PROLOGUE

The spy had vanished.

He was the most successful and valued agent the United States had run inside the Soviet Union in two decades. His documents and drawings had unlocked the secrets of Soviet radar and revealed sensitive plans for research on weapons systems a decade into the future. He had taken frightful risks to smuggle circuit boards and blueprints out of his military laboratory and handed them over to the CIA. His espionage put the United States in position to dominate the skies in aerial combat and confirmed the vulnerability of Soviet air defenses—that American cruise missiles and bombers could fly under the radar.

In the late autumn and early winter of 1982, the CIA lost touch with him. Five scheduled meetings were missed. Months had gone by. In October, an attempt to rendezvous with him failed because of overwhelming KGB surveillance on the street. Even the "deep cover" officers of the CIA's Moscow station, invisible to the KGB, could not break through. On November 24, a deep cover officer, wearing a light disguise, managed to call the spy's apartment from a pay phone, but someone else answered. The officer hung up.

On the evening of December 7, the next scheduled meeting, the future of the operation was put in the hands of Bill Plunkert. After a stint as a navy aviator, Plunkert had joined the CIA and trained as a clandestine operations officer. He was in his mid-thirties, six feet two, and had arrived

at the Moscow station in the summer for a tour devoted to handling the spy. He pored over the files, studied maps and photographs, read cables, and talked to the case officers. He felt he knew the man, even though he had never met him face-to-face. His mission was to give the slip to the KGB and make contact.

In the days before, using the local phone lines they knew were tapped by the KGB, a few American diplomats had organized a birthday party at an apartment for Tuesday evening. That night, around the dinner hour, four people walked to a car in the U.S. embassy parking lot, under constant watch by uniformed militiamen who stood outside and reported to the KGB. One of the four carried a large birthday cake. When the car left the embassy, a woman in the rear seat behind the driver held the cake on her lap.

Driving the car was the CIA's chief of station. Plunkert sat next to him in the front seat. Their wives were in back. All four of them had earlier rehearsed what they were about to do, using chairs set up in the Moscow station. Now the real show was about to begin.[1]

Espionage is the art of illusion. Tonight, Plunkert was the illusionist. Under his street clothes, he wore a second layer of clothes that would be typical for an old Russian man. The birthday cake was fake, with a top that looked like a cake but concealed a device underneath created by the CIA's technical operations wizards. Plunkert hoped the device would give him a means of escape from KGB surveillance.

The device was called the Jack-in-the-Box, known to all as simply the JIB. Over the years, the CIA had learned that KGB surveillance teams almost always followed a car from behind. They rarely pulled alongside. It was possible for a car carrying a CIA officer to slip around a corner or two, momentarily out of view of the KGB. In that brief interval, the CIA case officer could jump out of the car and disappear. At the same time, the Jack-in-the-Box would spring erect, a pop-up that looked, in outline, like the head and torso of the case officer who had just jumped out.

To create it, the CIA had sent two young engineers from the Office of Technical Service to a windowless sex shop in a seedy area of Washington, D.C., to purchase three inflatable, life-sized dolls. But the dolls were hard to inflate or deflate quickly. They leaked air. The young engineers went back to the shop for more test mannequins, but problems persisted. Then the CIA realized that given the distance from which the KGB followed cars in Moscow, it wasn't necessary to have a three-dimensional dummy in

the front seat, only a two-dimensional cutout. Illusion triumphed, and the Jack-in-the-Box was born.[2]

The device had not been used before in Moscow, but the CIA had grown desperate as weeks went by, with no contact with the agent. A skilled disguise expert from headquarters was sent to the Moscow station to help with the device and to bring Plunkert some "sterile" clothing that had never been worn before, to avoid any telltale scents that could be traced by KGB dogs or any tracking or listening devices that could be hidden inside.

As the car wound through the Moscow streets, Plunkert took off his American street clothes and put them into a small sack, typical of the kind Russians carried about. Wearing a full face mask and eyeglasses, he was now disguised as an old Russian man. At a distance, the KGB was trailing them. It was 7:00 p.m., well after nightfall.

The car turned a corner, briefly out of view of surveillance. The chief of station slowed the car with the hand brake to avoid illuminating the rear brake lights. Plunkert swung open the passenger door and jumped out. At the same moment, the chief of station's wife took the birthday cake from her lap and laid it on the front passenger seat where Plunkert had been sitting. Plunkert's wife reached forward and pulled a lever.

With a crisp whack, the top of the cake flung open, and a head and torso snapped into position. The car accelerated.

Outside, Plunkert took four steps on the sidewalk. On his fifth step, the KGB chase car rounded the corner.

The headlights caught an old Russian man on the sidewalk, then sped off in pursuit. The CIA car still appeared to have four persons inside. With a small handle, the station chief moved the head of the Jack-in-the-Box back and forth, as if it were chattering away.

The JIB had worked.

Plunkert felt a momentary rush of relief, but the next few hours would be the most demanding of all. The agent was extraordinarily valuable, not just for the Moscow station, but for the entire CIA and for the United States. Plunkert shouldered a heavy personal burden. One small error, and the operation would be forever lost. The spy would face execution for treason.

No one at the CIA knew why the spy had disappeared. Was he under suspicion? He was not a professional intelligence officer; he was an engineer. Had he made a careless mistake? Had he been arrested and interrogated and his treason revealed?

Alone, Plunkert walked the Moscow streets, a frigid tableau of slick ice

and inky shadows. He thought it was just about perfect for espionage. He talked to himself a lot. A practicing Catholic, Plunkert prayed—little, short prayers. Every time he exhaled under the mask, his eyeglasses fogged up. He stopped after a while, removed the mask, and donned a lighter disguise. He took public trolleys and buses in a roundabout route to the rendezvous point. He watched for KGB surveillance but saw none.

He had to find the spy. He could not fail.