

# REGAN BLACK

*USA Today Bestselling Author*



# PROVING GROUND

**An Unknown Identities Short Story**

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By Regan Black

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By Regan Black  
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Ben Thalimer woke to the delicious absence of pain and a cool sheet draped over his prickling skin. The constant tingling sensation was dialed down, significantly less than it had been in recent days. What had been a constant army of ants marching over his nerve endings might only be an occasional platoon now. At the moment, it felt as though the fever had broken in the night. If it was night. Hard to tell that kind of thing here in his room with no clock and no window.

Twitching his hands, glancing around for the equipment near the bed, he realized the IV had been removed. He hoped that was progress. If they wanted him dead, they could've killed him a few times over by now. Waking up alive, with a clear head, it might be time to think about breaking out of this place.

He remembered crazy talk during the worst of it. Implants, alterations, enhancements. Had they done any of it? All of it? He wished he knew if what he'd overheard had been bizarre dreams or a terrible reality. Why the hell had he volunteered for this science fiction experiment? Oh, yeah. To become the *first* invisible soldier.

That was something to shoot for, something phenomenal. He'd never been the first of anything. For all of his twenty-five years he'd landed somewhere between second-best or dead-last. Perennially he'd been the smallest cog in every big, unfathomable system. He'd even been the last to die which was how he'd wound up here, under the care of the innovative Dr. Gerardi. Or so he'd been told.

Several weeks ago a woman with a friendly face and a pristine white lab coat had sat next to his bed and brought him up to speed, reviewing his injuries and his options. She explained he'd wound up in a top-secret facility, with the rather suspicious name of Unknown Identities. If he stayed, the UI program would give him a chance to make a difference for other men and women in the military. If he left, his life was over. Not his career, though apparently he'd jacked that up beyond all hope of recovery. His life. It was the program or nothing.

He wasn't a complete idiot. He was too curious to ignore the idea of being invisible. He just hadn't anticipated the cruel, painful days and nights until they'd started working on his DNA, making tweaks and changes in their search for advancement.

He had only the vaguest recollection of the procedure and discussions over his bed at the blurry edges between scheduled doses of morphine. Hell, he might be imagining all of this. A nightmare so bizarre it only felt as if it went on forever.

"Ah, you're awake." Dr. Gerardi's shoes squeaked as he entered the room, his head bent over the chart, showing the bare circle of scalp surrounded by thinning silver hair. "Feeling stronger today?"

"Stronger than what?" Ben pulled his hand from under the sheet, watched his skin color shift, fading in and out with the movement as it matched the sheet. Weird and cool all at once. "Can you see me?"

Gerardi tapped the thick black frame of his eyeglasses. "Yes. The feature on my heads-up display helps.

*Interesting.* Ben kept the observation to himself. He'd keep that in mind as he considered how best to leave the doctor and his strange experiments behind.

"Also," Gerardi continued, "you're not invisible, more of a substantive shadow. Still, if this is as good as we can do with you, I'm pleased with the results." Dr. Gerardi set the chart on the sink and clasped his hands behind his back. "Now that your enhancement seems to be holding steady, I've prescribed a medication to help you with any emotional discomfort."

"How will you know if I take it?" He sat up, watched the doctor react more slowly to his movements. "Will the pills be visible traveling down my throat?"

"No."

He said it with such conviction, Ben knew they'd tested this kind of thing already while he was unconscious. "Does being an invisible warrior mean I have to fight naked?" As sensitive as his skin had been, he couldn't imagine waltzing around battlefields with no protection.

Gerardi laughed, the sound a strange cross between a goat bleating and a barking dog and absolutely nothing funny or lighthearted about it. "We've placed an implant that should interact with clothing designed to refract light. Once you get the hang of it, you'll be virtually undetectable."

"Nice." He wasn't sure how they'd pulled it off. Based on those foggy nightmarish scenes lingering in his brain, he didn't want to understand anything other than how to use the enhancements.

"We're going to do a few tests here at the lab to make sure the implant is functioning properly."

There was a 'then' hanging out there unspoken, but Ben didn't care. He wanted to get up and moving and clear out the cobwebs. Patience for a purpose was one thing, useless inactivity a whole different problem. His body was telling him he'd been sedentary for too long.

