

# **THE COLLECTOR**

**BOOK TWO**

## **THE ROAD TO SAN DIEGO**

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First Edition

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For my wife, Carrie,  
my light in the darkness.

# CHAPTER ONE

The trees swayed with the tender caress of wind that kicked up in the night. Gracie peered into the darkness, but the stars and moon were obscured by black clouds above, looming just above the treetops. All around her, the forest began to vibrate, as if the trees, rocks, and the ground had sprung to life and softly trembled.

Inchmeal, she got to her feet, careful not to make a sound. The air chilled, and the tiny hairs on her arms and legs stood at attention. In the distance, the soft rumble of hoofs echoed from tree to tree. The rhythmic pounding grew, causing the leaves on the ground to dance and slide, the soles of her boots vibrating. She slid her Colt revolver from its holster and awaited the approaching force, still unseen in the thick darkness. Sage snorted and tugged at her reins uneasily, shaking the branch to which she was secured.

The rumbling grew to a roar directly ahead of her in the darkness. She instinctively took several steps back, placing the large tree under which she slept between her and the rapidly approaching riders. The snarls and snorts of the approaching horses caused her hands to vibrate, the cold metal rattling softly.

In the distance, weaving through the forest, four pairs of red eyes found her in the darkness and followed her every move. She turned and unhooked Sage, jumped into the saddle, and fled in the opposite direction. The low branches whipped at her arms and face, leaving pink and red streaks across her pale flesh. The dark riders, like vapors or animate shadows, gained on her, their horses digging trenches in the ground as their hoofs pounded into the soft dirt.

She turned back and fired several shots, trying to hit the shadowy figures, but each shot seemed to make impact with no effect, merely absorbed as they charged closer. She holstered the Peacemaker and slid the long gun from the saddle and whipped herself around, facing backward as they zigzagged through the trees. She let loose shot after shot, all to no avail. The riders, unfazed, inched closer with each thunderous beat of hoofs.

The lead rider reared back with his right hand and sent a burst of flame at her. The fireball roared, illuminating the woods as it sailed at Gracie. She turned to see the blast just as it made impact, knocking her from her horse, tumbling hard on the ground, and finally slamming her back into a tree. Sage, sensing her rider's absence, circled back, swerving through the trees.

The dark riders came upon Gracie as she reeled from the pain of being thrown and getting back to her feet. The massive shadow riders charged directly at her, trampling her, one by one, under the powerful force of their mounts. Bloodied and in agony, she crawled with her broken body over to where her rifle landed when she fell. She heaved up the barrel and fired on the riders as they turned to take another pass at her. The lead rider recoiled as her blast caught him in the chest,

which seemed only to steel his resolve. He held both hands waist high at his sides, and they burst into flames. With a circular flourish, he launched two more fiery blasts at her. She dove to the ground, the flames licking at her back and searing her hair.

Smoke spiraling off her golden curls, she rolled over and raised the rifle again. As she squeezed the trigger, one of the black riders rammed into her, sending her. She winced from the stabbing pain in her side as she fought to regain her feet. She attempted to run, but her mangled body, having been trampled beneath the heavy hoofs of several horses, refused to support her full weight. Gracie pulled herself across the forest floor to the rifle, used it to get to her feet, then hobbled off toward Sage.

The four dark, misshapen riders formed a circle around Gracie's horse, their bodies becoming a blur as they became a dark, swirling tornado. The hands of all four riders burst into flame, giving the forest the look of daylight, forming a wreath of fire above their heads. Then, in perfect synchronization, they brought their hands down and consumed Sage in the churning inferno. The mare shrieked as the flames caught her coat, and she turned and bucked, trying in vain to cast off the burning.

"Sage! No!" Gracie cried out.

The horse stumbled a few steps, then collapsed in a funeral pyre among the ancient trees that stood witness. The dark swirling came to rest, and the four horsemen sat watching Gracie try to escape, their horses huffing plumes of hot breath into the cold night. Then, as if on cue, the four charged forward, ready to grind her into the forest floor. She drove the butt of the rifle into the ground as she hobbled as

quickly as her broken body would allow.

The shadowy horsemen fell into a single line, a buzzsaw of flesh and death, headed right at her. The foot on her good leg caught on a protruding root and sent her tumbling to the dirt, the stock of the rifle cracking and splintering into several pieces under her full weight. In a last-ditch effort, she withdrew her pistol and aimed at the lead rider. She squeezed twice, both rounds striking the creature in the face, but the dark figure barreled onward.

The sound of cracking and tearing reverberated through the grove as the charging train of black beasts rolled over her, leaving a twisted mess of blood and bone and hair. The lead rider dismounted and walked up to her, his hands engulfed in fire. He smiled widely, his rotten teeth the color of rotting flesh. He raised both fiery hands and brought them down on her, his scarlet eyes aglow in the burning.

She screamed, shaking herself awake. The night was still, crickets and the whispering breeze the only sounds. She searched her surroundings, making sure that her terrible vision was only a dream.

“Dad bless it! I hate that!” she said to the woods. “This life isn’t hard enough, but they have to add nightmares to boot?”

She shook off the spectral remnants of the dream as best she could and settled back down next to the tree. She longed for her small yet pleasant room at Amos Foster’s place, but there was no way she’d have been able to find sleep there, not after all that happened. She hoped that leaving the farm and setting up camp for a few hours in the grove on the road to Del Rio would at least let her forget about Alexander’s death long enough to get some much-needed rest, but sleep continued to elude her.



Something about this dream wouldn't let her rest. She couldn't fight the feeling that something bad was coming, though she had no idea what it could be. She couldn't shake the sense that something was definitely wrong. She got up, stowed her things back on her horse, and rode off toward the still sleeping Del Rio.