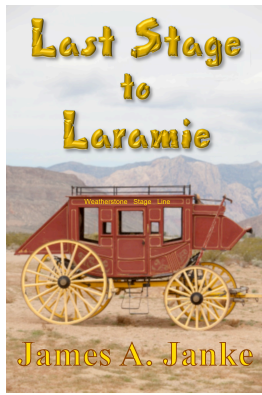


Last Stage to Laramie



James A. Janke



Hank Weatherstone is the young, ambitious, and proud founder of a new one-vehicle stage line in southeastern Wyoming. He thinks he has only two passengers for his upcoming two-day run to Laramie from Fort Laramie and he expects an uneventful trip. But it gets complicated.

Last Stage to Laramie

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Cover design by author.

Dedicated to
Laura

Last Stage to Laramie

By
James A. Janke

Chapter One

Hank Weatherstone stood on the right-hand step of the Concord stagecoach. It was parked beside Tubbs' Livery Stable and Blacksmith, across the Laramie River from Fort Laramie, Wyoming Territory. He was using a rag to buff the varnish on the name WEATHERSTONE STAGE LINE over the door, even though he had trouble seeing it in the dark.

Jasper Tubbs, standing in the doorway of the barn behind him, chuckled.

"What's so funny, Tubby?" Weatherstone asked. Everyone called the livery stable owner Tubby, even though the man was thin and tall. He didn't look strong enough to be a blacksmith, but he was a good one.

Tubbs leaned on his pitchfork. "You already polished that once tonight, Hank," he said.

Weatherstone smiled sheepishly. He stepped down from the stage. "Just can't get used to seeing my name up there."

"Well, maybe you only own one stage right now, Hank, but some day you'll own so many, someone else'll be polishin' your name."

"About the only part of this vehicle I own is that name over the door," Weatherstone said wistfully. He headed for the barn. "The bank in Laramie owns the rest. Maybe I should've settled for just a mud wagon to begin with instead of a fancy Concord."

"Nah," Tubbs said with a smile. As Weatherstone walked past him into the stable Tubbs added, "Start first class."

"That was my thought," Weatherstone conceded. He tossed the rag onto a bench. A few more steps brought him to the fresh straw that Tubbs had spread on the floor of the stable. He looked down the line of his seven team horses busily and contently munching hay.

One of the wheelers looked over at him, and Weatherstone thought the horse's eyes twinkled at him. But he knew it was just the reflection from the kerosene lantern hanging from a wire bracket on a post.

Tubbs joined him. "Fine horses, Hank."

Weatherstone shook his head slightly. "Not quite, but they'll do for now." In total he had title to twenty-four horses: seven at Fort Laramie and another seven at each of his two swing stations between Fort Laramie and Laramie, plus one more at the overnight stop, and two more at his headquarters in Laramie. "Tubby, I think I own just the head of each of my horses."

"Well, better than just the rear," Tubbs said. And he laughed.

Weatherstone chuckled too. But it had worried him to calculate how many horses he would need for just one stagecoach. He needed only six horses at a time, but he had to keep one extra horse at each station as a spare. Five horses just wouldn't do as a team.

And no single set of six horses could make the entire one hundred-mile journey from Laramie to Fort Laramie through the Laramie Mountains and back again. So at any given time most of his horses just stood in a stable or a corral and ate. Running just a single stage was an

inefficient use of all those horses. He hoped business would grow quickly and allow him to add more vehicles as soon as possible.

Weatherstone walked to his little office at the front of the stable. It was actually Tubbs' office, but neither man needed much space. And Tubbs helped with the business when Weatherstone wasn't there.

Weatherstone glanced at a newly painted sign hanging on the wall above a small desk. The sign read: WEATHERSTONE STAGE LINE. It was a smaller version of the sign that swung on a bracket outside the stable. Weatherstone didn't really need the sign over the desk, but the signmaker in Laramie had thrown it in for nothing for good luck.

As Tubbs stepped to his side Weatherstone glanced at a ledger book on the desk. "Only two passengers for tomorrow so far, I see," Weatherstone said.

Tubbs nodded. "Abner Kent's a salesman out of Denver. I think he's in minin' equipment."

"Hm. Not surprising. And this Gardner Hennings?"

"A lawyer."

"Hm. Last thing we need in Laramie is another lawyer. Is he staying in Laramie?"