A woman in pale blue scrubs walked in with a stack of black garments in her hands. Dr. Gerardi took the clothing and jerked his head toward the door. She hurried out.

"Does my barely there nudity freak her out?" Ben tossed back the sheet.

"No," Gerardi said, his jaw clenched against Ben's flippant attitude. "This is serious work, young man."

"Seriously cool," Ben replied with a surfer's attitude just to be contrary. He motioned for the clothes, hoping the knit fabric wouldn't be too irritating on his skin. Currently it seemed as if he could feel every fiber in the cotton sheets. "Will the skin sensitivity wear off soon?"

"Yes. The more you learn how to work with the enhancement, the less you should feel it."

Ben caught the 'should' and ignored it. No going back now even if he wanted to. He was too deep in the UI system. He dressed and triggered the implant as instructed, watching the clothing shimmer and fade. The distortion was minimal, similar to heat

waves rising from a sidewalk on a scorching summer day. "Seems like the clothes would be enough," he murmured.

"The clothing technology is unreliable on its own," Gerardi said. "Come along. They're impatient to see your progress."

He wondered about 'they' as he followed the doctor down the hall and into a room Picasso might've designed. Nothing made sense. Colors, fixtures, everything was random and scattered about. "What do you want me to do here?" *Please don't ask me to organize it.* He hated those crappy personality or logic tests.

"Be invisible," Dr. Gerardi said. He pulled a phone from his pocket. "Our spotters saw you walking down the hallway."

Right. He should've known every move from here on out was a test. "Any suggestion *how* I should be invisible?"

The creaky old doctor shook his head. "You're the first of your kind. You are setting the standard, Ben."

First. A nice concept, if he could pull it off. Walking into the room, he aimed for a dark blue screen. He held out his arm and saw himself clearly against the background. He wished to hell someone would give him a tip or guidance. Some damn suggestion of how to make the enhancement most effective. He didn't want to be the first *failure*, not with death as a probable consequence.

Gerardi stood in the doorway, flanked by two other men in lab coats. All three held clipboards. Only Gerardi wore the glasses that clued him into Ben's location.

He wandered from one backdrop to another, paused on various pieces of furniture, being tracked the whole time by all three of the observers. He dropped to all fours, tiptoed, to no avail. They still saw him. He made his way back to the darker screens and started over.

There had to be a way. He didn't want to go through life naked. If he didn't figure it out, they'd take him back to the lab and start over. The idea set his pulse racing and he had to struggle to keep the burst of obscenities and threats inside.

He didn't know jack about stealth technology or whatever they called this fabric. Desperately, he tried again and again, hoping what they'd done to his system would lead him to a breakthrough. Under the special fabric, his skin rippled with goosebumps and if they couldn't see him, they could probably follow their noses. He was sweating from the exertion and stress.

A speaker in the ceiling crackled. "Relax," the feminine voice said. "Don't try to be the color or thing. Be yourself."

He glared up at the speaker. "Myself isn't so helpful."

The speaker crackled again. "Think of it as being transparent, of letting the object behind you, around you steal all the attention. Use the perception of your observer as much as your enhancement."

He scowled as he stared at his observers. His breathing slowed. Transparent. Perception. He moved away from the wall, slowly and silently approaching Gerardi and the observers. "All right," he said, from a yard in front of them.

All three of them jumped.

*Interesting.*

He moved back, thinking less about matching his environment and more about not interrupting it. Soon Gerardi was grinning, the feminine voice on the speaker whispered a 'good job' and the other observers were rubbing their eyes and squinting into all the places he wasn't. He moved furnishings and screens around the room as he got the hang of it, to a chorus of impressed and awed comments ranging from 'remarkable' to 'spooky'.

"Well done, Ben!" Gerardi shooed the others away and closed the door. "Come have a seat, this is terrific progress."

Ben pulled out the chair opposite Gerardi and switched off the clothing, letting himself flicker into view.

"Outstanding!" Something in the doctor's tone resembled Dr. Frankenstein when the monster came alive. "You're ready for a trip to the proving ground," Gerardi said, his eyes glinting with excitement.

Proving ground? That sounded like a nice challenge. For people who were into self-destruction. The only definition he knew of proving ground was the military application of weapons testing. Not something a man should tackle, invisible or not.

