

MAYBE THERE WOULD BE A HOUSE

Ezzar's breath came with short ragged coughs of blood. She clutched at the frozen stems of a few rock-rooted bushes by the north sideroad, and hauled herself to her feet. Needled snow whipped at her face; she blinked and swiped angrily at the icy drops weighing her eyelashes.

Ungiori's eyes stared up into the darkening sky, as they slowly filled with snow, the heat leaving his body. His left hand clutched a ballistic, its muzzle buried in the whiteness; his right hand hid itself in his winter coat.

He'd shot her as she leaped out at him, as if he knew, and the bullet seemed to have slipped painlessly through her until she fired and brought him down, and then the pain grabbed her like a poisoned lance. When she'd opened her eyes, he'd died saying "Ezzar" softly, as if he'd just wanted to start a conversation.

Blood came in her mouth, and she spat it into the snow, leaving a streak of dark redness. It was getting late, and she was a long way from home. Tracking Ungiori had brought her far from Monford; she was in the mountains now, and she didn't know these roads or the people who lived on them. But revenge had brought her, and it would have to take her home.

Ungiori was the third; there were four more. She wrested the ballistic gun from his cold hand, pocketed it, and then searched his body, grunting with the fire that burned through her chest. She took what she could find. The late afternoon darkened further, and more snow was on the way. She dragged herself upright. One step, another, and she buried her hands in the pockets of her coat, her face down and shoulders hunched over, the blood soaking through front and back to cool and chill her as she walked. Maybe there would be a house not far up here. Maybe not.