Tubbs shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, no matter," Weatherstone said. "Long as he pays his fare."

"Business is business," Tubbs said solemnly.

"Any express?"

Tubbs nodded to some packages and a small cask sitting against the wall of the office.

"Any mail?" The contract to carry mail between Fort Laramie and Laramie was a source of regular income. But it was very small. The vast majority of the mail heading south still went from Fort Laramie first to Cheyenne on the Cheyenne and Black Hills Stage Line, and then to Laramie, if needed, by train.

Just then a young man stepped out of the darkness through the door to the tiny office. "Howdy," he said.

Weatherstone and Tubbs looked at him. Weatherstone nodded. "Evening," he said.

"You the stage line owner, Hank Weatherstone?" the young man asked.

Weatherstone nodded with what he hoped was proper dignity and casual acknowledgment, though inwardly he felt a thrill. "I am," he said quietly.

The young man whipped off his hat and held it in front of himself with both hands on the rim. "Name's Malcolm Reed. I was talkin' to the agent at the Cheyenne and Black Hills across the road. Over at the Rustic Hotel?"

"Yes," Weatherstone said. "That's Mr. Ford. And?"

"Well," the young man went on, "I wanted to hire on as a shotgun messenger for 'em. I heard over at the sutler's that they got a gold shipment on their next run south. But this Mr. Ford said they already had someone."

"Probably so," Weatherstone agreed.

"But he said you didn't have a messenger. So I'd like to apply for the job with you."

Weatherstone made a quick appraisal of Reed's clothes and appearance. He looked like a cowhand. He was about Weatherstone's own height, but he was thin. Not emaciated thin, but new-growth thin. And he didn't show much stubble on his chin even this late in the day. The gun belt he was wearing looked as if it might just slip right off his narrow hips. "Well, Mr. Reed," Weatherstone said, "how old are you?"

"Eighteen, sir." He looked Weatherstone straight in the eye. "But please just call me Malcolm. Nobody calls me mister." He grinned self-consciously and looked first at Tubbs and

then back at Weatherstone. He rotated the hat in his hands.

Weatherstone nodded slowly. "You aren't stretching that age just a tad, are you?"

Malcolm looked offended. "Absolutely not, sir."

Weatherstone glanced at Tubbs, and Tubbs closed one eye as he looked at Malcolm. "I see," Weatherstone said finally. "Well, Malcolm, it turns out I don't—"

Malcolm put up a hand. "If you've got any doubt about my bein' able to do the job, I'll show you."

"No, it's not that," Weatherstone said. But before he could say more, Malcolm had plunked his hat on his head and stepped out of the little office into the stable. Malcolm looked up at the rafters and drew his pistol. And before either Weatherstone or Tubbs could protest, Malcolm had cocked the weapon and fired a shot into a rafter.

The report startled all the horses in the stable, including the four that Weatherstone didn't own. Some whinnied and they all jerked or flinched.

"Hey!" both Weatherstone and Tubbs shouted, and they rushed toward Malcolm.

"I got 'em flyin' now," Malcolm shouted. He was watching pigeons wheel about in a frenzied rush of whistling and clicking wings. He cocked and fired twice more, and two pigeons exploded in a burst of feathers and blood.

Weatherstone snatched the pistol from Malcolm's hand. "Stop that! What the hell you doing?"

"Hey," Malcolm blurted. His face turned angry. "Nobody takes my gun away from me."

Tubbs ran to the stalls. "Easy, easy there," he called to the horses. "Whoa."

Weatherstone raised a fist at Malcolm. "You use your brain a lot slower than you use your gun, you idiot. If any of my horses are hurt—"

"They're okay, Hank," Tubbs called. He was patting the neck of one of Weatherstone's horses. The animals had quieted down.

"Here," Weatherstone said. He slammed the pistol into Malcolm's stomach hard enough that Malcolm flinched and let out a sharp grunt.

"Take your gun," Weatherstone said. "If you hadn't gone off half-cocked like that, you would have heard me say I didn't want to hire you simply because I don't use a guard."

"Why not?" Malcolm asked. He was massaging his belly with one hand as he put the gun back into its holster. "The other stage line uses 'em all the time."

"They usually carry a lot more valuables than I do. Gold from the Black Hills heading for Cheyenne."