“Messenger will be pleased with your progress.”

“Who’s Messenger?”

Dr. Gerardi ignored him, too delighted with the notes he was scratching into his report to answer Ben’s question. “The fresh air and natural environment will be good for you.”

Ben wasn’t sure if that was meant as a compliment. It was one thing to blend in with static objects, playing this game of hide and seek. Taking the trick outdoors sounded daunting. Would being ‘himself’ be enough?

“You’ll be our finest asset to date,” the doctor gushed. “A warrior who can go anywhere, accomplish anything. Completely undetected.”

Undetected left too much potential for abuse of power. He could get into that, but he wasn’t sure about the bigger implications. He hadn’t thought about his purpose beyond basic survival. In truth, he hadn’t thought it would even work. Now that it had, if asked, he’d never be able to explain how he did it, only that it was more fun than he’d had in a long time.

Dr. Gerardi slid a bottle of pills across the table. “Your first month’s supply.”

“What for?”

“I expect being invisible will prove challenging at times. Because even though you enjoy the sense of accomplishment, your life has taken a new, drastic turn, Ben. You are the only one of your kind. Only you have this invisibility enhancement grafted to your DNA. It’s part of you, permanently. The nature of UI means you can’t have much of a social life, even if you were normal. We all want your transition to go smoothly.” He tapped the bottle cap. “One tablet every day before bed.”

Ben nodded. He understood lonely, had firsthand knowledge how tough it was being an outsider when people when he’d been perfectly visible and accessible. Fitting

in had never been his strong suit and he figured being invisible would only make life more entertaining.

“It will take a day or two to get the proving ground ready for your field test.”

“Am I supposed to be a target, Doc?”

“I’m not sure what the exercise will entail, only that you’ll need all your new skills to pass and be cleared for duty.”

“Sounds fun enough.” Except by his count he only had *one* new skill. Was there a chance the enhancement could change even more?

Dr. Gerardi pushed back from the table, an odd mix of pride and concern on his face. “Practice all you can inside our facility and downstairs in the courtyard. I’ll have the staff make note of when they think they spot you.”

“Fun.”

Dr. G scowled. “Practice.”

Ben threw him an invisible salute as the doc walked out.

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Ben enjoyed seven hilarious days of sneaking around the facility, in and out of top secret labs and offices, memorizing passwords and codes, and eavesdropping on staff taking lunch and smoke breaks in the courtyard. Going around unseen had distinct advantages.

The rare times he was caught or spotted, people had heard him coming. So he worked on moving without making a sound, regulating his breathing to be virtually imperceptible. He’d learned to turn off the stealthy clothing and give himself enough substance for the staff who needed to see him to check his vitals and take blood. He assumed they were taking as many notes as possible and he wouldn’t be surprised if the data would later be used to create a tool or soldier who could counter Ben’s enhancements.

He took one pill each night before bed as prescribed, though he didn't appreciate the fuzzy-headed feeling the first hour of every morning. He decided to give his body a month or two to adjust, but when UI did eventually put him to work, he'd go without. Only an idiot would risk a muddled head during an operation.

Finally Dr. Gerardi found him, in the shower of all places, and discussed his upcoming test at the proving ground. The facility was in West Virginia, which might mean something if he knew where the hell he was right now.

Ben was instructed to travel visibly as a courtesy to the security detail that would accompany the doctor and a few of the support staff. He behaved, walking alongside the team as they loaded into a large passenger van. It was the strangest sensation having people look directly at him - seeing him - when he was already accustomed to sneaking around unnoticed. When they reached the proving ground after a six hour drive, the place reminded him of a glorified picnic shelter surrounded by a dense forest.

"Some place," Ben said, turning a slow circle. The one story cabin structure was permanent now, though it had probably started out as a temporary trailer. A sheltered roof stretched out over a concrete pad on one end. The air was cool as dusk fell and the trees were just starting to turn color, a visual confirmation of the dates he'd seen on the staff computers and memos back at the facility. His last days before finding himself a test subject in UI had been full of bitter winter in upstate New York, training with the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division.

The guards who'd traveled with them took up points at the corners of the long, low building and spread out across the clearing. Dr. Gerardi handed him an envelope. "Instructions are here. Start whenever you're ready. The clock is ticking." Then he walked away, leaving Ben alone.

