In Colorado ranch country, bad neighbors sometimes live short lives.

Deservedly Dead

A Shirley McClintock Mystery

B.J. OLIPHANT

Author of
THE UNEXPECTED CORPSE

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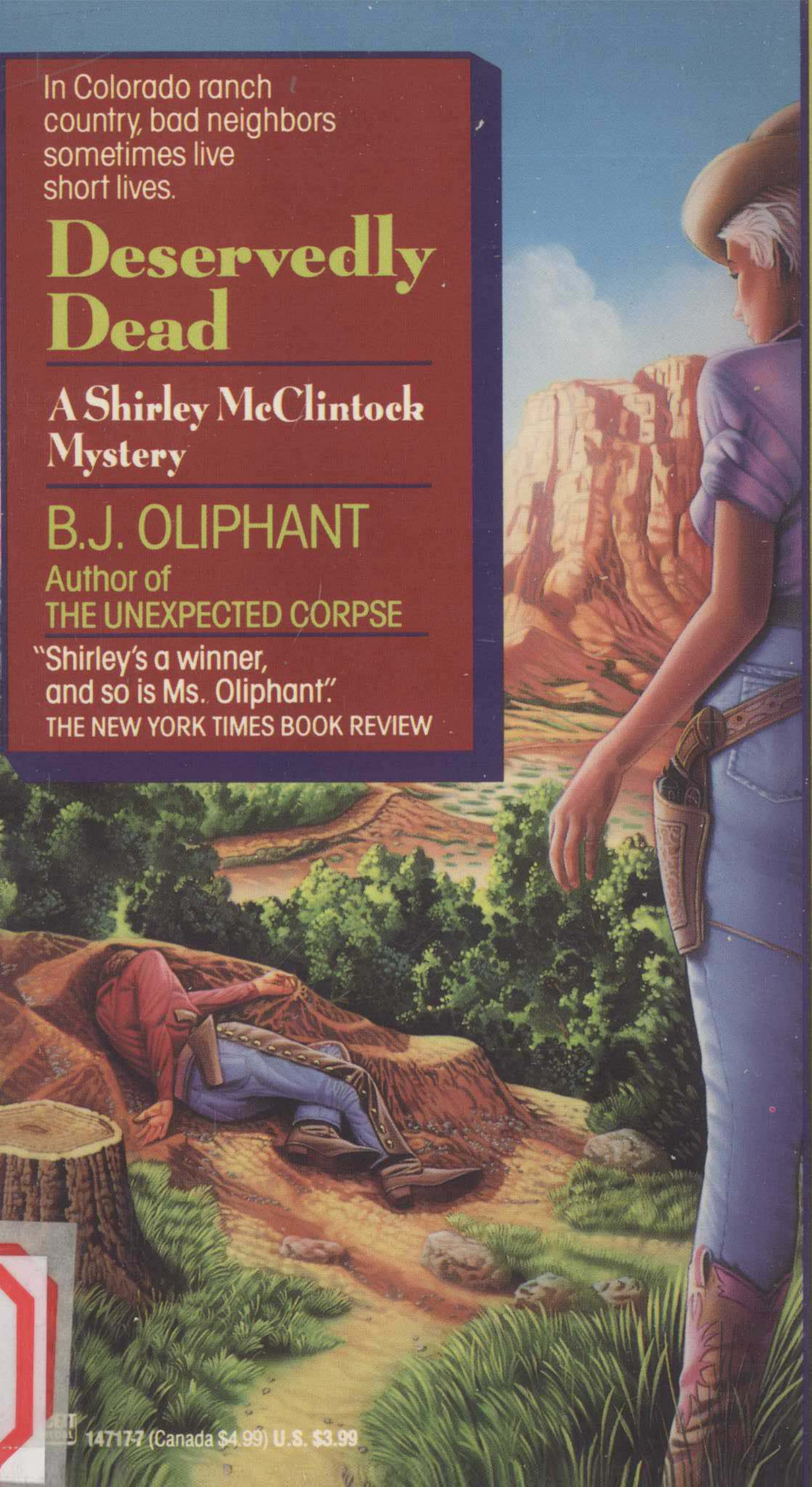

