

COLONEL  
RUTHERFORD'S  
COLT

Lucius Shepard

***Colonel Rutherford's Colt***

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Rita Whitelaw and Jimmie Roy Guy seemed like a strange couple to everyone but themselves. No one could understand how this boyish man of twenty-nine had come to partner with a flinty Blackfoot woman ten, eleven years older and looking every day of it...though even her harshest detractors would not deny that Rita was of a type certain men found alluring. She stood nearly six feet tall—taller yet in her fancy boots—and usually wore a hawk feather woven into her braid, and her finely sculpted features brought to mind a long-dead movie actress whose name folks could never quite recall. But there was something off-putting about her, something not-beautiful. Too much crazy luck and reckless living in her eyes. She gave the impression you might strike sparks from that hard-held mouth if you brushed her lips with a kiss. By contrast, Jimmy was towheaded, several inches shorter, with an amiable hillbilly face and grayish blue eyes whose steadiness supported the air of distracted calm with which he met the world. Some would tell you that he wasn't right in the head, and Rita was taking advantage of him. Then there were those who argued that the situation was exactly

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the opposite. Whatever their opinion, when people saw Rita and Jimmy sitting behind their tables at the gun shows, they found no reasonable way of fitting them together, no evidence of love or any ordinary mutuality. The only thing they appeared to have in common was each other.

Thursday, the opening morning of the Issaquah Gun Show, began as did many of their mornings in a campsite just off the expressway, this one a twenty-minute drive west of the Cascades in Washington State. A heavy mist ghost-dressed the landscape, lending the bunkerlike building that housed the bathrooms a mysterious presence and making shadowy menaces of the sickly spruce that sentried it. The rush of high-speed traffic sounded like reality had sprung a serious leak. Rita had thrown on a plaid wool jacket over a denim shirt and leather pants, and was stuffing sleeping bags into the rear of a brown Dodge van with GUY GUNS lettered in black and yellow on the side. Jimmy, wearing jeans and a tan suede sport coat that had seen better days, was standing off a ways, his head tipped back as if contemplating a judgment on the weather.

“Believe we got one coming today,” he said. “One with some move on it.”

“You always say the same thing,” Rita said curtly. “About half the time you wrong.”

“I can feel them out there,” he said. “They all trying to come our way, just sometimes they don’t make it to the table.”

She slammed shut the rear door of the van. “Yeah...we’ll see.”

They drove the slow lane for nine miles to the Issaquah exit and turned off the access road into a strip mall. Rain began to slant against the windshield. There were deep puddles everywhere. The blacktop was a regulated river running straight between one-story banks of burger taco pizza, with big shiny metal fish passing along it two-by-two. They ate a McDonald’s breakfast in the van, staring out at a tire dealership bulking up beyond a row of dumpsters—a huge

tire with a white clown face bulging from its middle was stuck on a pole atop the roof. Jimmy had gone for the sausage, egg and cheese biscuit. Rita was working on a Quarter Pounder and fries supersized.

"How you eat hamburger damn near every morning of your life, I'll never know," Jimmy said, and had a bite of biscuit. "That ain't no real breakfast."

Rita said something with her mouth full and he asked her to repeat it.

"I said—" she swallowed, wiped her mouth with a napkin "—you're eating lard." She took a swig of Diet Coke. "That thing you're eating, meat's about half lard. Biscuit, too."

"Least it tastes like breakfast."

Rita let out with a give-me-strength sigh, like she knew she was dealing with a child. They continued eating, and into Jimmy's mind, which generally ran along unimagina-tive lines, came the image of a sapling palm bathed in golden early morning sun. As the image hung there, superimposed over the customary traffic of his thoughts, it began to acquire detail. Dew beaded its dark green fronds. Glowing dust motes quivered in shafts of light like excited atoms. A speckled lizard clung to the trunk. When it faded he said, "Now I know we got one coming! It's talking at me already."

Rita popped a fry into her mouth, chewed. "What's it say?"

He told her about the palm tree.

