

THE COLLECTOR

A NOVEL

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For my wife, Carrie,
the most powerful person I know.

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A glint of light bounced off the barrel of the Colt Peacemaker, waiting for its chance to spring to life, and in doing so extinguish another. The sun hammered down on the baked clay at their feet, making the pistols feel heavier in their hands, as if toddlers were swinging on their arms.

Beads of sweat began to snake down Calhoun's brow, escaping from the swamp of his hat band, only to rest upon the end of his dirty, craggy nose. He blinked nervously as his eyes darted back and forth to the two killers in front of him. His palm began to itch, but he was helpless to find the relief of a good scratching, lest the stoic death dealers before him mistake his movement for ill intent. In fact, he had to remind himself to breathe, but only did so in shallow sips to conceal his terror.

To his right, the copper-skinned figure stood, unflinching. Even his eyes were motionless. He seemed so attuned to the world around him that he could almost anticipate any movement from his adversaries and strike them down before thought gave way to action.

To Calhoun's left stood the fair-haired figure, whose golden curls swirled about the neck and shoulders, contrasted with the rich, brown hue of the duster that gave the figure a spectral appearance, floating there

above the arid earth, its tan trousers blending in with the surroundings. The Stetson was pulled low over the figure's face, casting deep shadows across the steel blue eyes and over the bridge of the nose. A defiant smirk formed across a pair of full, cracked lips. He saw the slightest twitch in the muscles of the hand holding the revolver.

Strands of the native's hair floated on the soft breeze that drifted across the desert, cooling his sweat-glistened skin.

"This one is mine," he called to the cloaked figure across from him. His voice was emotionless and steady. "This is my territory."

In the distance, a hawk called to the heavens. A lizard scurried over a nearby rock. The clouds drifted slowly across the sky. But the cloaked figure did not move.

"Hey, Curly," Calhoun called. "You're not gonna let this savage put one over on us, are ya? Civilized folk like us gotta stick together."

The figure's smirk fell to a slight frown.

"I'm sure we can work something out," he continued. "I have access to more gold than you ever seent. You'll be rich. Get you a nice big house in one of them big cities. Live out your days in luxury."

Calhoun's hands began to gently tremble. He could feel the blood rushing to his extremities, and a tingle went up the back of his neck. The native, sensing the growing tension, crouched ever so slightly, like a rattlesnake slowly coiling before a strike. Finally, the figure inhaled.

"I'm leaving here with him, one way or another," the figure said in a voice just above a whisper. "And you know this area is neither of our domian. You need to decide if you want to leave here, or if you want to die here."

Calhoun's eyes darted back and forth, waiting for either of his adversaries to flinch. Neither moved a muscle. Neither blinked. The breeze moved away, leaving a hot, stale vacuum. His heart pounded so hard in his chest that he was sure the gunfighters could hear it.

"How about we drill this savage, and I'll come along peaceful-like? I'd much rather trust my fate to you and the law than this some bitch," Calhoun pleaded. "I've heard stories of what these godless heathen Comanches do to white men out here."

"I'm not Comanche," the warrior called back. "I'm Apache, you ignorant wretch."

"Oh," Calhoun said, feeling a bit embarrassed at his mistake, then doubled down. "Comanche. Apache. They're all savages."

"You know I can't let you have him," the Apache warrior said to the cloaked figure.

"I know," the figure finally responded.

Calhoun swallowed hard. The tension was quicksand, and he could feel himself sinking in it. His hopes of escaping this moment faded with each shallow breath. He suddenly came to the realization that the only way he would survive this encounter was if the two gunslingers killed each other. His only recourse was to stay as still as he could and wait for them to strike. Perhaps if they sensed no movement on his part, their attention would fall to each other and they would have no choice but to tend to the more immediate threat.

A fly happened by and landed on the cloaked figure's face. It walked slowly across the craggy lips and over to the golden strands resting on the collar of the duster. It seemed to realize that it had

stumbled upon an unfriendly encounter, then flew off with great urgency, only to perch on a nearby rock to await the outcome of the showdown.

The hawk gliding above let loose another cry, and in that instant, the figure's eyes widened. Without warning, guns were raised and death spat from the barrels of each. For a moment, neither moved. The smoke from the shots rose slowly and began to mix with the hot, stifling air around them. Calhoun looked from one to the other and back again several times, and yet neither showed signs of harm.

The Apache warrior's eyes winced, and his stare moved slowly down to his chest. At his breast, where his heart lived, a small hole began to turn red. The shirt absorbed his lifeforce and the spot grew, dyeing his shirt crimson. His hand, which still held the gun, sank as his legs lost their strength. In one smooth motion he rolled down to his knees and then toppled over onto the hard, shattered desert floor. The blonde figure did not move.

Calhoun saw this as his moment. He inhaled, raised his arm and squeezed the trigger, hoping to catch the figure unaware. But before the hammer could strike the bullet, a blast erupted from the figure's Peacemaker and he felt a shock akin to being hit in the head with a rock in the middle of his forehead. His bullet hit the ground 100 yards behind the stranger and released a puff of dust that quickly drifted away on the breeze.

He blinked hard, realizing he was unable to move. He was frozen there, a dried and decayed tree that was once beside a lush riverbed, now the victim of drought, unable to flee. He tried to speak, but no sound came. He grew dizzy and the sky fell to black as his body tumbled to the dusty ground.

The figure walked over to the fallen Apache warrior, gun still in hand, and stood over him as his breathing became labored, his face growing ashen.

“I wish you had walked away when you had the chance,” the figure said.

“You, of all people, know why I couldn’t,” he mustered, in between bloody coughs.

The figure holstered the Colt revolver and reached up to remove the hat which had hidden the face in shadow.

“If we meet again, Magaskawee,” he said, “it will be the end of you. I swear it.”

Brushing away several errant strands of curly, blonde hair, the figure then smiled.

“I suppose that will give me something to look forward to.”

The figure returned the hat to its proper place and pulled it down low, turned and walked over to the body of Calhoun.

“Your life is not worth this piece of human garbage.”

The Apache warrior pulled himself up to rest on his left elbow.

“Neither is yours,” he said.

The figure tossed Calhoun’s body over its right shoulder with great ease, then walked over to a horse the color of sand and heaved it onto its back. The horse moved a few steps, adjusting to the new weight. The figure climbed into the saddle and was about to ride off, but turned back to face the fallen warrior.

“And I told you, Chikautok, my name is not Magaskawee,” she said. “It’s Grace.”