

# RED EARTH

## Sample Chapter

### CHAPTER ONE

Banging on the front door of their two-story farmhouse awakened Traiko Ivanoff and his wife, Maria, from a deep sleep.

“Who could that be at this hour?” A startled Maria bolted upright in bed.

Continued pounding rattled the heavy wooden door. Traiko rubbed his eyes, shook his full head of black hair, and slid out of bed. He drew on his twill work trousers and bounded down the stairs. “Who is it?” He demanded, before opening the door.

“It’s me.” Zevko Slavkov, a towering compatriot and Bulgarian Resistance member, filled the open doorway.

“Zev, what are you doing here?” Traiko yanked on his flannel shirt.

“They’ve got your brother, Korle.” Zev’s breath frosted in the cold. “Come on.”

“Who has him?”

“The Secret Police.”

“Where?”

“Red Earth.” Zev wished those two words would never have to come out of his mouth.

“Not Korle.” Traiko knew Red Earth was named for the many brave Bulgarians who had given their blood for freedom. He grabbed his jacket and shoes from the hall bench and bolted out the door.

“I pray we’ll be in time.” Zev started his truck.

From the bedroom window, Maria watched them leave. Her hand trembled as she covered her open mouth. The stillness throughout the farmhouse made her shudder. She had heard ‘Secret Police.’ When they took people away, they never returned alive.

Dawn broke in gray streaks as grim-faced Traiko and Zev raced through Dupnista’s deserted streets. Light from candles or lamps seeped through thin curtains or cracks in boarded up windows around the town square.

The year was 1958. At each entrance to the village sandbags and barbed wire surrounded guard towers. Tanks with large red stars painted on their sides stood guard inside the military compound.

Zev’s truck bounced along uneven holes in the road. Traiko gripped the dash. “How did the police capture Korle?”

“I don’t know.” Zev shrugged and turned onto the main road out of town.

Traiko’s eyes widened. “They must know about us.”

“How would they find out?”

“Perhaps we have an informant in our ranks.” Traiko’s eyes narrowed; his jaw tightened.

Zev kept his eyes on the road, but his thoughts raced to Red Earth. Korle might already be dead. He pressed harder on the accelerator.

After a few more kilometers, Zev cut the engine, halted the truck behind a thick cluster of trees at the far edge of an alfalfa field. They quietly stepped out and crouched

in a ditch. Traiko's eyes widened when he gazed at the middle of the field.

A detail of Bulgarian militia with rifles lined up at attention. Facing them, a beaten and drained man braced himself. Nearby, soldiers in a canvas-covered truck trained two machine guns on witnesses from the town. They stood in the dirt staring at the prisoner. Their faces twisted in anguish.

Captain Georgi Lukanov, Commandant of the Secret Police, barked orders to the firing squad. They raised their rifles to the ready.

"...Aim!" Lukanov watched his tight-lipped prisoner's glassy eyes stare at the ten rifle barrels. "Fire!"

Korle Ivanoff jerked backward as the bullets tore into him. Blood spurted onto the earth beneath him. The citizens watching groaned, pushed toward the firing squad. The cocking of the machine guns halted everyone's forward motion.

Traiko's rage exploded. He lunged from his hiding place.

Zev grabbed him, held him down. "Quiet, you fool!"

The captain turned to the villagers. "You see! I will not tolerate any resistance." He turned and walked stiffly to his command car.

Lieutenant Stepan Stoyanov opened the car door. The captain entered without looking back. The lieutenant saluted and the car sped past the troop truck, spewing dust on the witnesses.

Traiko tried to break free.

"Not now." Zev restrained him. "We have no chance."

They struggled. Traiko, on his hands and knees in the dirt, twisted and grabbed Zev's shirt, but Zev's superior weight prevailed. Traiko relaxed his grip, dropped his head into his rough hands, and cried.

"Too many of them." Zev also felt the rage and pain.

Traiko stared at his brother's body in the middle of the bloodstained field. "I will come back for you, Korle." Tears smudged the dirt on his weathered face.

"Look," Zev pointed. "The townspeople are milling around. We better wait."

Traiko shifted his gaze from Korle to the villagers. He saw the frightened looks on many faces. "They too know the wrath of the Communist Party."

"Now, maybe more will join our cause."

Traiko glanced at Zev. "I fear some in our cause are not for our cause."

"What do you mean?"

"Petroff and Zarov are not here," Traiko said.

"They must not have been picked this time."

Traiko raised an eyebrow. "I wonder if they are ever picked."

"Do you suspect something?"

"Have you noticed that Petroff's tailor shop always seems busy?" Traiko rubbed his stomach. "And by the looks of him, he is well fed."

"Only the officials can afford tailored clothes now."

"And Zarov—when the police took over his hotel, he became the head bookkeeper. His family is not wanting."

"They have both been to some of our meetings," Zev said.

Traiko peered across the field. "That is what worries me." He fixed on Korle's body again, lying still in the dirt. Time raced through his mind. All the good years—had gone so fast....