She was studying the fine print on the back of a candy bar wrapper she was preparing to tear open. "Sounds like a real pretty story."

"I know it ain't talking at me," he said, annoyed by her indifference. "It's a figure of speech is all. I ain't as simple as you think."

"You don't know what I think," she said flatly, and peeled back the wrapper; she had a bite of the candy bar.

"What the hell you see in me?" he asked. "It can't be much. You treat me like a damn idiot about half the time."

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The rain picked up, filming across the windshield, washing the tire dealership into a blur of blue and white.

“How I treat you the rest of the time?” Rita asked.

“You treat me nice,” he said sullenly. “But that don’t...”

“Well, maybe you oughta consider that before you snap at me. Maybe you oughta assume when I don’t treat you nice, I got things on my mind.”

That worried him. “What...? Something bothering you?”

“Something’s always bothering me, Jimmy.” She stuffed the empty fry carton into the McDonald’s bag, balled it up, rolled down the window and heaved the bag in the direction of a dumpster. Rain slashed at her shoulder as she wrangled the window closed. “I’m thinking about bills. If it ain’t bills, it’s about getting the van looked at. About whether we should do the show in North Bend. About all the shit you don’t have to handle.”

“I can do my share, you just let me.”

“Oh, yeah! I seen you do your share. Last time I left you to handle things, we had collection people calling every five minutes. You want to know what I see in you?” Her black eyes nailed him so hard, he felt stricken. “I tell you that, chances are I won’t see it no more.”

She turned the ignition key, gunned the engine. “Finish your breakfast. Y’know they won’t have nothing good at the show.”

He was remembering the palm tree, wondering where it grew, Mexico or Brazil...maybe Cuba. It took him a few seconds to respond.

“I ain’t eating no damn lard,” he said.

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Tucked into a corner of the Issaquah armory, away from the central pathology of the gun show, where beneath ceiling-long trays of fluorescent light, teenagers with tipped hair, relief-map acne, and Satanist T-shirts fondled assault rifles,

and wary militia types with graying prophet's beards passed out tracts to Kiwanis Club members and fat men with trucker wallets, and novelty dealers sold Buck Owens switchblades and WWII bomb casings, and families shopped at the fancy booths for a nice pearl-handled carry-along with decent stopping power for Mom...far from all that, tucked into a rear corner of the building, were the two tables assigned to Guy Guns. Unlike the other dealers, Jimmy and Rita suspended no banner behind their tables. They appealed to a select clientele, and the people with whom they did business knew how to find them. In their display cases a .42 caliber Smith and Wesson revolver that had once belonged to Teddy Roosevelt, a .38 caliber Beretta with a golden grip presented to Elliot Ness by the Chicago Chamber of Commerce, and a single-shot derringer wielded by the Civil War spy Belle Star nested in among weapons of less noble yet no less authentic pedigree, some dull and evil-looking amid folds of purple velvet, others with fancy plating and inlays appearing harmless as jewelry. Most people who wandered back into their corner would glance at the price tags and skate away. Occasionally a man wearing a T-shirt bearing a brave slogan such as *If You Want My Gun You Can Pry It From My Cold Dead Hand* would linger over the cases and ask a question or two before moving on. And once a group of Russian men who had been buying switchblades in volume debated whether or not to make an offer on the Ness Beretta.

"Is Elliot Ness the Untouchable guy, yes?" their spokesman asked, and when Jimmy said yeah, it was indeed that Elliot Ness, and showed him the certificate of authenticity, the Russians huddled up. After a brief discussion, the spokesman—a burly, affable sort with a watermelon gut and his head shaved to stubble—came back with an offer that was about two-thirds the asking price.

"This gun's got a lot of move," Jimmy told him. "It's bound to move before end of business tomorrow." He dangled the price tag in front of the bewildered Russian's

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face. “But it ain’t moving for a dollar less than it says right here.”

“We coulda used that sale,” Rita said as they stood watching the Russians push into the crowded center aisle.