Malcolm was still scowling. "Well, you didn't have to hit me that hard. I'm sorry I scared your horses, but I really wanted to show you—"

"Those horses are mighty precious to me," Weatherstone said. "I get real touchy when my investment is threatened."

Malcolm spread his hands wide. "Please, Mr. Weatherstone, I need to get to Laramie real bad. Real bad. I'll be messenger for you for no pay. Just get me to Laramie."

"After seeing the way you act, I wouldn't take the chance of someone innocent getting shot or my horses hit or—"

"Okay, okay, you made your point," Malcolm said. He stuck his thumbs in his belt. "Look, is there some work I could do for you then instead? To earn the fare?"

Weatherstone shook his head slowly. "Tubby and I do all the work here. Sorry, kid."

Malcolm bristled. "I wish people wouldn't call me kid."

Tubbs pointed at Malcolm's gun. "Your parents know you're totin' that gun around?" Tubbs

asked.

"I ain't got no parents. Besides I'm old enough not to have to answer to folks anyway."

"Why do you need to get to Laramie?" Weatherstone asked.

"Business," Malcolm snapped. "That okay with you?"

Weatherstone shrugged. "Sure."

"You live near here?" Tubbs asked. "I don't recollect ever seein' you before."

Malcolm shook his head. "I live in Laramie, more or less. I drove a wagon and freight back up here from there as a job. The owner paid me enough to get back on the stage and then some."

"So why not just pay the fare?" Weatherstone asked.

Malcolm clenched his jaw. "Poker. Last night at the sutler's saloon." The sutler's store and saloon at the fort were open to the public as well as to military personnel. Scandal in the past had made the military refer to such men now as post traders, but the former name of sutler did not die easy.

"Ah," Tubbs said. "Should've stuck to honest wages."

"He was cheatin'," Malcolm insisted. "Some fancy card sharp."

"Sure," Weatherstone said. "Just couldn't have been that he was a better player than you."

Malcolm glared at him. "No."

Weatherstone said, "Well, you could sell that gun and holster for enough to pay fare to Laramie and even have cash left over."

"I'm not sellin' my gun," Malcolm declared.

"Okay. Well, I'm afraid I can't help you, Malcolm. Sorry."

Malcolm nodded. "Yeah, sure," he mumbled. He headed for the door, looking down at the dirt. He went out into the darkness.

Tubbs stepped to the door. He was carrying what was left of the two dead pigeons. He watched Malcolm disappear. "You get a feelin' that that's a boy headed for trouble?"

Weatherstone joined Tubbs at the door of the stable and watched Malcolm shuffle back up the road toward Fort Laramie. "Maybe. But plenty of men have been in tougher spots than that," Weatherstone said. "Including me."

Tubbs held up the two dead birds. "Hank, do you think you could have hit these two pigeons?"

Weatherstone shook his head quickly. "He's plenty good with that gun, no question about that."

"That's what could get him into trouble."

"I wonder if he's ever tried to shoot at a man instead of just pigeons."

"Yeah, pigeons don't shoot back."

"Well, Tubby," Weatherstone said, "I'm going up to the sutler's myself for a beer before turning in for the night."

"Okay," Tubbs said. "See you in the mornin'."

"Right." Weatherstone exited the stable.

It was a pleasant, warm June night, and the air felt good. Weatherstone stopped and looked up to check the sky. He was encouraged when he saw a vast spray of stars with no clouds.

He didn't like rain; it was bad for his stage runs. Not that there ever was much rain in Wyoming. But a sudden deluge caused the streams to rise almost instantly. And he didn't usually have the luxury of bridges like the Cheyenne and Black Hills did on the improved territorial road from Cheyenne. If the rivers on his route were too swollen, he had to simply wait for them to go down. Otherwise the stage might get stuck or, worse, tipped over.

Once he had had to wait all day before he could get across Bluegrass Creek, which usually was hardly more than a trickle. His passengers had to spend hours sitting in the coach in the rain, and they quickly ate up what little food that had been fortuitously brought along. By the time the stage could cross the creek, the passengers were ravenously hungry and pretty vocal about the poor transportation service. Not good for a fledgling business.

Weatherstone started walking north up the road that led past the Rustic Hotel to the bridge across the Laramie River. He walked past a few small deserted buildings. The buildings were gradually being stripped of their lumber for construction elsewhere or simply being used for firewood in the harsh Wyoming winters.