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B.J. Oliphant

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WHEN THE PLANE came in over Denver, Shirley McClintock refused to look out the window. City lights made her think of sequins, of carnivals, of those banks of shimmering votive candles she remembered seeing in Catholic churches before they'd all seemingly gone electric—pretty things all. What was below was juvenile gangs, drug problems, pollution from the Rocky Mountain Arsenal, nuclear waste from Rocky Flats, a lung-clogging layer of brown air, and a downtown district so dead after six P.M., you could use it for bait. All the pretty lights in the world wouldn't change that. Sparkling up cities didn't hide their essential nature, and she'd lately had her fill of them.

Grump, growl, grump. She glanced guiltily at her seat mate, who'd been dozing on and off since Chicago. Though her subliminal snarls had seemed loud enough to keep the entire nonsmoking section alert, he'd remained impervious. Which meant she hadn't been as obviously obnoxious as her mental state indicated. And a good thing, too.

The plane tilted, swinging the city lights up beside her left cheek. Umpteen miles of Colfax Avenue, straight as an ar-

row shot from the eastern plains to the mountains. Broadway crossing it north to south, the crossing marking the center of a grid that marched militantly off into an explosion of curly suburbs. Everything straight and square except in the northwest quadrant, where downtown streets plunged off in surprising diagonals amid a glimmer of tall buildings whose lights shone on mostly empty streets. At least annually the mayor talked of revitalizing the downtown area. He'd be closer to the truth if he spoke of resurrection. Everything that wasn't an office building was a parking lot, neither very attractive at night. Shirley's first husband, Martin Fleschman, had remarked on occasion, "You build a ghetto, you *got* a ghetto." Marty had been right. Downtown was a nine-to-five ghetto, one more piece of evidence of the stupidities so-called urban renewal could commit without half trying.

Yawning, she ran her fingers through her short gray hair, making it stand up in unruly spikes. The flight had been an hour late out of D.C. She'd turned time back two hours in Chicago to be on Mountain time, which, according to her watch, was eight-fifty. J.Q. was meeting the plane. She'd told him not to bother; she'd stay at an airport hotel tonight, and he could pick her up in the morning. Silly to come all the way into the city this time of night. If the baggage was as slow as departure had been, it'd be midnight by the time they got home.

She smiled ruefully, shutting down the pro forma politesse. J.Q. was meeting the plane because he knew she was dying to get home. A month away from the ranch was twenty-nine days too many, and she'd practically drooled in his ear the last time they'd talked. Even though she'd lived in D.C. during all of her first and part of her second marriage, the place had always felt like an assignment: temporary, not unamusing, but definitely involuntary. Now, of course, D.C. was what almost every city was becoming: frightened citizens being ground up between conservatives who were determined to force people to be good and liberals who didn't think it was right to force people to do anything, while the drug disabled subclass went its own ugly way.

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"You, of course, would do something about it," Roger Fetting had challenged her in the middle of a noisy cocktail party. Roger was her former boss, and he'd always enjoyed being the agent provocateur.

Well, she'd told him. Compulsory schooling for all illiterates and quasi-illiterates—sex-segregated work camps until they could read, write, and speak standard English, plus sterilization for all drug dealers and addicts.

Some of her ACLU-type friends had taken umbrage.

"It's still a free country, Shirley. You can't just abrogate people's civil rights!"

"I'm all for allowing *human* rights to every unfeathered thing that walks about on two legs," she'd snarled. "But *civil* rights can only apply to civilized people, and children aren't born civilized. They're born barbarians. The whole task of parenthood is to civilize kids by compulsory, coercive training and education. Every good parent does just that! And if parents can't and the state won't, you end up with barbarian tribes warring through the streets of your cities!"

