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God's Secret Agent

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THE CALLING

PART **1**



CHAPTER ONE

THE DAY THE CURTAIN TORE

One of the defining moments of my life came the evening of New Year's Day in 1990. More than ten years later, I still see it in my mind as though it were yesterday. Everything I've ever done pointed to an experience destined to thrust me into situations I never dreamed possible. That night would give me the courage to walk into the aftermath of genocide in Rwanda. It thrust me into the middle of war in Burundi. It opened doors for me to speak in some of the largest stadiums in the world. And it inspired me to dream of reaching China and the Middle East with the message of Christ.

It was cold and dark, and snow fell at the eerily quiet Romanian border that evening. Revolution was in full swing. Everyone else seemed to be trying to get out of the country, but two friends and I had to get in. My heart pounded as armed soldiers approached our car. I knew my name was in their computers as having been blacklisted a year and a half before. If the soldiers were tied to the communist dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, our very lives were in danger.

"Get out!"

I knew that what came next would change my life, for good or for bad.

I was not new to that border crossing. There had always been delays, searches, and harassment. But to try to get into Romania

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on New Year's Day evening during the revolution, after what had happened July 22, 1998, many would consider lunacy. That fateful July night, soldiers had pulled me off a train and held me under guard until the next day. Then I was blacklisted and told, "You'll never set foot on Romanian soil again as long as you live."

All I could do was sing "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" because I had to believe God would allow me to see my beloved Romanian friends again. We had developed such a mutual love over the years that the very thought of our separation broke my heart. After I had been deported, Romanian friends smuggled a note to me. "Sammy," it read, "remember, the glory of God comes only through much suffering. Keep praying. Don't give up."

But how could anything ever change in Romania? The Securitate [Si-kyoor-'i-ta-'tay], Romania's dreaded secret police, were ruthless, helping Ceausescu rule with an iron fist. Many believed that one of every three people in the nation was somehow linked to the Securitate. There was no such thing as peaceful protest in Romania. Whenever I visited, friends and I had been followed and threatened, and now I had been banned.

I had been preaching in Nigeria in 1989 when I first heard news that made me dream of the possibility of going back to Romania. After a couple of hours of fitful dozing in a remote, dilapidated hotel, I awoke dehydrated and doubled over with pain. The only people I knew in the hotel were two missionaries from New York whom I'd met in the restaurant. In the middle of the night I staggered to their room and woke them.

The phone system was down, but somehow they got through to a local pastor and brought him to me. As soon as he saw me, he knew I needed to get to a hospital. There they wanted to pump liquids into me, and as much as I hated to offend the woman preparing the IV, with AIDS rampant in Africa I had to ask, "Has this needle been used before?"

"Why, of course not!" she snapped.

There seemed to be only one person on duty in the entire hospital, and no one on my floor. When my IV ran low, I had to get up and carry it with me, calling for someone downstairs to come and help me.

They tried to convince me it was natural that my stomach began to bloat. I was scared and in pain. Never had I been so sympathetic to my wife, who had twice been pregnant. I thought

I was going to burst. I prayed earnestly, "Lord, I hate to put out a fleece, but I've got to have an answer. If what they're doing to me is wrong, don't let my stomach deflate. If it's right, let the swelling reduce."

If my stomach was still swollen twelve hours later, I was going to take the needle out, get dressed, catch a taxi, and pay whatever it cost to get me to Lagos (about a three-hour drive). From there I would fly to London and find a hospital where they could help me. I knew my decision might offend the people of Nigeria, but I was so sick I felt I had no choice.

Fortunately, the swelling subsided, but I was still very sick. The local pastor visited me for about a half hour each day, but otherwise I was lonely. He kept telling me, "You'll be okay, brother Sammy. God has given us assurance. He will take care of you."

I appreciated that, but in truth I wanted divine help that was concrete and visible—in the form of people who would stay with me.