Weatherstone had heard that people had thought that a town would sprout up around the Rusty, as most people called the hotel. Forty years earlier Fort Laramie, nestled in a bend of the Laramie River just three miles from where it emptied into the North Platte River, had been a major stop on the Oregon Trail. Tens of thousands of pioneers, as well forty-niners, had stopped there each year for protection from Indians, for resupply, for repair, and for medical help. The emigrants' wagons had stretched for miles along the Laramie River bottomlands adjacent to the fort, and business around the fort had been booming.

But after the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869, few people wanted to walk or ride a wagon across the high plains when they could take a train instead. The fort's importance had dwindled, and with the conquest of the Sioux in 1877 the fort might have closed entirely, except for the discovery of gold in the Black Hills of Dakota Territory.

It had long been suspected that there was gold in the Black Hills, but the 1868 treaty with the Sioux had kept miners out. Fort Laramie, as well as other forts, had provided soldiers to police the treaty, protecting the Indians' land from invasion by whites.

But the Custer Expedition of 1874 had definitely found gold there, and the pressure to open up the Hills became overwhelming, Sioux or no Sioux. After Custer had been killed at the Little Big Horn in 1876, the Sioux were quickly vanquished by a vengeful nation. The treaty of 1877 turned the Black Hills wide open.

Now there was a steady stream of traffic between Cheyenne and the Black Hills, passing through Fort Laramie at the halfway mark. For the easiest way to get to the Black Hills from the East was to take a train all the way to Cheyenne and a stage from there to Custer City and Deadwood. So traffic, which had been east to west, was now south to north. And north to south, carrying either disappointed miners back home or sometimes successful miners and their gold, as well as passenger and freight traffic coincident to successful businesses in the Black Hills area. There was additional traffic between Fort Laramie and the Red Cloud, Camp Robinson, and Spotted Tail Indian agencies, which became important after the defeat of the Sioux.

Still, the mining traffic and the reservation business was nothing like the flood of pioneers and their prairie schooners that had worn ruts across hundreds of miles of prairies and hills and the nearby sandstone ridges. So the town that some had expected never developed; Fort Laramie all by itself adequately filled that function for the diminished amount of traffic involved.

What had continued to flourish, however, were the sutler's saloons at the fort. The enlisted men's saloon was open to anyone. The officers' saloon could also be visited by anyone, provided they were invited to do so by one of the fort's officers or the post trader, John London. It was to the enlisted men's saloon that Weatherstone was headed.

As Weatherstone passed the Rustic Hotel a man stepped out onto the boardwalk. "Oh, Hank," he called.

It was John Ford, the agent for the Cheyenne and Black Hills Stage company. The company

used the Rustic Hotel as their headquarters. The adjacent stables and corrals serviced the stage line's horses as well as sold feed and services to the public.

Weatherstone stopped and nodded. "Evening, John," he said. He got along well with Ford, for the two stage lines were not strictly direct competitors, and they often did favors for each other. He walked toward the hotel and stopped again just short of the boardwalk.

Weatherstone wondered if someday he'd be able to use the hotel as an office, too. Ford didn't have to settle for a pile of hay in a corner of a stable for a bed or shaving with cold water in front of a tiny mirror in Tubbs' office. Ford slept in a proper bed at night; the Rustic Hotel was fairly new and well furnished, having been built just five years earlier.

Ford took the cigar out of his mouth. "I got some business for you, Hank."

"Oh?"

"A fellow sent his gold poke down from Deadwood in our care, but it's headed for Laramie, not Cheyenne. Thought we'd just send it directly to Laramie on your stage."

"Fine," Weatherstone said. Before, gold had been shipped south to Cheyenne on the stage and then, if need be, to Laramie to the west on the train. Allowing for direct shipments to Laramie was exactly the kind of business convenience that Weatherstone thought his new stage line could provide and therefore thrive on.

"Stop by on your way out of town tomorrow, Hank, and pick it up," Ford said.

"Will do, John," Weatherstone answered. "Thanks."

"You headed for the sutler's?"

"Yes. Want to join me?"

Ford shook his head. "No, thanks, I just came from there. But a piece of advice, Hank. Stay away from that gambler in the stovepipe hat." He shook his head and shuddered.