That had started an argument that had gone on most of the evening, with several parents indignantly asserting they did not coerce their children while others pointedly asked them whether they had ever held a child until a tantrum wore out, or made a child sit in a corner, or trained a child how to behave in traffic, or made their kids turn off the TV until after homework—and wasn't that coercion?

It had been a pretty good brouhaha, probably more fun than the evening would have been otherwise.

Her ears popped. The plane leveled, heading for the runway lights and the still dimly backlit line of the Rockies on the western horizon. A clear Sunday night in July. Probably still hot. It'd been in the nineties all week. No rain. J.Q. had fussed about that. The hay was baled and in the barn, so now he wanted rain to green up the pastures. "Settle the dust," he said. That was what he always said. What he really wanted was what she wanted: green. Any color green in this arid land. Grass green, scrub-oak green, pine green, willow green. Even sage green if nothing else offered. Green at the

foot of red sandstone cliffs against a sky of western blue with piled white clouds sailing overhead in endless processions. Ducks muttering to each other in the pond. Herons croaking down along the creek. Coyotes yipping their heads off at the moon. Bulls bellowing. Home.

She swallowed and blotted her eyes, overcome by a wave of homesickness almost like grief. Where had that come from?

When they taxied to the gate, the air-conditioning shut off and everything went into slow motion. People stood up, muttering and stamping like a herd of cows about to stampede, totally destroying the illusion of breathable air in the cabin. Shirley had never been able to figure out why it took an objective five minutes to taxi to the gate and a subjective half hour after that to get the doors open. Invariably she sat there feeling claustrophobic, trying not to hyperventilate, and suspecting some joker from a rival airline had Super-Glued the doors shut before they took off. They'd all die in here, gasping for air, entombed like sardines.

She actually sighed with relief when the standing mob began to move. Once there was air, she could survive, but at six-three she was too damned tall to stand up until she had somewhere to go. After the first rush had subsided, she pushed past her sleeping seat mate to the aisle. Maybe he was going on to Seattle, Tacoma, Anchorage. Maybe he needed to get off here. If so, no doubt some helpful airline employee would wake him. Her own helpfulness account was overdrawn.

Jacket and briefcase came down from the overhead. Presents for J.Q. and Allison in the briefcase. Other baggage checked through. J.Q. would meet her downstairs at baggage claim. Even back in the days when non-ticket-holders could go directly to the arrival gate, he'd always met her in baggage claim. J.Q. traveled by Amtrak himself, being convinced that airport metal detectors would eventually turn out to cause cancer, diabetes, ingrown toenails, and the common cold.

She had just laid hands on her second suitcase when he reached past her and took it from the carousel.

"Evening, lady."

All she could do was stand there, grinning at him. He looked so good. So J.Q. Mustache brushed. Face browner than when she'd left. Might have lost a pound or two. Always did when she went away, even now that he had foster daughter Allison to cook for.

"You're thinner," she said. She always said that.

"Lost my appetite," he said in return. "I can feel it coming back."

She admired him, head to toe. "New boots?"

"Yeah. Treated myself. Ostrich. Whadda you think?"

"*Pink* ostrich?"

"Sunset," he said, extending his right foot to examine its blushing toe. "That's what the salesman called it, sunset. Besides, they were on sale. Allison picked them out. She's out in the car, listening to space music on the radio."

"She didn't come in?" That was odd for Allison. "Well, then," she said, seizing one of the cases back from him. "Let's go."

Twelve-year-old Allison didn't look thinner. She looked brown and smooth, like a well-fed cat, though there was something a little . . . Shirley couldn't identify it. Preoccupied, maybe. Whatever it was vanished as Allison's questions and comments came in a flood. Shirley had to tell her all about Washington: Had she seen the President? Had she seen anybody famous? Had she gone to the Lincoln Memorial? Had she gone to the Library of Congress?

"I told you everything I did on postcards," Shirley complained after the twentieth question.

"It sounded pretty dull," Allison rejoined. "I thought you must've done something else."

