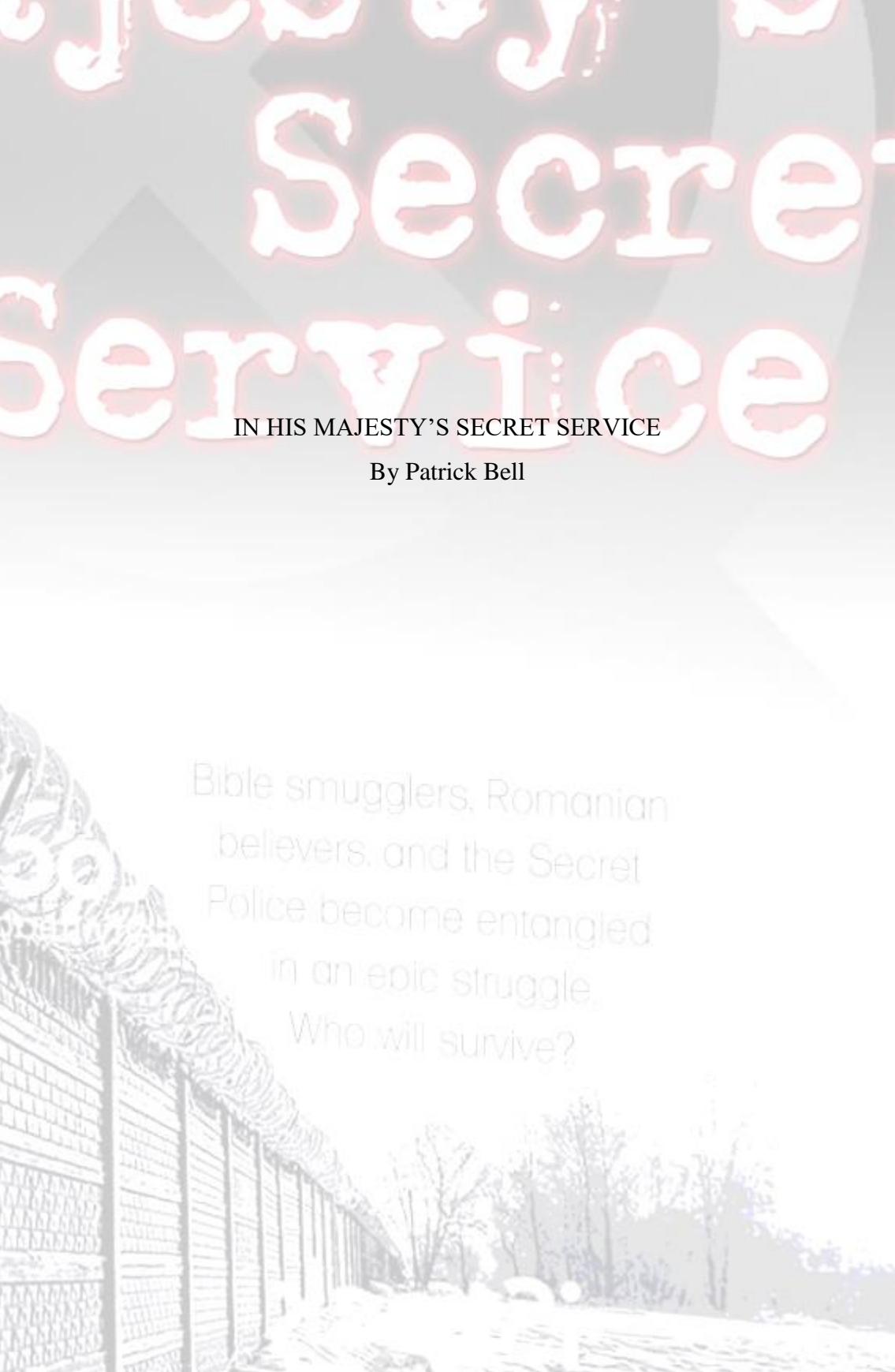


Secret Service

IN HIS MAJESTY'S SECRET SERVICE

By Patrick Bell



Bible smugglers, Romanian
believers, and the Secret
Police become entangled
in an epic struggle.
Who will survive?

PROLOGUE

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Romania

The distant pounding of an AK-47 assault rifle brought each person to a standstill. Petru's eyes locked with those of their leader Emil. Emil shook his head slightly, warning him not to move or speak. The six men and four women listened, hesitated, then, when Emil gestured for them to continue, followed him through the dense brush in the dead of the night. A murky, cold canal stretched before them, barely visible. One hundred yards beyond, they would be challenged by the heavily-patrolled fence, its top lined with twisted coils of barbed wire. This was the Yugoslavian frontier, which signaled freedom and escape from Romania.

Petru, tall and bulky with an unruly tangle of brown, curly hair, brought up the rear; his huge hand gripped a length of cord, nearly invisible in the darkness. He strained to see, but could barely make out their guide as Emil moved on carefully and silently in front of them. He wouldn't abandon them,

would he? Petru felt a tug on the cord and kept close to the group, anxious not to be left behind.