When he and Korle had been teen-agers, they had come from Serbia to fight against the Bulgarians during World War I. After the war, they made Bulgaria their home and started a lumber business. They began with one truck, then increased their fleet to fifteen trucks hauling wood from the mountains. Traiko did all the mechanical work while his younger brother, Korle, located the wood and took care of the office. As business boomed, they realized the village needed transportation. The town had money and the brothers owned motor vehicles. Traiko bought a taxicab and expanded to buses, ambulances, more cars, and a fire engine. He contracted with Dupnista and the surrounding towns to transport coal miners to the mines and back home again. When anyone needed to travel the Ivanoffs provided the buses or taxicabs.

Life was good until one morning when Traiko walked into Korle's office. "Will you haul the wood from the mountain today?" he asked. "I am short a driver."

Korle's ruggedly handsome face broke into a smile. His eyes flashed. "Would love to. All this paper work is boring."

"The truck is outside," Traiko said.

Korle drove up the mountain to their wood camp and began loading the truck. The trees had been cut in sections small enough for one man to handle. He picked up several pieces of wood and carried them on his shoulders to the truck. After three hours, he had loaded about half-a-truck full. He took a short break and resumed his task. The next large pile of wood he lifted on his shoulders buckled his legs. He almost fell, but decided he could carry the heavy load. When he threw the wood on the truck something snapped in his head. His eyesight blurred so much he could not see. Korle staggered, grabbed his eyes, and fell.

Traiko, bringing lunch, found Korle on the ground and rushed him to the hospital. After an examination, it was discovered he suffered a detached retina in both eyes and was blind, Traiko vowed he would help Korle the rest of his life. Because the doctors and the nurses had given Korle the best care possible, Traiko donated an ambulance to the town of Dupnista.

When Korle had recovered enough to function on his own, he married and fathered nine girls and one boy....

Traiko shifted his gaze to the townspeople who had begun to straggle back toward the village. Many had tear-stained faces and downcast eyes.

Grim despair was their mask. They had seen other killings, but this was Korle Ivanoff, one of their leading citizens. Why did the Secret Police go after Korle? He wasn't mixed up in anything against the Communists. If he could be shot, who's next?

Lieutenant Stoyanov watched the last of the citizens walk away and ordered his men into the truck, then drove off.

Silence again settled over the alfalfa field until the sky darkened. A cold wind swished through the trees, blew leaves over Korle's crumpled body, and stirred his tousled hair.

Zev saw the glaze over Traiko's eyes and knew he was still deep in his thoughts. He tapped him gently on the shoulder. "Come, it is time to go."

"Korle . . ."

Zev peered across the field and down the road. "We will come back. I don't trust the

police.” He helped Traiko to his feet and walked him to the truck.

Not speaking, they drove to Traiko’s farmhouse. Maria and their two sons, Konstantine and Mikel, stood in the front yard.

Konstantine, the elder, who everyone called Kosty, ran to his father. “Papa, what happened?”

Traiko embraced his thirteen-year-old. “Uncle Korle is dead.”

Maria’s eyes filled with tears. “It can’t be true.”

“Yes, my dear.” Traiko gathered her into his muscular arms. “This time it is one of us.” His voice broke. “Korle—without him, I...”

Maria saw the moisture in his eyes. “I know.”

“Does Benika know what happened? I must bring Korle home.” He pressed her close, but his brother’s body sprawled on Red Earth flashed before him.

Maria tilted her head upward. “She hasn’t called yet. I better call her.”

Just then, the telephone rang in the house. Maria ran inside. Ten minutes later, she returned. “That was Benika. She and the children are devastated. When she gathers them all up, they will come here.”

“How did she find out?”

“She heard from a neighbor,” Maria said. “I don’t know what she will do without Korle.”

Traiko sighed. “It will be hard, but her boy must become a man now.”

Maria heard his stomach growl. “You and Zev have to eat some breakfast. You know how bad your stomach can get.”

“No, I should go back and get Korle before the police take him.”

Zev moved away from the truck. “The Secret Police will leave the body in the field—as further warning.” His jaw hardened.

“Then we will wait, eat first.” Traiko felt the pangs inside his gut.

After a quick and silent breakfast, which consisted of lard and sugar for Traiko, he rose from the table. “Well, it worked again, my stomach feels better.”

“It’s your gall bladder, the doctor said.” Maria’s face tightened.

“Nothing can be done about it.” Traiko turned toward Kosty, sitting in his chair with drooping shoulders and a bewildered look on his face. Traiko realized Kosty did not understand all that had happened. “Kosty, come with me. We will bring Uncle Korle home.”

Kosty’s anxious eyes widened. “Yes, Papa.”

“Zev, stay here. We will take the truck.”

Zev squeezed Traiko’s shoulder. “Be careful.”

Everyone walked outside. Maria hugged Mikel, her ten-year-old, and watched the truck disappear down the long hill to town. Tears streaked her smooth cheeks.

“Mama.” Mikel wrapped his arms around her waist. “What will happen?”

“I don’t know, Mikel.” Her dark eyes showed the frightened look of a prey chased by a panther.

Zev turned to them. “When your own blood is spilled, there is no monopoly on patriotism. Traiko will see to that.”