There had been something of politeness in the whole conversation. The questions had sounded more rehearsed than spontaneous. Allison was acting the part of a child being good. What was going on here?

"I didn't do much else," Shirley confessed with a sidewise glance at J.Q. "It actually took most of two weeks to go over those two properties Marty left me. I hadn't looked

at either of them for years, and there were some problems. I'm going to sell them both. They're supposedly worth a lot, but by the time I pay the mismanagement company for screwing up everything from the leases to the plumbers' bills, I only get a pittance in income. Since I'm not willing to go back there and manage them myself, they'll have to be sold, and that means tax problems."

"Does tax problems mean lawyers?" Allison asked, actually sounding interested.

"Probably. Unfortunately. Lawyers or not, I'll be glad to be rid of the buildings. They've been a headache for the last five years. So, besides taking care of that, I visited with Martin's family. I went to a Bar Mitzvah and a wedding. I wrote a little paper for my old boss, Roger Fetting, just to pass the time between tax consultants, and he took me to a cocktail party where I got into a fight."

"Fight!"

"She means an argument," said J.Q. "If she'd meant a fight, she'd have said a confrontation."

Shirley gave him a look. "I took a few very early-morning walks, after the muggers had gone to bed and before it got hot. I spent an afternoon at a bookstore buying presents for you and J.Q. and me myself. And I went to the zoo once. That's about it."

"Doesn't sound like much fun, except for the zoo."

"Well, that was the high point of the month," she admitted, feeling guilty. She might have enjoyed the family gatherings more if her membership in the group had been as herself rather than as Marty Fleschman's widow. As it was, she'd spent most of two parties listening to Great-Aunt Sophie shriek in a cracked treble, "Isn't he darling!" or "Isn't she adorable!" coincident with the arrival of each unmarried offspring: toddler, teenager, or twenty-year-old. The strident exclamations were identical on the successive evenings; so were the young people apostrophized. Nobody paid much attention, least of all the children. The whole business had the inexorability of ritual, but it had stung Shirley like a grabbed thistle, perhaps because she had no children to be

praised. Young Marty and little Sal had died before Martin himself, their deaths no doubt hastening his own. She wondered now if she'd have felt differently if it had been Marty Junior and Sal Aunt Sophie was greeting with that aged shriek: Isn't he handsome; isn't she beautiful! They had been lovely children. Better-looking than Shirley herself was. Better than Marty had been.

The darkness fled by outside the windows of the Wagoneer, and she blinked away another wave of suffocating melancholy as she felt J.Q.'s hand on her own. He could always tell what she was feeling.

"Another thirty minutes," he said. "There's no traffic. Lean your head back and relax. It's after midnight, Eastern time."

She put her head against the seat back and closed her eyes, comforted by finding reason to be weary and weepy. He was right. She was tired. She'd been up since five.

"We made soup, Shirley," said Allison, that strange tone back in her voice once more. "Refrigerator soup. It's got leftover beef and tomatoes and everything in it except J.Q. said no anchovies, but after we strained the stock, we put in new noodles. J.Q. says you can slurp it even if you're too tired to eat."

"You're both very thoughtful," she said, ashamed of herself for her sadness. She didn't need to grieve over family. She had family. Even though Allison didn't sound quite like herself.

When they turned off the highway onto the gravel of County 64, she sat up in anticipation. They were headed northeast and uphill. A mile or two ahead, just past Indian Bluff, where 64 bent eastward toward Allison's school and the Cavendish place, Old Mill Road swooped down to the left, westward, into the valley the McClintock ranch shared with other residents: wild, domestic, and human. As a child, coming home after dark, she had always waited for the turn and watched for the first glimpse of the McClintock porch lights across the darkness of the valley. Other homes in the

valley were screened behind ponderosas and scrub or by the willows along Big Cawson Creek.

"How's Mrs. Bostom?" she asked, suddenly remembering that Oriana Bostom, her nearest neighbor, had been diagnosed as having cancer.