Short of that, I had to call my wife, Tex. Finally finding a working phone, I brought her up to date and said, "Sweetheart, pray for me, and get your other women to pray for me."

After she encouraged me, she asked if I had heard about the Berlin Wall.

"No," I said. "What about it?"

"It's come down."

I was sure I hadn't heard her right.

"You've got to be kidding!"

"I'm not, Sammy. The wall has come down. People are dancing in the streets."

Sick as I was, I hardly slept. So much of my life and ministry revolved around the Eastern bloc that my heart and soul and mind yearned to be there. I'd had the indescribable privilege of preaching all over the world, but my international ministry began in Europe, a place God led me to in my first few months as a Christian.

I had prayed since my college years for the downfall of atheistic Communism, because I knew it was Satan's greatest weapon against the gospel in Eastern Europe. Since beginning to minister there in the 1970s, I had prayed more specifically for the end of oppression of the beloved brothers and sisters in Christ I had

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grown so close to over the years. I had heard great elderly saints cry out to God for this day, yet I can't say I truly had the faith to believe it would happen in my lifetime. I knew it was a worthy prayer and that people imprisoned by godless dictatorships were victims of spiritual warfare, but I was as shocked and thrilled as anyone when the news came.

I knew how important the Berlin Wall news was when I realized that in spite of all my pain and sickness and fear and loneliness, I was occasionally overcome with joy. Lying in that hospital bed, wishing I could be anywhere but there, I began thinking about the wonderful news from Europe and praised God for His mighty work.

As usually happens with intestinal distress, the antibiotics gradually began to work against the bacterial infection, and the pain and discomfort slowly started to lift. I was eventually able to preach the last couple of days of the Nigerian crusade, and I couldn't wait to get back to the States and to see about getting to the Eastern bloc. Before I was blacklisted and deported, my main area of ministry had been Romania. Tex told me as soon as I arrived home that everyone wanted to know if I thought Romania would be the next place to break free of totalitarianism.

I told her, "Not without a bloodbath. The Securitate is too strong. With transportation and communication so limited, no one could pull off a coup without bloodshed."

Just a few weeks later, I took my family to Louisiana to visit my widowed mother. We were enjoying the Christmas holidays, the adults chatting in the kitchen, when my son, Dave, came in. "Dad, come and watch the news. Something is happening in Timisoara [Tim'-mee-schwa'-ra]. There's been a massacre."

I rushed to the TV in time to view CNN's reports about the Romanian city of more than 300,000 people, the city that had become so dear to my heart. People had been killed. Multitudes had taken to the streets. Could any of them be my treasured loved ones in Christ, the brave soldiers of the cross who had for so long lived out their faith under the tyranny of Nicolae Ceausescu? I was glued to the TV, praying I wouldn't hear numbered among the victims the names of layman Nelu Dronca or Pastor Peter Dugalescu—two of the many brothers and sisters in Christ in Timisoara who had become so beloved to my family and me.

Reporters had never been allowed into the country, so news was sketchy. The borders were closed, and truck drivers were the only ones allowed out. I called Sam Friend, a former associate in Washington State, and asked what he knew. He told me the Securitate had come to arrest a pastor named Laszlo Tokes, who had spearheaded a demonstration. When government forces arrived, they found people surrounding his home to protect him. The Securitate had fired into the crowd, killing dozens. That was all Sam knew.

I called Wheaton, Illinois, to talk to Josif Tson, head of the Romanian Missionary Society and former pastor of the great Second Baptist Church in Oradea, Romania, where revival had swept through years before. Josif confirmed Sam Friend's report and bemoaned the plight of his countrymen. I believed the United States needed to take a stand. Romanians were always low on food. They had no weapons, no money. We needed to come to their aid.

I became obsessed with the people of Romania. I told Tex, "I know it's our Christmas, but I have to do something."

"I'm with you all the way," she said. "But what are you going to do?"