“He’ll be back before closing.” Jimmy lifted the top of the display case and gently placed the Beretta next to a delicate fowling piece embellished with mother-of-pearl—male and female together. “Come Saturday night he’ll be hauling it out at a party, telling everybody he’s—” he did a mud-thick Russian accent “—the Untouchable guy.”

“Your call,” said Rita and went back to her magazine.

One o’clock came, and Jimmy’s stomach started growling. All the food concession had to offer were corn dogs and warmed-over fries and rotisserie-grilled Polish sausages that resembled blistered rubber tubes. He was debating these choices when a woman in a blue flowered dress approached the table. Smoky hair bobbed at the shoulders and a fair complexion. Peaches and cream, his daddy would have said. A little plump, but pretty in a TV-housewife way. She would have looked a lot prettier, he thought, if she’d been less worried. Her mouth was screwed up tight, her brow furrowed. Dark pouches beneath her eyes suggested that she hadn’t been getting much sleep. She had tried to fix herself up with powder and bright cherry lipstick, but this had not disguised the effects of whatever was troubling her. He guessed she was about Rita’s age, though it would have been a neat trick to find a pair of women more opposite. Where Rita was all lean angles and cheekbone sharpness and aggression, this woman was diminutive and gave the impression of vulnerability and soft curves everywhere. She kept an arm wrapped about a large brown purse, as if afraid what was inside would squirm out should she let go.

“Are you Mister Guy?” In its gentle probing, the woman’s sugary voice reminded Jimmy of his third grade teacher asking if she could see what he was writing in his notebook. He said yeah, he sure was. She offered her hand and said, “My

name is Loretta Snow," almost making it into a question. She had a quick look behind her. "I'm told you buy guns?"

"We buy historical weapons," Jimmy said. "Y'know... guns belonged to famous people, or else they were used in some famous battle. Or a crime."

"I might just have one for you, then." She opened the purse and removed something covered in a gray cloth. The instant she began to unwrap it, Jimmy knew she had brought him the palm-tree gun, and when she handed it over, a Colt .45 Model 1911 with a well-oiled gray finish, he could feel a tropical heat in his head, and felt also the shape of a story. Blood and passion, hatred and love.

Rita leaned in over his shoulder, and he held it up for her to see. "Original model. No crescent cuts back of the trigger." She made a noncommittal noise.

"It used to belong to Bob Champion," Ms. Snow said. "He might not be famous enough for you, but people know him around here."

Jimmy didn't recognize the name, but Rita said, "You mean the white-power guy?"

Ms. Snow seemed surprised that she had spoken. She folded the cloth and said quietly, "That'd be him. I was his wife for eight years."

Rita scoured her with a stare. To Jimmy she said, "Champion's the one robbed them armored trucks over in Idaho. Son of a bitch is a star-spangled hero to every racist fuck in America."

Ms. Snow took the hit fairly well, but when two prepubescent boys juked past behind her, laughing, jabbing and slashing at each other with sheathed knives, she gave a start and looked shaken.

"You sell this privately, you'll get more'n I can pay," Jimmy told her, ignoring Rita, who was making angry speech with her eyes. "I can move it for you, but we get forty percent markup."

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“I know.” Ms. Snow stuffed the cloth back into her purse. “I had a man offer me four thousand, but I wouldn’t let him have it.”

“Four thousand’s high,” Jimmy said. “I’d do ’er, I was you.”

“No sir,” she said. “I won’t sell to him. In fact, I don’t want you to sell to him, neither. That’d be a condition of me selling it to you.”

Rita started to object, but Jimmy jumped in first. “How come you won’t sell to him?”

“I believe I’ll let that stay my business,” said Ms. Snow.

Rita snatched the gun from Jimmy and held it out to Ms. Snow. “Then you can let this here stay your business, too.”

After a moment’s indecision Ms. Snow said, “The man’s name is Raymond Borchard. He calls himself Major, but I don’t know if he was a real soldier. He’s got a place up in the mountains where he marches around with some other fools and shoots at targets and talks big about challenging the government. He venerates Bob. They all do. He told me Bob’s gun was a symbol. If they had it to look at, he said it’d make them stronger for what was to come.”