J.Q. sighed. "Saw Neb in town last week. He says she's failed a lot."

"She's dying," Allison said soberly. "That's what he said." Allison, who had lost both her parents to murder a little over a year ago, had had more experience of people dying than had most twelve-year-olds. She tended toward an accepting point of view. "He said she's going to die."

"Well, yes," J.Q. said judiciously. "That is what he said."

"I'll have to get over there to see her," Shirley murmured. Oriana and Nebraska Bostom had lived in their low log house south of Old Mill Road as long as Shirley could remember. They had been friends of Shirley's parents and were both well into their eighties by now.

As they passed Indian Bluff, a darkness against the stars, Shirley looked westward, waiting for the moment she'd see the lights at the McClintock place, like little stars, shining miles away in the darkness.

They crested the hill. Light blazed in her face: light that had no business being there, light that didn't belong.

"Damn," she cried. "What the hell!"

"Sorry," J.Q. cried. "I forgot to warn you."

"What the hell!" she demanded again, blinking the glare out of her eyes as they turned to the left off 64 and started the long slope down Old Mill Road toward the McClintock place, the sudden flash fading behind them. "J.Q., that was Hi Jewell's place!"

"Hi sold it, Shirley. You remember that. Sold it to a man named Azoli. Couple months before you left. Azoli's bought part of the old Stenger place, too."

"That's right." She had forgotten. "If he bought some of the Stenger place, he must have a couple thousand acres."

"About that."

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"So, what's all that light?"

"Azoli's moved all the ranch buildings that were scattered all over; he's put them down there next to the house."

"All right, so?"

"And he's lined 'em all up. About four, five barns and a couple silos and toolsheds, all the buildings Hi had scattered around. Plus the new cattle sheds he's built."

"And!" she demanded impatiently.

"And he's painted 'em all and put new tin roofs on 'em. Not colored metal. Nothing easy on the eyes. Daytimes, with the sun on 'em, they hit you even worse than when that light's on at night. Like mirrors."

That was what she'd seen. Light reflected off a whole row of tin roofs. The place had looked like an industrial park! "What's he growing? Marijuana? He lighting up gun emplacements or something?"

"Not growing anything except cows, he says. Those long-legged foreign cows that don't take to hills too well. He has some kind of timer to turn those lights on sometimes at night to discourage prowlers, so I hear. He tells people he likes his privacy."

"My Lord," she sighed, shaking her head at the welcome darkness down in the valley. "That's what people have dogs for, to discourage prowlers."

J.Q. kept his mouth shut on the topic of Mr. Azoli's two groveling retrievers, which had been, so the local vet had informed J.Q., debarked. The vet had been pinch-lipped about that, and so had J.Q.

Shirley sighed. "Well, it's sure a punch in the eye when you're not expecting it."

J.Q., who hadn't told her half of it yet, felt what he had said was enough for one night. Allison had her mouth open, but she caught his slightly shaking head and subsided.

Down among the trees, dim squares of lighted windows in the Ramirez house said someone was staying there.

"Joe and Elena came home for the funeral," said J.Q. "I told you about Mrs. Ramirez on the phone last week."

Shirley nodded; yes, too many neighbors getting old, get-

ting arthritis, getting cancer, dying of this or that. Shirley remembered the Ramirez kids as children, as teens: solid Joe, fiery Elena. She'd had a crush on Joe in the third grade, even though she'd towered over him. All that black hair and smooth, olive skin. Hector Ramirez had transferred the property to his kids years ago, but their stepmother had gone on living there until her death last week. J.Q. and Shirley had speculated as to whether either of the kids would come home, maybe to live on the place.

They rumbled across the bridge over Little Cawson Creek, then turned a hard right between the old gateposts and under the creaking McClintock Ranch sign, invisible but audible in the darkness above them. To their left a few tumbled stones from the long-ago mill lay among the willows along the drive. The wheels clattered across the cattle guard, then crunched on gravel once more. At the top of the hill the lights were on at the ranch house, and the bunkhouse, and the barns.

