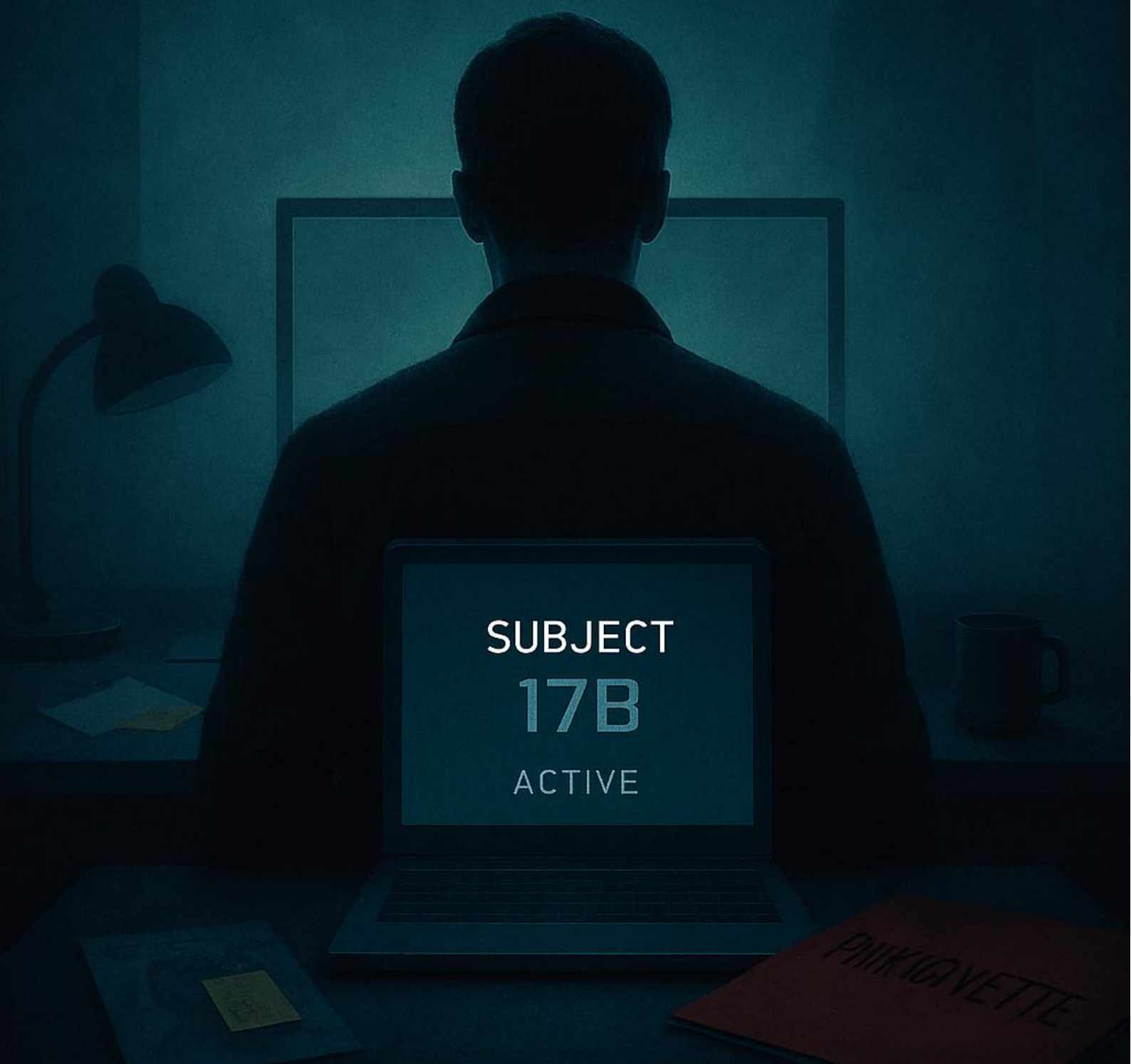


17B



17B

At 4am, my phone rang. What? I slowly woke up to catch the phone. The name that appeared on the screen gave me a rush of adrenaline: secret office of CIA.

“- Hello Mr. Monroe, it’s an emergency. Someone leaked important documents to the USSR. You must come to the office right now.”

Please, tell me it’s a joke. This can’t be real. It’s catastrophic.

I ran to the office.

The atmosphere at the CIA was dreadful. Every employee was already there.

I heard a conversation next to me:

- “But how is it possible?”