A yellow moon rose at the edge of the forest, outlining Emil. The forest came alive with the movement and sound of small animals and insects. Frogs trilled their chorus between the reeds of the canal; crickets chirped their reply among the grass and leaves. Then as suddenly as they had begun, both the frogs and the crickets fell silent.

Petru froze. Beyond the tree line, a border guard near the edge of the canal strode towards Emil. "Stop," Petru hissed at the others; they promptly drew back into the brush, crowding together out of sight of the guard. Petru tensed, ready to run.

The guard uttered a sharp, "Halt. Stand still." Emil lifted both arms. The cord in Petru's fingers went limp.

"You are under arrest," the guard shouted. "Turn around and put your hands on your head." A beam of light flashed across Emil's body, settling on the side of his face.

"My bicycle broke down and I thought this was a short cut to the village," Emil declared loudly. "I have my papers in my inside jacket pocket."

The guard shoved the muzzle of his AK-47 into the small of Emil's back. Without hesitation, Emil spun to his right, pinning the rifle barrel between his body and his right

arm. With his left hand, he grabbed the knife strapped to the back of his neck. A quick slash with the blade stifled a cry from the guard. Petru watched as the two men toppled over and disappeared with a noisy splash into the dark waters of the canal.

Petru drew closer to the others. “Emil is finished,” he whispered.

“Maybe not,” one of the other man replied. “We must wait and see. I haven’t heard an alarm.”

They waited for nearly an hour, huddled together, growing colder as the minutes past. A branch rolled as a woman shifted her foot, which drew a round of harsh stares from the others. She didn’t move again.

The hairs on the back of Petru’s neck stood on end as a twig cracked behind him. He turned his head slowly and sighed with relief when he spotted Emil moving between the darkness and shadows only ten feet away.

The others spun to face Emil, who held a finger to his lips so the others would be silent. “Come now,” he whispered, “it’s time to go. The guard forgot to release the safety lever on his rifle. I didn’t give him a second chance.”

“Where *is* the soldier?” a woman asked. “Why weren’t you watching out for him? We each pay you two hundred

dollars American and you run into a trap. You're not a professional."

"Be quiet," Emil muttered. "Did you see any other guards?"

Petru shook his head.

"Be quick then." Emil spun on his heel. "Let's get out of here before another patrol comes."

Emil led off, this time at a faster pace. The woman who had complained struggled to keep up and mumbled something inaudible. Petru followed closely behind the last of the group members, ducking the low branches that scratched at his face.

He reached the canal bank only moments after the others. Anxious to keep moving after their close call, he tore off his coat and boots and eased himself into the dark water, holding his bundle over his head. *What was that?* His leg brushed against something in the water and his hand instinctively shot out to protect himself. *What was it?* Something bumped his leg again. Petru jumped forward then lost his footing and fell shoulder deep into the murky canal. A military cap floated by his head. He grabbed it and flung it behind him before surging forward against mounting fear. *Please don't let me run into the body of that dead guard.*

On the far side, he put his boots back on and hurried to catch up to Emil and the others. He grasped his coat firmly in one hand; it was only a short distance to the border.

Petru slowed his pace, stopping occasionally to listen. He detected no sound above his own heartbeat and the suppressed breathing of the others. Emil pushed forward again with the rest of the group, but Petru hung back. Something wasn't right. Would one soldier patrol alone? Wouldn't there be others with him?

Petru stopped and looked back over his shoulder. Should he turn back? He shook his head. It was too late. The police would be looking for him back at home. He had to escape this country. Once he was free, he could arrange for his family to leave and then they would all enjoy safety. He hurried forward and caught up to the others who waited at the edge of the final clearing. The fence was just ahead!

"Oh, Lord Jesus," Petru prayed, "please take us safely across."

He saw no one in sight as he and the others began their final dash to freedom. He tightened his grip on his coat, ready to throw it over the barbed wire. His heart drummed in his chest. Adrenaline surged through his veins.

Without warning, two heads appeared from a ditch by the fence and two gun barrels were levelled in their direction.

The first staccato burst caught Emil and one of the young women. Both were flung backwards off their feet, their bodies shattered and their blood-soaked clothing turning black in the dim moonlight.

Something tugged at Petru's shirt sleeve. He lost his balance and plunged headlong into the short grass. Someone crashed over him, slamming into the ground just a foot away. Petru stared at the dead man, catching a glimpse of a face frozen for eternity in a mask of terror and disbelief. *God, why did it have to end this way? We've come so close to our freedom. Now my dreams are nothing. Don't you care about me?*

Footsteps thudded behind him. A heavy boot rolled him onto his back. Petru opened his eyes and cried out in terror, "Oh God, help me."

"This one's still alive, Ian," the soldier said in Romanian to his comrade.

"We could shoot him and no one would know," his companion replied. "See if he has any money on him. I'll check these others for loot."

"We'd better let our superiors deal with him. Perhaps when the *Securitate* finish talking to him, he'll wish he had died tonight."