

Chapter 1

The Lone Rider

A LONE RIDER ON a long-legged roan came to Dead Horse Crossing on the Pecos. He was a gray-eyed man wearing a black high-crowned, wide-brimmed hat, blue cotton shirt under a brown leather vest, and brown wool pants. He was riding easy when the people of the town first noticed him, but his horse was dust-coated with dried sweat showing on the flanks and top of the rump. The stranger rode directly to the stable, dismounted, and paid the liveryman to care for his horse.

Only after seeing to the care of his horse did he turn and glance toward the hotel. Then he crossed the hard-packed dirt street, pulling his hat brim down lower and adjusting the tied-down Colt at his right hip. Two cowboys sitting in chairs in the shade out front stood as the stranger approached. They crossed the rough-hewn plank porch, spurs jingling, and met him at the front door. One of them, a heavysset fellow, tipped his sweat-stained hat back on his head.

“Something I can do for you, stranger?”

“You run this hotel?” the new arrival asked.

“No.”

“Then there’s nothing you can do for me,” the man said before opening the door and entering the lodging establishment.

Inside, he strode to the front desk and tapped the bell on the counter. A clerk sauntered out of a backroom, looking the stranger up and down.

“Yes?”

“I’d like a room.”

“Sorry, mister, we’re all full up.”

The stranger spun the guest register around on the counter and flipped through some pages.

“You seem to have lots of vacancies.”

“Well, uh, some cattlemen are due to arrive any time now, and they spoke for most of the vacant rooms. And we reserve the few rooms left for the pleasure and comfort of the local cowboys when they come into town from the ranches. They pay for the rooms in advance by the week or month.”

The stranger glanced at a board nailed to the wall to the side of the desk, where room keys hung in rows from brass hooks. He selected a key and showed the numbered tag to the clerk.

“I’ll take this one,” the man said. He picked up a pencil from the counter and signed his name on the register. “I’d like to have a bath if it’s not too much trouble.”

The desk clerk turned and pointed to the stairs. “Head of the stairs. I’ll bring some water up.”

When the front door opened, the stranger looked over his shoulder. The lanky, raw-boned cowboy sitting outside with the heavysset man when he had arrived walked in. The man strolled over to a chair, sat down, and crossed his legs. He pulled out the makings, rolled a cigarette, and produced a match. He struck it against the bottom of his boot and lit the smoke, his eyes never leaving the stranger.

Key in hand, the stranger walked toward the stairs but paused in front of the cowboy. “Don’t know why you’re so interested, but the name is McNeil. It’s all in the register,” he said. Then he turned away and mounted the stairs to the second floor.

The cowboy stood and crossed the room to the counter.

“Pete McNeil, Uvalde, Cotton,” the clerk said without prompting.

The cowboy nodded and leaned on the counter. “I want to know everything he does, where he goes, and who he talks to, Jay.”

“Okay, Cotton. But what do we do in the meantime?”

“In the meantime, I think I’ll see how easy McNeil is to push.”



When McNeil left his room with a towel for the bath, he met the desk clerk in the hallway carrying two buckets of hot water. He waited until the man dumped the water into the copper tub. Then, when the clerk departed, he went inside, closed the door, and undressed. McNeil climbed into the tub and scrubbed off the trail dust using a bar of lye soap.



McNeil padded barefoot back down the hallway to his room, wearing the towel around his waist and with his clothes and boots bundled under his arm. His gun belt hung over his shoulder. He opened the door, went in, and found the cowboy from downstairs reclined on the bed, smoking.

“I guess maybe you’re in the wrong room,” McNeil said.

“You think so? What else you got on your mind?”

“Well, nothing else, I guess,” McNeil said, dropping his bundled clothes on the washstand and his boots on the floor.

“If you had any sense, you would have listened to what Jay downstairs told you. He said most of the vacant rooms here are all spoken for by the cattlemen on the way to town. The rest of the rooms, the hotel reserves for the pleasure and comfort of us cowboys.”

“So, I guess this is your room?”

“It is when I’m in town, and as any fool can see, I’m in town right now. You can see that, can’t you, McNeil?”

“I guess so.”

“Where you from, McNeil?”

McNeil jerked his thumb towards the southeast.

“Where you headed?”

McNeil pointed toward the northwest.

“I guess you’re a man of few words, McNeil.”

“That makes one of us. I try to live a quiet, contemplative life. Talking too much interferes with that. So, you know my name. What’s yours?”

“Cotton Patrick. I ride for the Bar Deuce spread outside of town. I answered your question, so answer one for me. What are you doing in Dead Horse Crossing?”

“I’m not huntin’ trouble, but that’s my business. It’s a free country, the last I heard. We even fought a big war not long ago to emphasize the point. So I figure I have as much right to rent a room in this fine hotel as the next man.”

“But not my room, you don’t. A room I’ve already rented. And I believe a man’s nothing unless he stands up for what’s rightfully his, McNeil. What do you think?”

“I guess so.”

“You’re all the time guessing, McNeil. Don’t you know anything?”

“Well, I know everyone has been downright inhospitable ever since I rode into this town. Mind telling me why?”

“I guess I rightfully don’t know. But the way I see it, it looks a mite suspicious when a man rides into town and refuses to answer a few simple questions. Makes people think he has something to hide.”

Ignoring the remark, McNeil said, “Well, if this is your room, Patrick, I guess you won’t mind me gathering my things so I can go get another one.”

The cowboy looked at the gun belt slung over McNeil’s shoulder, positioned so that the butt of the Colt was close to hand.

“You a gun hand, are you, McNeil?”

“You know as well as I do, Patrick, most men in this country wear guns same as they wear pants. That doesn’t make them all gunmen. But if it makes you feel any better, I’m a cowpuncher by trade, just like you.”

“So, you here looking for work, McNeil? Maybe I could introduce you to the foreman at the Bar Deuce.”

“I’m not huntin’ a job or lookin’ for any trouble, Patrick. I’m just passing through.”

Patrick swung his legs off the bed and stood. “I guess you can have the room, McNeil, seeing how you already got the key. And I expect you won’t be in town long since you’re just passing through.”

“Yeah, I’ll probably be on my way by tomorrow afternoon. Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to get dressed and go find some grub for supper.”

“Sure, don’t let me hold you up. See you around, McNeil. Patrick sauntered over to the door, went out, and closed the door behind him.”

McNeil wondered why everyone in the two-bit town of Dead Horse Crossing seemed on the prod. He had nothing to hide. But maybe someone in the town did. Something they wanted to keep secret. Maybe by whatever means it took.