Weatherstone laughed. That must have been the gambler that had cleaned out Malcolm. "Will do, John. Thanks again."

Ford nodded and waved a goodbye. He turned and headed back inside the hotel.

Weatherstone continued past the Rustic. In the dark he could make out some of the fort's buildings that were on this side of the river, as well as some corrals. Then he crossed the bridge over the Laramie River and entered the fort proper.

Fort Laramie had no palisades. The fort relied on its alertness and the weapons of its soldiers for protection. But with the Sioux no longer a threat, there was little need of protection anyway.

In fact Fort Laramie was taking on the character of a town more and more rather than a military post. The fort's resources had always been available to emigrants, and now the growing population of civilians living in the area came to the fort for the same reasons that the emigrants had stopped there many years before. Why, Weatherstone had even heard that officers' row would soon be tree-lined with boardwalks, gas lights and even bird baths.

The sutler's saloons and stores were on the north side of the fort in a direct line with the bridge that Weatherstone had just crossed. So he headed straight past some barracks and storehouses across a grassy field to the low, double-peaked gray building from which he could hear laughter.

Most of the front part of the building composed the post trader's general store, a U.S. post office, and London's office. All three were entered through two doors in the front side of the building.

The left rear part of the building was the officers' saloon, entered through a door in the rear of the building. The right side of the front of the building, and extending all the way to the rear, was the enlisted men's saloon. Its entrance was on the right side of the building. Weatherstone

headed that way.

He entered the saloon. The room, which was wide but not very deep, was noisy, though not raucous. The short bar straight ahead was half-filled with men. Each of the six tables in front of the bar was filled. Some tables had active poker games. A billiard table to the left of the bar had a game going at it, watched by other men standing about or sitting at long benches.

About half the men in the place were soldiers. The others were cowhands, ranchers, drifters, salesmen, one lawman, and some others whose professions Weatherstone could not even guess at. And it would not have been either polite or wise to ask.

Weatherstone couldn't miss the gambler in the stovepipe hat, sitting at the table just to his right as he entered. He was smoking a large cigar and talking loudly, even as he played. He wore a black coat and checkered pants. But Weatherstone noticed that despite the gambler's reputation for success, everything he was wearing looked old and frayed.

Weatherstone walked up to the bar.

"Evenin', Hank," the bartender said.

"Howdy, Irv," Weatherstone replied.

"The usual?"

Weatherstone nodded. "One cold beer." Fort Laramie had two ice houses that could hold almost four hundred tons of ice sawed and chopped from the Laramie and North Platte Rivers in the winter. If the summer was not too hot, ice could be furnished to the officers, infirmary, sutler's store, and saloons all the way into autumn. Cold beer was twice the price of warm beer, but Weatherstone counted it as his only luxury.

When the foamy mug arrived, he paid for the beer and took a long drink and set the mug down. He wiped his lips with his tongue and gave his head a little shake. "That's good, Irv." The bartender smiled and went back to wiping a beer mug.

Weatherstone picked up the mug and sauntered over toward the billiard table. He sat down on a bench and took another long drink from the beer mug.

The lawman at one of the tables rose. He talked briefly with Irv and then came over to Weatherstone, carrying a mug of beer in his left hand.

He nodded to Weatherstone. "Evenin'."

Weatherstone nodded back. "Evening, sir," he said.

The lawman was a tall, broad-shouldered man, well into middle-age, with a belly that was starting to spill over his belt. He sported a magnificent handlebar mustache and was dressed in rough clothes. There was a deputy US marshal's badge pinned to his leather vest.

The marshal tipped his hat back a little with a pointed finger of his right hand. "The barkeep said you were the owner of that new stage line that runs straight to Laramie."

"That's correct." Weatherstone felt another thrill of pride. "Hank Weatherstone." He extended his right hand.

The marshal nodded. "So the barkeep told me." He shook Weatherstone's hand. "I'm Ulysses Drill, deputy US marshal."

"Pleased to me you, Marshal. What can I do for you?"

"You got room for two more passengers on that stage of yours leavin' tomorrow, Hank?"

Weatherstone wanted to laugh. The Cheyenne and Black Hills sometimes piled as many as a dozen and a half passengers in and on their coaches, but Weatherstone had yet to even fill just the inside of his coach. "You're in luck, Marshal," he said with a straight face. "I do have that much room."

