives strapped to him. *We can’t rescue him, dammit.* Noah spoke into his mic. “Air deployment, bring the unit now. Teams, fall back another five feet.”

“I have a deal for you,” the boy continued. “If you’ll rescue me, I’ll use my talent for your organization, just the way you wanted me to years ago.” The boy raised his hand, his thumb on the trigger.

The helicopter flew in above the gardens and maintained altitude as the Network-designed explosion containment was lowered over the bomber. Made of advanced polymers and alloys, the shock-absorbing, blast-mitigating unit would contain the explosion from a typical suicide bomber’s detonation within a five-foot radius. But Noah realized the boy would trigger the explosives before the barrier was fully in place. The blast would be only partially contained.

“Air deployment, release the unit!” he shouted, slammed down the blast-shield on his helmet, and ran toward Rhiannon.

She hadn’t fallen back as ordered. Just the opposite, she emerged from the bushes, thankfully with her blast helmet on and the shield over her face, and spoke in a pleading, kind voice to the boy, “Please, you don’t have to do this. You don’t have to listen to what they’ve told you. Let us help you. We can make the voice in your head go away—”

The chopper disconnected the structure and soared upwards as the blast unit surrounded the head of the bomber. The explosion rocked the garden. Noah dived to cover Rhiannon with as much of his own body as he could.