I considered something drastic and noisy, as I would have done early in my ministry—maybe chaining myself to a cross in front of the United Nations building. Or going to the great Romanian population in Chicago and calling for a big rally in the civic center there.

But times had changed. Techniques that had once been effective could now make me a laughingstock. I called all my media contacts and encouraged them to get the word out that the Securitate would march through and massacre more people while the world press was focusing on controversy in Panama.

One thing the Communists hated was adverse publicity. So every chance I got I accepted interviews as a Romania watcher who had spent years in ministry there. I called for the American people, particularly the Christian community, to raise a loud cry against the atrocities. "We need to protest every killing. We need to stand for the Romanian people."

Within days the stunning news arrived. The army had pulled out of Timisoara. The Communists had been booted out, and a transitional government was in control. From what he knew of

the passion of the resistance and his years as a Romania watcher, Josif Tson predicted that within forty-eight hours Ceausescu would be dethroned.

From anyone else, that was a remark I would have dismissed as foolishness. I had spent enough time in Romania to know how powerful Ceausescu was, how he had surrounded himself with security and staged elaborate parades in honor of himself.

Yet Josif was a Romanian, a powerful expatriate. Perhaps his contacts in-country had passed on inside information. Still, I was skeptical. "It will happen, Sammy," he said. "We need to prepare."

I was so excited about the possibility of returning to Romania that I could hardly think of anything else. After my years of ministering there, it had now been seventeen long months since I had been to that country whose precious people I loved so much.

I helped arrange for a colleague, evangelist Steve Wingfield, to preach in Timisoara the next month, and for Dr. Joe Ford, chairman of the board of our ministry, to go. "It's dangerous," I said, "and I can't tell you what you should do. But, I'm making plans. I don't know when, but at the right moment, I'm going."

Steve and Joe both said, "We're going, too."

The next thing I heard was that while Ceausescu was making a speech in Bucharest, he staged another demonstration to show how the people loved him. But some university students, who had heard over Radio Free Europe what had happened in Timisoara, began hollering from the back of the crowd, "Jos cu Ceausescu! Jos cu Ceausescu! [Down with Ceausescu!]"

The crowd picked up the chant, and perhaps for the first time since he had taken power in 1974, Ceausescu realized he didn't have the support of the people.

Ceausescu was the cruelest of all dictators. He spent elaborately on himself, even built himself an obscenely opulent palace, one of the largest buildings in Europe, despite the squalor of the people. The populace was starving and couldn't get bread or meat. They camped out to stay in line for gasoline. Yet Ceausescu lived like a king.

Most experts agree that at least a third of the population had been compromised by the Securitate. Family members would turn each other in for various offenses to gain favor with the

guards. Yet all over the country signs read, "Long live Ceausescu!" "The People for Ceausescu!" "Ceausescu Peace!" It was Orwellian.

One of my dearest friends in the world, a compatriot, a prayer warrior, and my companion and translator in Romania, was a man named Titus Coltea. A young medical doctor who risked everything to serve Christ against the wishes of the Communists, Titus and his wife, Gabi, were on our minds every minute. How I missed this dear brother and his deep, warm, affectionate, bold faith!

Steve Wingfield came to me with the news that a friend of his had used a phone with an automatic redialer to finally reach Titus after thirty hours of continuous calling. "It was strange," Steve reported. "My friend kept asking Titus how he was doing and was he safe and how was his family, but all Titus could say was, 'The glory of God has come to my country. The glory of God has come to my country. Tell Sammy that what we have prayed for for so long has come. Tell him he must come immediately.'"

The next day I talked to Titus by phone, and he told me to get a vehicle and put a red cross on it and drive to the border. "They'll let you in if you bring medical supplies, no questions asked."

I arranged for a vehicle through a friend in Germany and began planning to go. That Sunday morning my pastor, David Walker, asked me to update the congregation on Romania. After I shared what was happening and what our plans were, he added: "Sammy will not ask for money, but I will. If you want to help get him there or provide medical supplies, just give it directly to him after the service."