"Good," Drill said. "What's the fare?"

“Ten dollars apiece, one way. One hundred miles, two days.” Assuming it doesn’t rain, he thought. “An overnight at the Gregersons’ will cost you a dollar for a bed in the house or fifty cents for one in the bunkhouse. Meals are fifty cents at all stops. Whiskey twenty-five.”

Drill nodded. “Done.” He fished into the right pocket of his vest and pulled out a large handful of coins. “Mind if I pay you now?”

“That’d be fine.”

Drill put his mug down on the bench and picked out two golden eagles and handed them to Weatherstone.

“Thank you, sir,” Weatherstone said. He put his own mug down on the bench and pulled a small, snap-fastened leather pouch from his rear trousers pocket. He opened it and dropped the coins in. He snapped it closed and put the pouch back into his pocket.

Drill picked up his mug again. “Weatherstone’s not a common name,” Drill said. “A long time ago I knew a man by the name of Gideon Weatherstone. Any relation?”

Weatherstone smiled. “That’s my father.”

Drill smiled. “Well, bite my ear off.” He motioned back to the table from which he had risen. “Care to join me at my table?”

Weatherstone picked up his mug from the bench. “Sure, Marshal.”

The two men went back to the table. The men who had been at the table with Drill had left.

Drill lowered his big frame into a chair, which squeaked at the heavy pressure. He set the mug on the table and leaned back, folding the fingers of his big hands lightly across his chest.

Weatherstone sat down next to him and put his own mug on the table. “I would have thought that being a US marshal would have warranted an invitation into the officers’ saloon,” he mused.

Drill smiled. “So it does,” he said. “London has been most hospitable. But somehow I like the company here better. Like those cowhands I was drinkin’ with. Maybe it’s got somethin’ to do with my roots.”

Weatherstone nodded casually.

“Two days to Laramie, huh?” Drill said. “No worse than the other stage line actually. Oh, they only take one day to get to Cheyenne, but then I gotta take the train the next day to Laramie.”

“The route from Fort Laramie to Cheyenne is relatively flat all the way. My route’s through the Laramie Mountains. Too many steep hills to make it in one day.”

“I’m not complainin’. Still, the quicker the better. Nothin’ personal, you understand, but I don’t really like stagecoaches. Prefer a good saddle. But I’m takin’ a prisoner back to the State Penitentiary in Laramie, and that’s easier on a stage.” He picked up the beer mug and took another drink.

Weatherstone had thought about the penitentiary before. “Well, sir, I can drop you and your prisoner off right at the front gate.” Maybe there could be some repeat business.

Drill looked pleased. “I’d appreciate that.”

“You said you were taking a prisoner *back*? That wouldn’t be Spicer Flagg by any chance, would it? The one who escaped last week?”

Drill said, “The very same. He gave me a good run, but I’ve got him stashed in the fort’s guard house right now.”

“They ever figure out who smuggled that pistol in to him?”

Drill shook his head. “He’s got a number of friends who would’ve tried to help.”

“Hard to see how a man like that has friends.”

“Well, maybe these friends are more interested in the money it’s said Flagg has hidden

somewhere than they are in Flagg's hide. Nobody's ever found the pile of loot he took out of that bank in Helena."

Weatherstone smiled. "Even so, there's plenty of people who will wish you'd shot him this time instead of just recapturing him."

"Duty, Hank," Drill said. "Flagg dropped his gun and surrendered. I don't shoot unarmed men."

"Understood. What happened to the two men who escaped with him?"

"They're buried where I found 'em," Drill said. "They didn't surrender." He calmly took another drink from his mug.

"Ah." Weatherstone had a sudden uncomfortable thought. "You think whoever got a pistol to Flagg and his pals in prison might try to free him again while he's on this stage trip?"

"Maybe," Drill said. He suddenly reached down with his right hand and partially drew his pistol, cocked. "But they're not likely to surrender either."

Weatherstone noted how fast the marshal was, even sitting down. Apparently the years hadn't slowed him much. Weatherstone smiled. "I get your meaning."

Drill lowered the hammer of the Colt and shoved the pistol down into the holster. He took another drink and then sighed in satisfaction. "Hank, your pa and me were in the same regiment in the war, the 2nd Wisconsin."

"I was nine years old when he went off to war in sixty-one."