- “I don’t know...they have no idea of what happened”

The whole night, all devices were checked: camera footage was analyzed by algorithms to find out who the mole was, but we couldn’t find anything. Monitoring tapes had disappeared. Cameras turned gray for 30 minutes at 2 AM this night.

This was terrible, there were so many issues. This leak could change the course of the war and lead to the fall of the USA.

The TV was always on at the CIA, to check the news. What appeared on the screen at 6 AM was probably the least thing I could imagine. The media had already found out what had happened.

✨ BREAKING NEWS ✨

Some papers of major importance were leaked to the USSR. We don’t have any more information about the thief, or how it happened. The CIA is currently investigating the case. The consequences of this leak could be disastrous for our country.

✨ End of breaking news ✨

Wow... We have to resolve this case very quickly. I was a member of the board, the highest rank an employee could have, we had to reunite. Five minutes later, we were all together in a room.

I immediately asked

“- What can we do?”

- I don’t know... answered Thomas. He was clearly overwhelmed by the situation, but we had to all remain calm.

- Let me think... Don't you believe we should start to investigate all the employees? I mean, no one can access these rooms except employees. Said Simon, the co-director of CIA.

- But employees mustn't think that we doubt them. If distrust begins to spread in the office, it could be devastating.

- Yes of course, but they are all aware of the issues at stake. They will understand. Decided Frank, the boss.

- Okay then, let's do this."

When we got out of the room, we reunited all the employees to announce the decision.

"- Hello everyone, you are all aware of the current issue we're facing. We have to be cautious. Before anything else, don't forget we do have trust in you, but we have to be careful and you'll all be monitored. You will also be subjected to an interrogation."

All the employees were in shock, but all agreed it was the best solution.

After 24 hours, nothing conclusive was found, which led to even more confusion. We had questioned every employee with a lie detector, and no one was lying.

We were all exhausted. Staring at screens, reading the same logs over and over. We had worked non-stop, and nothing was found. No anomaly, no foreign access, no internal confession. Just silence.

It was maddening. What else could we do?

At some point, my thoughts started looping. I was staring at the same line of code for twenty minutes without reading it. My mouth was dry. My head was buzzing. I turned to Frank, who looked just as dead-eyed as I felt, and said, "I need to crash. Just for a few hours."

He nodded. "Yeah. Go."

As I walked down the fluorescent-lit hallway toward the exit, the adrenaline that had been keeping me upright began to drain out of me. My limbs felt heavy, like they didn't belong to me. I blinked and nearly lost my balance.

Something was off. Not just exhaustion—deeper. Like a strange gravity pulling me inward. A pressure behind my eyes. A subtle flicker at the base of my skull. I told myself it was just fatigue. That I really, really had to go to sleep.

I barely made it home. I remember closing the door behind me, collapsing into bed fully clothed.

And then the second breach happened.

Bigger. Bloodier. We lost two agents in Iran—burned because someone had leaked their positions. The chatter online pointed straight to the Kremlin.

And once again, it came from inside.

That was the moment the atmosphere at Langley truly broke.

After the second breach, something shifted in everyone's face—something raw, jagged, dangerous. Fear gave way to suspicion. No one was just a colleague anymore; we were potential liabilities. Traitors in waiting.

Frank had been calm up until that point. Focused. All business.

But that morning, after the news from Iran came in, he walked into the room with a folder in his hand and rage barely disguised behind his usual composure.

He dropped the folder on the table. The contents spilled out—reports, heat maps, intercepted messages. None of us reached for them.

His tone, usually steady and strategic, cracked into something else: cold fury.

“We’re being gutted from within,” he snapped, voice echoing off the steel and glass. “Do you understand what that means? Someone in this room is doing it. Someone *in this goddamn room* is killing us.”

No one said a word.

He paced, breathing hard, like he couldn’t contain it.

“I don’t care how long it takes. I don’t care what it costs. Unless someone talks, I will tear this place apart until I find the mole. You think you’re clever? You’re not. You’re sloppy. And I will find you.”

His eyes moved across each of us, like he was trying to burn guilt into our faces.

I felt his eyes linger on me a second too long. The second breach had just hit-top-level data, field operative lists, satellite codes. Everyone was in panic mode. But me? I was frozen. Not just by fear, but by confusion. I felt... empty. Not surprised. Not angry. Just hollow. I was exhausted.

