

Pete could tell Will Jr. had more to say by the way he lingered after the small talk had run out. Pete helped him along by asking a random question about how he was finding things on the rounds he did for Mr. Danyon.

“Oh fine, just a lot of driving, as you know,” he answered. Then his thoughts seemed to come together as he added, “Was over by Fort Stockton and heard from some guys there that their shop had been broke into and a bunch of engine parts were stolen—right off their bench, they said.”

Pete listened, trying to tell where his cousin was headed with the story. He gave him a worried look as the tale kept on.

“They said it was Sunday night, right after all that commotion about those cattle that were found shot out by Chancellor on Saturday. Story is the police believe whoever is doing the vandalism in that area must be the same ones involved in the thefts.”

Pete kept his eyes looking straight into his cousin’s as the information was being relayed. He had heard this opinion from Will Jr. before.

“Maybe there is a connection to all that’s happening,” Pete agreed with him. “Stands to reason. Maybe whoever is doing it thinks they’re pretty smart. My guess is they’re going to get caught; a man can’t get away with such behavior for long.”

Will Jr. stood looking toward the street for some moments and then turned back to Pete.

“Thing is, Pete, I been hearing a few tales about how you might have been hanging around John Buderus and Jack Pushton. I even saw you come back into town riding with John a while back, myself.”

Pete let his cousin finish without offering up any excuses too quickly. He sensed that Will Jr. was fishing for him to give out any bits of information that would tell him something, believing Pete would be doing so unwittingly. Pete knew what the tiny town had been saying, and he was not going to just stick his head in the sand or his nose in the air while conforming.

“I know,” Pete started in a really apologetic tone. “But John has tools over at his shop that make this place look like a fishing tackle box. And I know that Mr. Walker wouldn’t approve of me asking, but it just seemed stupid to pass

up on work that could be making this shop money, just because it would look bad if I borrowed a tool from Buderus.”

Pete made it sound like he was simply trying his best in the absence of the businesses owner. He went on to say that he had accepted the ride with John when he was coming back from being out at Valentine, returning a truck he had serviced. Pete kept telling his story about how John had been out there also, and when it was found that Pete needed a ride back to town, the lift from Buderus was offered. He added another bit to cinch the tale that he knew would distract his cousin.

“Just as we were going to leave, I saw that Laurel was in Valentine, as well.” Pete noticed Will Jr. stiffen a little. “She stopped when she saw me, just being polite I suppose, and when she saw John in his truck, she offered a quiet hello and then asked him why he had not shown up at the park for the veteran’s appreciation ceremony on the Fourth.”

Will Jr. did not ask for details but just waited to hear whatever might be told. Pete said that John had just grumbled about being busy and told Pete they needed to be headed out. Pete knew his cousin’s ears were burning for any words about Laurel, especially in connection with Buderus, so he kindly fed him another small offering.

“She said something about giving the housekeeper a ride home for the weekend and then asked me how you were doing.”

While watching the reactions play over Will Jr.’s features, it came to Pete that maybe his cousin would think it best to say no more about whom he spent time with, believing that more information could be gained in future. Just then Will Jr. seemed to come back into his senses and answered Pete.

“Just know who you’re dealing with, Pete. It isn’t just that people disapprove of John and some of the guys he hangs out with—hell, I went to school with most of them. It just seems that for some guys, Pete, they’re bad luck, you know? They use their poor upbringing as an excuse to act up.”

Pete told Will Jr. that he agreed whole-heartedly and added what a really dreadful character he thought that Buderus guy was.

“I just don’t want any of those guys feeding you a big line about what

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heroes they are, just because they may have served more time during the war. Hell, Pete, you know the story yourself,” Will Jr. stressed. “The guy *had* to go into the army. It was that or jail. So be smart, Pete.”

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