"We had some real brawls with the Rebs. Mighty fierce fighters, them Rebs. He ever tell you about Gettysburg?"

"He still talks about the war sometimes," Weatherstone said. "Especially Gettysburg."

"Then he's still alive, I take it," Drill said.

"Runs a freighting outfit out of Denver."

"Denver? I thought he was goin' back to Madison."

"He did at first, but he got restless, and we kind of drifted out here. Like you?"

Drill laughed. "Well, sure, I left Wisconsin, too. Left Milwaukee as soon as I got back to it. Say, how's your ma?"

"She passed on more than a dozen years ago."

"I'm sorry."

"It's been a long time now."

Drill nodded slowly. "That's too bad though. Your pa was real attached to your ma. I don't think there was a man in the regiment who wrote as many letters home as your pa did. Must've wore out a pencil a month."

"My mother kept all the letters."

"Hm. Well, she was some letter writer herself. When mail did catch up to us, Gideon would have a stack of mail from her. He'd read 'em over and over again."

Weatherstone smiled. He could still remember his mother writing those letters, still remember as she carefully dipped the pen in the ink bottle and scratched out words on paper with so much care.

"How I envied that man," Drill said. "I never got any letters at all."

Weatherstone didn't know what to say to that, so he said nothing.

"Course," Drill went on, "your pa was always readin' somethin'. Your ma sent him books, too, regular like. And after he finished each one, it made the rounds of the company. And newspapers, too. Fact, your pa was about the most readingest man I ever knew."

Weatherstone nodded and smiled. "My mother, too."

Drill took another drink of beer. "There were other kids, too, weren't there?"

"A sister and a brother. Both younger than me."

"So that made you the man of the family when your pa went away. You bein' the eldest, I mean."

"Sort of."

Drill nodded. "Hm." He took another gulp from the mug of beer and set it down. "Your pa bein' in freightin' what got you interested in startin' this new stage line?"

"Partly. I worked with him for years, so I know teams and freighting. But I've worked for others, too. Wrangler, cowhand, this and that, here and there. Eventually I got tired of working for others. So I looked for an opportunity. I think the whole Laramie Mountains area is going to be developed, both in ranching and mining. And I'm establishing a presence. In the future I want to add freighting to my route, but right now passenger service seems the best way to start."

"So you run back and forth between Laramie and Fort Laramie?"

"Connecting with the Union Pacific Railroad in Laramie and with the Cheyenne and Black Hills Stage Line here in Fort Laramie."

"That's what I figured." Drill raised his beer mug. "Well, to the Weatherstone Stage Line," he proposed.

Weatherstone clinked his own mug against Drill's. "To the Weatherstone Stage Line," he repeated. They both took a drink.

Drill, in fact, finished his mugful. "Ah," he said. "That's good. Imagine, cold beer." He stood up. "Well, what time do you leave in the morning?"

"Seven."

"I'll be there with my prisoner," Drill said.

"Okay."

Drill went back to the bar and deposited the mug on the counter. Then he left the saloon. Weatherstone stayed only another ten minutes. He watched the billiard game a little, but then finished his beer and went back to the livery stable.

At the livery stable he sat down in the office. Tubbs had long since finished his chores and gone home, which was, ironically, a small room in his competitor's hotel, the Rustic. But for Weatherstone the livery stable was his home away from home.

Weatherstone undid the buckle of his gun belt and laid the holster and pistol on the desk. He leaned back on the chair and stared contentedly for a moment at his sign above the desk again. Then he picked up a book from the desk and opened it. Before turning in he would allow himself one chapter from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

It wasn't his book. It belonged to Fred Gregerson, who owned the ranch where Weatherstone had established an overnight stop. Indeed, it was partly because Gregerson owned some books that Weatherstone had picked him.

Weatherstone turned up the wick on the kerosene lamp on the desk to give himself a little more reading light. A horse in the stable snuffled. Weatherstone glanced in that direction. He was pretty sure it had been one of his horses. His horses. He smiled to himself and settled in to read.



Hank Weatherstone is the young, ambitious, and proud founder of a new one-vehicle stage line in southeastern Wyoming. He thinks he has only two passengers for his upcoming two-day run to Laramie from Fort Laramie and he expects an uneventful trip. But it gets complicated.

Last Stage to Laramie

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