The exhaustion was bone-deep. Not just the kind that came from lack of sleep—but from carrying too many questions without answers. My body was beginning to fail me in little ways. Shaky hands. Short breaths. Headaches that bloomed behind my eyes and stayed there for hours.

I wasn’t sleeping well, but I didn’t know if that was the cause or consequence. I’d wake up feeling more drained than when I went to bed. Sometimes sore, like I’d run a marathon in my dreams. My apartment felt strange in the mornings—like things weren’t quite where I left them. But maybe that was just tiredness. Maybe everything was just... catching up.

Still, something gnawed at me.

And so, one night, I bought a camera.

Small. Discreet. Motion-activated. Just enough resolution to see clearly. I placed it on the bookshelf, angled toward the bed—more for reassurance than anything else. To prove to myself that I was just tired. That nothing was wrong.

I told myself it was just for a night or two. Just to feel in control again. Just to breathe.

The first night—nothing.

The second night—I slept like a corpse.

The third night—I watched the recording and my blood turned to ice.

There I was lying still, breathing normally.

At 2:43 AM, I sat up. Not startled. Not groggy. Just... sat up. My head turned toward the door. I stood and walked out of the room. No expression. No sound. I fast-forwarded. I returned at 4:11 AM. Same blank face. Same calm movements. Back into bed. I never remembered leaving.

And that night? Another breach.

I watched the footage again and again. I started checking my apartment. Scrubbing it clean. I opened every drawer, unscrewed vents, lifted floorboards. I thought maybe someone was coming in, controlling me. Drugging me, maybe. But I found nothing. Worse than nothing. I started finding signs that I had moved things. Papers shuffled. Safe cracked open. A flash drive—my own—missing, then reappearing under my mattress two days later.

I didn't know what terrified me more: the idea that someone was manipulating me... or the idea that no one was.

That it was just me.

Each day at Langley only made things worse. If the CIA is a cold place on good days, after the third leak it turned glacial. The building felt like it was holding its breath—every corridor stretched with tension, every conversation clipped and coded. People looked over their shoulders. Doors closed a little quicker. Every hallway echoed with clipped footsteps and whispered speculation. People stopped making eye contact. Conversations died mid-sentence when someone else walked in. You could feel the suspicion, thick and heavy, like smoke after a controlled burn.

They called it “the phantom.” An internal leak. Surgical. Impeccable. No digital trail. No security footage. Just data, gone.

I sat in the Situation Room that morning, across from Ava. She looked pale—exhausted. Her eyes scanned the screen in front of her, but I could tell her mind was elsewhere. When our eyes met, she didn't smile. Not even a nod. Just concern. Distant and quiet.

“They're going to start interrogations,” she said under her breath as Franck left the room with three advisors.

I didn't reply. I couldn't. I felt the walls narrowing.

Ava Chen was one of the few people in the agency I trusted. Truly trusted.

Brilliant analyst. Unshakable. She didn't climb her way into upper command—she earned every inch.

We'd been close once. Not romantically, but something deeper. The kind of closeness forged in silence during crisis debriefings and late-night war-room sessions. There was an understanding between us. So when she cornered me in the west corridor a few days later, her voice low and her hand gripping my sleeve, it shook me.

“Daniel,” she said, pulling me into an unused archive room, “I need you to tell me the truth.”

“About what?”

She stared at me. Searching.

“You're not... right. You've been cold. Distant. You vanish during lockdowns.”

I laughed nervously. “So now I'm the leak?”

“No.” Her voice cracked. “But something is wrong. And I think you know it.”

I looked at her. Really looked at her. Her eyes were red at the edges, her fingers clenched into fists.

I wanted to tell her everything. That I was filming myself. That I was blacking out. That I saw myself move like a puppet while I slept. But how am I supposed to tell her that I'm betraying our country during my sleep? So I lied.

"I'm tired," I said. That's all."

And as if she couldn't keep it in any longer, she said quietly:

"You know, I've been feeling drained for a while now. What gets to me the most is always being watched. Sometimes it's like I forget how to live, I stop noticing everything else..."

I started missing time during the day.

I'd blink and find myself at the wrong end of the building. I'd open files I didn't remember requesting. Once, I found myself standing in front of the server room—no recollection of how I got there. My hand was already on the keypad.

I started taking stimulants. Sleeping only in bursts. But every time I slept—he returned. The version of me that I saw on the tapes. The calm one. The *efficient* one. He walked like he owned the place. He never looked rushed. Never hesitated. And every time he left, something vanished from Langley's secure systems.