"Great," he said with exaggerated enthusiasm. He walked toward the trees as he tore open the envelope. Apparently he'd been invited to an elaborate game of hide and seek. That was certainly better than being target practice for someone. His job was to find and steal fake identification cards from three of the six men UI had sent into the woods. The parameters and boundaries of the exercise were clear enough. Each soldier

was armed with live ammo and had orders to shoot to kill. Ben had twenty-four hours and acres of forest to cover.

“This is gonna be all kinds of fun,” he reminded himself. Getting injured or shot might mean back to square one - if they thought he was worth saving. The last place he wanted to go was back to the labs. He’d taken a full tour during the past week and knew he wasn’t the only human-sized rat caught in the UI cages.

Ben swatted at a mosquito as dusk fell, tripped the trigger on his special clothing and focused on being transparent as he jogged off into the woods to play the game.

No doubt the six highly-skilled, well-armed men armed waiting for him were as eager to prove themselves valuable to UI operations as he was.

He stumbled onto the first sentry about a mile into the trees. He made some noise, watched the bullets fly well wide and decided he was pretty good at the invisible game. He crept up behind the sentry and put him in a sleeper hold, easing his body to the ground so he could steal the fake card. He took the patrol routes and exercise parameters, a handgun, and a knife as well, just in case someone out here turned trigger-happy.

In the full dark, he found and bested the next two opponents well before midnight, stealing a couple of candy bars from the third man. Technically, three cards in his pocket, he could head back victorious. With the wildlife skittering and various spiders and bugs clinging to the last shred of summer, it was a tempting idea. The challenge, the chance to make a statement kept him moving deeper into the trees. Maybe he could get all six without incurring an injury. Wouldn’t that be a better display of his skills?

“Halt right there.”

He ducked behind the nearest tree and turned toward the voice, noticing the goggles, he had to assume this guy was using a thermal imaging system. Hmm. How to outwit that? With no control of his body temperature, he’d show up perfectly against the cooler environment. If the guy called it in, his demonstration was over. “Don’t shoot. It’s Frank,” Ben called back, using the name of the first man he’d taken out of the game. “I sprained my ankle and have to head back.”

“Bull. You’re caught. You lose.”

Stubborn bastard. Ben flipped off the stealth switch and made himself visible. Limping, he leaned into the tree with one hand, raising his other in surrender. “Don’t be a dick. Help me out.”

The fourth man hesitated and asked for a confirmation code. Ben gave it. When his adversary lowered his weapon and removed his glasses, Ben disappeared. After a short spate of swearing, Ben had four of six IDs collected, two to go. He hunkered down next to the unconscious man and waited for dawn to regain his advantage, opting to skip tonight’s dose of emotional stability.

In the soft early morning light, a thin fog drifting over the slopes and whispering through the trees, Ben discovered he didn’t have to think about his enhancement so much. In these conditions, he was invisible without really trying. It was fun to test his range as he took out numbers five and six.

Quickly collecting the last fake ID, Ben sat back on his heels, almost disappointed when he knew it was time to return to the staging area. With almost ten hours left, he decided to poke around the glorified picnic shelter and see if there were other secrets to find and save for use later.

Through the window, he watched Dr. Gerardi talking with a man in a gray suit. Expensive from hair to polished shoes, the other man didn’t strike Ben as the sort who typically strolled around in rural West Virginia.

Ben made his way into the building at the opposite entrance, using the keycard he’d stolen from the first of his tactical opponents. Instead of surprising the men in the office, he swiped the card across a reader at a different door and grinned to himself as the lights came on over a steep stairwell leading deep into the earth.

He waited, but no one reacted to the opening door, so he descended into a bunker lined with filing cabinets, computer servers, a long table with three computer stations and a glass door that showed an impressive stockpile of weapons. He poked through a couple of drawers, used the code on the back of the access card to unlock a computer

and otherwise helped himself to as much information as he could memorize on test subjects, weapons orders, and staffing.

With thirty minutes to spare, he wandered back upstairs. He slipped into the office on the heels of a sentry reporting Ben had bested him last night. The doctor's face glowed with pride while Mr. Expensive checked his watch.

Staying transparent, Ben tossed the fake IDs onto the desk and waited for the reactions. He wasn't disappointed.