“I can’t understand why you got a problem with that,” said Rita. “Seeing how you in the same damn club.”

Ms. Snow met Rita’s contempt with cool reserve. “You don’t know me, ma’am.”

This tickled Jimmy—Rita hated to be called ma’am. She set the gun down on the table and said to Ms. Snow, “I don’t wanna know ya...*ma’am*.”

“I was barely eighteen when I married Bob Champion,” Ms. Snow went on in a defiant tone. “Far as I could tell, he was a good man. Hard-working and devout. Something went wrong with him. Maybe it was the money trouble...I still don’t understand it. It just seemed like one minute he was Bob, and the next he was somebody else. I was twenty-three and I had three babies. Maybe I should have left him. But I simply did not know where to go.” A quaver crept into her

voice. "If you want to damn me for that, go ahead. I don't care. I've got a good job's been offered me in Seattle, and all I care about is getting enough money to move me and my kids away from here...and away from Ray Borchard."

Rita gave Jimmy a you-deal-with-this-shit look and had a seat at their second table. Jimmy picked up the Colt and settled the grip in his palm. He felt the weight of the story accumulating inside his head. "Tell you what," he said to Ms. Snow. "I'll take the gun on consignment this weekend and the next. For the show they got over in North Bend. If I move it before I leave North Bend, I'll cut myself twenty percent commission. If it don't move, I'll make you an offer and you can do what you want."

"I suppose that's reasonable," Ms. Snow said hesitantly.

"It's a helluva lot more than reasonable!" Rita scraped back her chair and came over. "We don't take nothing on consignment."

"We can do this one," said Jimmy calmly. "We got enough we can help someone out once in a while."

"Jimmy!"

"We going to move the goddamn Beretta, Rita!" He fished out a handful of twenties from the cash box. "Here. You go on ahead and celebrate. And get us a room at the Red Roof."

He thought he could feel the black iron of her stare branding a two-eyed shape onto the front of his brain. She grabbed the bills and stuffed them in her shirt pocket. "I'll leave you a key at the desk," she said. "I'll be at Brandywines." She expressed him another heated look. "You better sell the damn Beretta." Then she stalked off, shoving aside a portly balding man wearing a camo field jacket and pants.

"I didn't mean to cause trouble," Ms. Snow said, but Jimmy gave a nonchalant wave and said, "That's just me and Rita. We got what you call a volatile relationship."

"Oh." Volatile relationships did not appear to be within the scope of Ms. Snow's experience.

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Jimmy began writing a receipt. "You better tell me what this Borchard fella looks like 'case he tries to pass himself off as someone else."

"That's not his style. He'll come right out with who he is. He expects everyone'll be impressed."

"Yeah, but..." Jimmy stopped writing. "Supposing he sends one of his men to buy it? Whyn't you hang around, and I'll buy you a cup of coffee? You can tell me if you spot someone familiar."

Ms. Snow faded back from the table, clutching the purse to her stomach. "No sir," she said. "I won't deal with those people. That's why I gave you the gun. So I won't have to."

"All right." Jimmy finished with the receipt. "But I'm going to need your information. That way I can check with you when I get a buyer." He handed her a business card and she scribbled down a number and an address.

Ms. Snow pivoted out from the table, smooth as a dance turn, then stopped and glanced back, affording Jimmy a view of a sleek flank sheathed in flimsy, flowered blue. "I should be home most of the weekend if you need to give me a call," she said, and smiled her cherry smile. "Thank you so much...for everything."

"I'll be in touch real soon," Jimmy said.

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It was in Cuba where the palm tree grew. Jimmy sat facing away from the table, head bent to the Colt, turning it in his hand. Cuba a long, long time ago. Ten years after the Spanish-American War. No, he'd have to make it fifteen years after, because John Browning had not even made a prototype of the Colt before '09. The man who originally owned the gun, Colonel Hawes Rutherford, had been posted as a captain to Havana in 1901, where he served as an interpreter...Interpreter, Jimmy decided, wasn't enough of a job for Colonel Rutherford. He had to be a powerful man, or

else he wouldn't be able to manipulate people the way Jimmy wanted. A liaison, then, between various American missions and the Cuban government. That would do the trick.