That version of me—the calm, unblinking marionette—he wasn't sloppy. He didn't leave fingerprints. But the gaps were starting to close around me. Surveillance tightened. Passwords were reassigned. Even the elevators felt slower. Like the building was watching me. They didn't say it out loud. But I knew. They were hunting me.

It started small. My clearance badge flickered red before turning green. My login credentials took a few seconds longer than usual to process. My access to internal systems—restricted without explanation. Colleagues who used to greet me in the hallway now kept their eyes fixed ahead.

And Frank... Frank stopped calling me into meetings. But I caught him watching me from the glass panels, always from a distance. No accusations. Just a patient sort of vigilance. Like he was waiting for me to make a mistake.

I barely slept. I ate only what I could verify I'd bought myself. Every time I opened my door, I expected someone to be waiting behind it.

And then, one morning, I found an envelope slipped through the mail slot of my apartment.

No stamp. No return address. Just my name in all caps: **MONROE.**

Inside, a Polaroid. Me—sitting at my workstation. Hands on the keyboard. Eyes hollow. Underneath, stuck crooked across the white margin: a yellow sticky note. In shaky handwriting: "You're not the first". My hands went cold. I flipped the photo.

On the back, scrawled in red ink like it had been written in haste: **"PROJECT MARIONETTE – Protocol – Initiated: 1956."**

My breath caught.

That was before I joined the Agency. Before I was even *recruited*. Hell, I was just a kid in 1956. I locked all the doors. Sat on my couch with the photo in my hand. I stared at it until my eyes stung.

A name surfaced from somewhere deep: **Marionette**.

But the polaroid wasn't the only thing inside the envelope.

With it, two binders marked "Joint Intelligence / Legacy Transfers." I opened one. Inside were grainy photographs. Children. Test scores. Behavioral profiles. Medical scans. EEGs and MRIs lined up like report cards. Some had notes scribbled in Russian. Then I saw it.

A file stamped:

SUBJECT 17B

Name: Robert Miller (Alias: Daniel Monroe)

Status: Active

Cognitive Susceptibility: High

Implantation Date: May 1956 (Age 12)

Custodial Redirection: Approved

Assigned Cover: Military Placement – Virginia

I stumbled back.

That was the year my parents died. A crash. Sudden. Brutal. I was told the details once, and then never again. I was "lucky," they said. Taken in by a military family. Raised in Virginia. Clean record. Gifted aptitude. A perfect candidate. Too perfect.

I couldn't move. Every word felt like a nail in the floor beneath me, because I realized... The parents I'd mourned for decades had never crashed. They'd been removed. The family that raised me wasn't happenstance—they were assigned.

I wasn't adopted; I was redirected.

Once I'd examined the first file, I knew that the second would finally help me understand. I opened it and discovered the scope of the project.

The Marionette Program wasn't about stealing secrets. Not directly. It was about placement. Construction. Implantation. They had built operatives not from volunteers, but from children—genetically pre-screened, neurologically primed, and conditioned before their consciousness was even fully formed.

Then it hit me: the CIA knew, it was they who sent me those documents. They knew it was me. Or maybe I wasn't the only one who thought so... Franck had been watching me all along. Using me. Willing to sacrifice any data I leaked, just to analyze my every move, emotion, every conversation. He was taking notes, studying me.

The only reason I was still alive... was because they hadn't finished learning from me. They needed to understand how I ticked—my fears, my triggers, my breaks—so they could spot the others like me. The silent sleepers hidden in plain sight, waiting to be activated.

I wasn't just a subject. I was the prototype. I was the key.

The days that followed moved like wet concrete—slow, thick, suffocating. Every glance felt loaded. Every hallway too quiet. Langley's walls, once sterile and secure, seemed to hum with something beneath the surface. No one said anything outright. But conversations stopped when I entered the room. Everyone except Ava avoided me. She was the only one still talking to me, as if nothing had changed.

The feeling grew—inescapable and pressing—that it wasn't just someone who knew.

It was everyone.

At night, I stopped filming myself. What was the point? I already knew what I would see. Every morning, the same dull ache behind my eyes. The faint chemical taste on my tongue. And every time, the network flagged another breach.

Vaults opened from the inside. Air-gapped servers flickered with access pings. Entire databases slipped into the ether like vapor through fingers.

And every trace pointed back to me.