It reminded me of earlier years in my ministry, when God had His ways of providing for us. One man asked me how much I thought my flight would cost, then wrote a check to cover it. By the time I left church that morning, I had been handed more than four thousand dollars!

On Christmas Day I heard the stunning news that Josif Tson had predicted: Ceausescu was not only dethroned but also put to death by firing squad. It was time to go. Steve and Joe and I flew into Vienna January 1, 1990, and were met at about noon by Don Shelton, pastor of a church I had pastored years before in

West Germany. Don and a few other laymen were there with a van and medical supplies. Although my luggage never arrived, I didn't take the time to buy clothes. We had nearly an eight-hour drive to the border at Oradea, and I couldn't wait to get there. Titus told me there would be a church service that night, and though he wouldn't tell anyone I was coming, I wanted to be there more than anything.

"Great Is Thy Faithfulness" was on my heart again as I realized that truly, even when everything else fails, God is faithful. No government, no dictator could keep me out if God wanted me in.

We drove as fast as we dared across Austria and Hungary. About an hour outside the border between Hungary and Romania, we started praying. Don Shelton and I were both blacklisted in the computer, and we were not to be allowed back in the country. The question now was, who was in charge of the border? Who would be in control of the computer, and how would they respond to us, even with our red cross and medical supplies?

First we had to pass through the Hungarian border, where they welcomed us with open arms and insisted we enjoy a lengthy meal. We kept trying to beg off, but they wouldn't hear of it. We finally got to the Romania side, and in the dark, desolate, dead of winter we were ordered out of the car.

In the past the first question had always been whether we had Bibles. The Romanians believed Christianity was an illness. While there was no law against people afflicted with its disease meeting together, trying to bring a Bible in was considered akin to pushing drugs. I didn't try to smuggle in even my own Bible, let alone Bibles for others. I always used one from someone inside the country.

But this time the question was different. "Are you a Christian?"

My heart raced. I always made it a practice to tell the truth, to not smuggle, to assume that if God wanted me somewhere, nothing could stop me. I had seen friends turned away because they had been "in-country with Sammy Tippit," only to be routinely processed through myself a few minutes later.

"Yes," I said, "we are Christians."

With that the guard smiled, threw open his arms, and said,

"Welcome to Romania. There is a man in the customs office waiting for Christians to arrive."

We looked up, and here came Titus and Gabi running to embrace us. What a joyous reunion! We knelt in the same spot where I had once been told by a Securitate guard that I would never be able to return. We prayed and praised God, and then Titus said, "We must get you to the church. The service has already run two hours."

We got there at the end of the meeting. I had become so endeared to the people of that great church that they even had a greeting just for me. Whenever I showed up, whoever was leading the service would say, "Tonight we have with us . . .," and the people would say in unison, "Sommy Teepeat."

Now there was a stir as they saw me arrive after my exile. Titus's brother-in-law was at the microphone. Although they had been about to close, he said, "Tonight we have with us . . ."

How sweet to hear that congregation of more than two thousand say in their unique accents, "Sammy Tippit!"

Peter said, "Brother Sammy, would you preach?"

There was nothing I'd rather do. Titus and I mounted the steps to that platform, and my heart burst with love and joy as I looked into the beaming faces of newly freed people. I couldn't wait to open to them the Word of God. Titus and I could only weep as we spoke, praising God for the mighty miracle He had wrought in their land.

The great question on all our minds was what this would mean for the rest of the Iron Curtain countries. With the tearing down of the Berlin Wall and the execution of the Romanian dictator, what could be next? From the massive Soviet Union came rumors of demonstrations, threats of secession, and Kremlin strong-arm tactics.

Clearly we had burst into a historic period. The mammoth Iron Curtain had been rent, and the world would never be the same. Neither would our ministry.