"You've lit up the place," she cried.

"We wanted to say welcome home."

"It looks pretty," said Allison.

It did look pretty, the soft glow of lamps and lanterns marking well-loved places. From here she couldn't see the lights back on the Jewell place—the Azoli place. Thank God for small mercies.

"How much hay did we get?" she asked, suddenly voracious to hear about everything she'd missed while she was away.

" 'Bout forty tons."

"We'll need to buy some."

"Not much. And not until spring."

"Forty tons sound like a lot," said Allison. "Looks like a lot, too. The whole barn's full."

"Yeah," agreed J.Q. "But it's a little barn." The size of the barn was cause for recurrent conversation. Shirley's father had planned to build a new hay barn after the dilapidated old pole barn had collapsed, but he'd never gotten around to it, and Shirley kept changing her mind where she wanted it. Anyplace sensible and easy to get to would block a treasured

view. Anyplace not sensible would be a pain in the wintertime. The little barn had started life as a stables cum equipment shed, and its roof was too low for the bale stacker to back in. Every time J.Q. hired a man or two to help him stack hay, he spent the next several days making pointed remarks about hay barns.

When they pulled up in front of the house, Dog came to the top of the steps, grinning and wagging. Along the wall behind her, Shirley could see the barn cats, crouching shapes, watching intently, waiting to see who was coming and whether anybody had anything good to eat. From the horse shed came a contented whicker: Zeke, probably. Speaking of horses . . .

"How's Beauregard?" Shirley asked Allison.

"Beautiful." Allison gave her a quick hug. "He's the best thing I've ever had, Shirley. He's the nicest horse."

"So everything's all right." Shirley sighed. "All's well with the world." She heaved one of her bags out of the backseat and started up into the house.

Behind her, Allison gave J.Q. a troubled look.

"Tomorrow'll be time enough," J.Q. whispered, laying a finger on his lips. "Let her get a good night's sleep first."

She woke on Eastern Daylight time with first light barely graying the skies outside her window. The clock, half-hidden behind a mostly eaten bowl of Allison's refrigerator soup, said five-thirty. Contentment said go back to sleep. Homecoming euphoria said no point lying about. She showered, combed her wet hair, put on jeans and a shirt, carried the soup bowl to the kitchen, where she scraped the remnants into a bowl for the cats, then made a pot of coffee, put it on a tray along with milk, sugar, and half a dozen oatmeal cookies, and carried her prebreakfast snack onto the porch.

She leaned on the rail, hearing the lovely liquid fall of a meadowlark's call repeated, the sound evocative of endless childhood summers when time had no end. The sound had always fascinated her: the three tentative flutelike tones, as though searching for the pitch, then the fall of tones, tum-

bling over one another like water into a fountain. Whenever as a child she had read fairy tales about nightingales, she had imagined their song being like that of the meadowlark.

From the porch she could look southward and to either side across nine hundred sloping grassy acres dotted with white-belted cows. Behind her lay another seven hundred McClintock acres in folded hills thickly forested with ponderosa and fir and scrub. Mill Creek—sometimes called County Line Creek since its flow marked part of the line between Ridge and Granite counties—glittered by on the right, into and out of the duck pond, down the long grassy hill into stair-stepped beaver ponds, under the road and into larger beaver ponds across the Bostom place and on into the Stengers'. The line of the stream arroyo was softened by low willows and taller cottonwoods, a gentle green that darkened into cattail swamps at the bottom of the hill.

As she watched, a flight of mallards took off from the uppermost beaver pond, circled with wings flapping frantically, then landed again with a great silver splash. Ducks were so urgent about everything. Nothing lazy about ducks. Great blue herons were a different matter, as the two who flew down the creek past her demonstrated, lazing along, huge wings slowly flapping, legs trailing, heads folded back on their shoulders as they croaked at one another. When they landed in the pond, they made no splash at all. The wide wings went up; the long legs inserted themselves into the water; the wings folded softly around attentive gray statues. There were four of them fishing the pond. No. Five.