But still, they didn't move.

Not yet.

Not until that day.

I was at my desk—blank screen, untouched coffee. Just staring. Somewhere in the building, alarms were going off. Silent ones, digital. You could feel them more than hear them. Pressure changes in the air. Vibrations in the walls. The way your skin knows lightning is coming before the sky does.

Then came the email.

Subject: URGENT – Compartmental Briefing Room C.

No sender. No signature.

I stood, not thinking, not resisting. Just... obeying. Maybe part of me already knew it was over.

As I walked along the corridor towards this room, Ava stopped me.

"- Where are you going?

There was something odd in this question. Why did she ask me that? She knows I move frequently during the day just to do my job.

- I'm going to Room C. I answered a bit hesitatingly and confused. She ticked when she heard where I was going, she knew something was wrong. But she moved aside to let me pass.

- Okay, go then. Sorry for interrupting you."

What had just happened? I started walking again and turned around to see her still standing in the same place, looking straight at me. I kept walking, trying to separate myself from the strange sensation that had followed our conversation.

Room C was at the end of the south wing, beneath the floor most agents never accessed. No windows. No sound. No comfort.

Inside: two chairs. One camera. One mirror.

And Director Franck.

He didn't greet me. Didn't offer a seat. Just stared. Long and quiet.

Then: "Do you know why you're here?"

I opened my mouth. Closed it.

"I think," I said slowly, "I'm here because I'm not who I thought I was."

He didn't blink.

"We've been tracking the breaches. Seventeen in total. All with your credentials. Most while you were logged in elsewhere."

I nodded.

"We've reviewed internal footage. You enter restricted zones at night. Calm. Precise. No memory of it."

"Yes."

"We believe you are compromised."

"I believe it too."

He inhaled sharply. "Is it a device? An implant?"

"I don't know."

Silence stretched between us.

Then he said, quieter: "The truth is, we've suspected for months. Years, maybe. You're not the first. And you're not the only one."

He pulled a folder from the table. Tossed it toward me.

Inside: the same file that had been delivered to me a few days earlier, but with even more information. photos. Redacted names. Case numbers. All the same pattern.

Officers. Analysts. Agents. Each brilliant. Each loyal. Each unknowingly siphoning secrets to... someone.

Something.

Marionettes.

"What happens now?" I asked.

He studied me. "We bring in Defense Command. You'll be processed as a hostile asset. Due to the nature of the breaches... your case falls under military jurisdiction."

Which meant one thing.

Capital offense.

They arrested me the next day. Not violently. No shackles, no struggle. Just a quiet corridor, four men in black suits, two steps behind at all times.

Ava was standing by the elevator when they walked me past her. She didn't speak. But I caught her eyes. She looked more tired than afraid. Like she'd been waiting for this to happen since the day we

met. I think, somewhere deep down, she'd always known something about me didn't fit. She never visited.

The interrogation phase lasted nine days.

No torture. No shouting. Just long sessions in a cold white room with no clocks, no windows, and the same three questions:

"What did you access?"

"Who gave the order?"

"When were you activated?"

I answered them all the same way.

"I don't know."

Sometimes, I felt like I meant it. Other times, I wasn't sure.

They brought in neurologists, behavioral analysts, even a former KGB defector who just stared at me for ten minutes in silence and said, "This one's clean. That's what makes it worse."

They did one last scan. Deep tissue. Something behind my left ear triggered a pulse they couldn't trace. Too old to be new tech. Too stable to remove.

Implanted. Permanent.

Then came the verdict.

No trial. No jury.

Just a single-page statement:

"Subject 17B (Alias: Daniel Monroe) has been deemed irreparably compromised under Section 8.3 of Joint Intelligence Safeguard Directive.

Sentencing: Termination.

Date: Pending execution authorization."

There was a signature at the bottom.

Franck's.

I spend my last days in a military detention wing somewhere outside D.C. They didn't tell me when. Just "soon.". The guards don't speak. The food comes through a slot. Lights never dim. And every night, at 2:43 AM, I wake up sitting upright. Not from a nightmare. Not with fear. Just... awake. Alert. Calm. Like something inside me still has instructions to follow.

They think it ends here. With my death.

But they're wrong.

Because if I was Project Marionette 17B...

That means there's a 17A.

And a 17C.

And others.

Out there.

Waiting.

And the next day, another file vanished from the CIA without a trace, without a breach, like it had never existed at all.