Dr. Gerardi and the other two men in the room all jumped and looked around wildly, trying to spot him. Mr. Expensive only arched an eyebrow as he evaluated the six rather than minimum three cards Ben had secured.

"Ben this is Messenger. He is in charge of active UI agents."

"You can stand down, soldier," Messenger said.

"I am," Ben said. "Sir."

The man in charge frowned. "I meant you can show yourself."

"Sure." Ben shuffled his feet, made some noise and unzipped the close-fitting black knit jacket, knowing it wouldn't help matters at all. "Don't you have those special glasses Gerardi wears? Sir?" he added, once more a second later than he should have.

"I shouldn't need them. When I am speaking to you I expect you to be visible."

"You mean I'm not? Huh. Well, I'm sure I'll get better control overtime."

"You will, I'm sure."

Ben heard the inherent threat.

The man in gray cleared his throat. "Congratulations, Chameleon." He spoke with an unwavering authority and calm precision. "You've passed your field test and I will clear you for duty."

"Chameleon?" Ben snorted. There had to be a better code name. He didn't want to be the joke among the UI agents. "Can I protest the code name, sir? Make other suggestions?"

"No."

Ben sighed loudly and took another step toward the door. If Messenger noticed, he didn't show it at all. Life was going to be one interesting game of chicken after another from this point forward. He couldn't wait to get started.

"You'll check in monthly with Dr. Gerardi's lab. Mission success will extend that requirement and grant you increasing freedom."

"Yes, sir."

"We will stay in touch via cell phone and email."

"Got it." The cell phone was definitely equipped with the GPS tracking software they couldn't keep working in his body. He didn't plan to hold onto it for long. Cell phones could suffer all sorts of mishaps. He reached out and took the smart phone off the table, more than a little pleased when Messenger twitched in surprise when the device disappeared from view. "What next?"

Messenger gestured to the door. "I ordered a car for you. It's stocked with cash and equipment. While you're waiting for orders, establish a base for yourself near the facility in Boston. All the information is in the phone."

"Great. Thank you, sir."

"You do recall the fine print of your contract, Chameleon?"

That damned codename was going to get old in a hurry. "Yes, sir. Absolute loyalty to the UI program and absolute confidentiality." Under penalty of death. If he used his enhancement for personal gain, or otherwise embarrassed or failed the program, they'd kill him. Assuming they could find him. He stifled the smile, even though Messenger couldn't possibly see it. "Don't worry about me, sir." He couldn't think of anyone to tell that would be worth the risk to this astounding, newfound freedom. He might be more alone than ever, but he was finally *first*. First and basically invisible, giving him a fresh advantage. He wasn't going to screw it up. "I'll be ready whenever you call on me, sir."

He slipped past Gerardi undetected as he headed for the car they'd given him. It would be tempting to sneak back and listen to what Gerardi and Messenger might

discuss, but Ben had more immediate concerns. He wanted to enjoy the weather, life, and experiment with his enhancement.

He started the car and headed away from the proving ground. In order to survive Messenger's plans and thrive in his new role with UI, Ben needed to figure out how to outmaneuver the people tasked with monitoring the cell phone and GPS on the car. Life as the invisible man was going to be a fantastic adventure.

The End

*Dear Reader,*

I hope you enjoyed this foray into the early days of the UI program and this glimpse into Ben's start as the Chameleon. I've had a great time getting into what makes him unique as an Unknown Identities agent.

Be sure to look for [Last Strike](#) the next book in the UI series and stay tuned to the newsletter for upcoming fast-paced adventures sure to satisfy your craving for romance, excitement, and a happy ever after!

Live the adventure,

*Regan*

### **About the Author**

Regan Black, a USA Today bestselling author, writes award-winning, action-packed romantic suspense, paranormal and urban fantasy novels featuring kick-butt heroines and the sexy heroes who fall in love with them.

Raised in the Midwest and California, she currently makes her home with her family, their adopted greyhound, two arrogant cats, and a quirky finch in the South Carolina Lowcountry where the rich blend of legend, romance, and history fuels her imagination.

You can visit her online anytime at [www.ReganBlack.com](http://www.ReganBlack.com) and find a full list of her books at her [author page at Amazon](#).

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