Shirley counted again. Rare to see five of the big birds feeding in such close company. The ponds down Mill Creek and the ones up on Hi Jewell's place—not Jewell anymore, but Shirley was blocking the new person's name—were big enough to let the valley's heron families spread out. She turned to look east, down the long meadow to the Jewell property line, and beyond it to the ponds along Little Cawson Creek, and was momentarily blinded by the sparkle of tin roofs, like a monstrous junkyard. Damn! She hadn't realized

she'd be able to see them from here! She shouldn't be able to see them from here! Something wrong.

Plenty of sparkle from tin, but none from water. She stared, squinting her eyes, then went in to get the field glasses, unable to believe what she was seeing.

J.Q. was in the kitchen. When she went out again, he followed her with his coffee cup and filled it from the pot she'd left sitting on the railing.

"My God," Shirley said. "My blessed God. He's cleaned out the scrub and drained the wetlands. Everything's all brown."

"Ayup," said J.Q., returning into the laconic New Englander persona he sometimes affected.

"When did he do that?"

"Right after he killed off all the willows and cottonwoods with herbicide. Which was the same time he used a helicopter to spread herbicide over all the scrub oak on the place."

She turned back to the glasses, examining the landscape with more care. J.Q. was right. All the hills that had been green with scrub were now either scraped raw or brown and dead. She turned back to J.Q., mouth open. "All the scrub? Why?"

"He says he doesn't like it and it gets in the way of his raising cows."

"But, my God, J.Q., that scrub is habitat for most of the wildlife that lives out here! If he wanted plain grasslands, why buy up here in the foothills? He could've had all the grasslands he wanted over near Elizabeth! Or in Wyoming. Or Montana. Cheaper than here, too. He didn't need to come here and destroy hundreds of acres of wildlife habitat."

"Thousands," said J.Q. "I told you he bought part of the Stengers' place, too. It wasn't all scrub, but when you kill the cover, you mostly eliminate the grazing, too. At least so far as deer and elk are concerned. To say nothing about bears."

"And he's killed everything on it but grass?"

J.Q. sighed. "Well, I can't say whether everything's dead, but I'd venture to say when he's through there won't be a

wildflower left on the place, and I doubt if there's a bird there now. I know for sure there's fewer snakes than there used to be, because I saw him and a hired man beating a bull snake to death out at their gate the other day."

"What's he going to do with that dead scrub?"

"Some of it he bulldozes. For the rest, he's got a machine. Something out of science fiction. Great enormous thing with multiple wheels and jaws. It crawls along and chews the scrub to pieces. When it passes, nothing's left but chewed-up ground and kindling chunks. 'Course, the scrub comes up again, but then he flies a helicopter over and sprays herbicide."

Shirley sat down with a thump. "What does he think's going to grow on the tops of those rocky hills?"

J.Q. shrugged. "Grass, no doubt. And if it doesn't, he'll import topsoil until it does. The man's made of money. Some say he was with the mob or the mafia or whatever you call it back East, and this whole thing's some kind of money-laundering scheme, or he's setting up a guest ranch for wanted men and cutting all the brush so nobody can sneak up on him. Personally, I think his daddy died and left him a lot of money; he's seen too many John Wayne movies, and he thinks he's bein' macho."

"Is he married?" She lifted the glasses to her eyes again and began to scan the eastern fence line. Everything J.Q. said was true. The new neighbor had raked a channel down through the wetlands and riprapped it with stone. The stream trickled down this channel like a sewer through a junkyard, not a shred of green beside it. Everything else was brown and chewed except for the meadows.

"He's got a woman he says is his wife, if that's what you mean. She doesn't say much."

"What did you say his name was?"

"Azoli," J.Q. said. "Eleazar Azoli. Around here, me and a few of the boys call him El Assholy."

The best Shirley could manage was a twitch of the lips. She was as angry as she could ever remember being, but the anger was so mixed with grief, it was hard to know what to

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