Over the course of a decade, thanks to his nefarious dealings with the corrupt Cuban officialdom, Colonel Rutherford amassed considerable wealth and power; and in 1910, following hard upon his promotion to colonel, recognizing that his position required a suitable companion, he returned to his native Virginia and presented himself at the plantation home of Mr. Morgan Lisle—where his father had worked the fields as a sharecropper—pursuant to seeking the hand of the Lisle's youngest daughter, Susan.

Jimmy stretched out his legs, cradling the Colt on his belly, and stirring the possibilities around. He believed Colonel Rutherford should have some leverage over the Lisles—he wasn't sure why yet, but the narrative absence where that leverage would fit felt like a notch in a knife edge, a place that wanted grinding and smoothing. He did not use logic to resolve the problem, just kept on stirring and letting his thoughts circulate. The character of Susan Lisle pushed forward in his mind, shaping herself and her circumstance from the whirled-up materials of the story, and as she grew more clearly defined, he came to understand what the leverage should be.

Mr. Lisle, a gentleman alcoholic renowned for his profligacy and abusive temper, had squandered most of the family fortune in a number of ill-considered business ventures, and the prospect of a marriage between Susan and Colonel Rutherford seemed to him, despite the colonel's lack of pedigree, a fine idea in that it served to rid him of an expense, and most pertinently, because the colonel had offered substantial loans with which Mr. Lisle might renew his inept assault upon the business world. And so it was that the marriage was arranged and celebrated, whereupon the colonel then whisked Susan away to Havana, to an elegant two-story house of yellow stucco with a tile roof and extensive grounds

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where flourished palms, hibiscus, bougainvillea, bananas, mangos, ceiba trees, and bamboo.

At the age of twenty-four, Susan Lisle Rutherford was an extraordinarily beautiful woman with milky skin and dark hair and blue eyes the color of deep ocean water. She was also a woman for whom the twentieth century had not yet dawned, having been nurtured in a family who clung stubbornly to the graces, manners, and compulsions of the antebellum period. In effect, by marrying at the urging of her parents, she had merely exchanged one form of confinement for another, emerging from the cloistered atmosphere of the plantation only to be engaged in a luxurious prison of Colonel Rutherford's design. Since the ceremony, she had not had a single day she cared to remember. The colonel was a stern, overbearing sort who kept her fenced in by spying friends and loyal servants and tight purse strings. She had not grown to love him, as her mother had promised she would, but to hate him. His demands of her in the marriage bed, though basic, had become a nightmarish form of duty. For nearly five years, she had been desperate, depressed, prone to thoughts of suicide. Not until recently had any glint of light, of life, penetrated the canopy of the colonel's protective custody.

Aside from the odd official function, Susan was permitted no more than three trips away from the house each week. Each Sunday she attended church in the company of the colonel's housekeeper Mariana, a stately bulk of a woman with light brown skin. Tuesday afternoons she went to market with Porfirio, the colonel's chef, and on Thursday evenings, escorted by the colonel's driver, Sebastian, she would make an appearance at the weekly dinner given by the president's wife for the wives of American and Cuban staff officers.

The dinner was held in a small banquet room at the Presidential Palace and was sometimes attended by other family members—it was on one such occasion that Susan struck up

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a conversation with Arnulfo Carrasquel y Navarro, the nephew of General Oswaldo Ruelas, currently employed by the Banco Nacional but soon, he informed Susan, to become the owner of an export company dealing primarily in rum and tobacco. Ordinarily Susan would have been reluctant to speak with such a handsome young man, knowing that Sebastian reported her every movement to the colonel. But Sebastian had formed a romantic attachment with one of the palace maids; after leaving his charge at the banquet room door, he hurried off to meet his girlfriend. Thus liberated, Susan...

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