

TALES FROM THE
CROSSING
at
BARRACUDA FLATS



BY **L.S. CHRISTOPHER**

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at Barracuda Flats**

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About This Book

These stories are works of fiction. The characters aren't real and the town isn't either. Certain historical figures mentioned in these stories were, of course, real at one time, but they are being used fictionally and so are not necessarily being portrayed as real history knows them. Any other character's resemblance to the living, the dead, or someone you know, is just a coincidence.

These stories also take place in an alternate historical timeline where the Civil War never happened but the Negro Homestead Act did, because people who travel back in time by accident don't always realize they aren't supposed to rearrange history to suit themselves. You may also encounter some elements of the science-fantasy subgenre commonly known as steampunk thanks to that same coffee-loving time-traveler.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to Terry, Jon and Sara, who sacrificed most of one November to my first foray into NaNoWriMo, and the creation of a wild and wondrous place called Barracuda Flats.

Much thanks and appreciation also goes to Ina, Pam, Eric, Roseanne, Sue and Chris, because without them this book would never have been finished, and I would still think that penguins live at the North Pole.

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Just Another Day

On days when there were no settlers, miners, trappers or troops passing through, Barracuda Flats was a very uneventful place to be. Today was such a day.

Sheriff Joe Anders, known locally as Sheriff Joe, wasn't complaining. In fact, he was sitting out in front of his jail with his chair tipped back and his legs stretched out, reading a book in the sun. From down the street – if you could call a wide track of log-graded earth fronting a straggle of small buildings a street – came occasional sounds of desultory industry from the blacksmith's workshop and the hotel. And from the other direction, if you were listening closely, might be heard an even more occasional snore as the owner of the trading post napped the empty afternoon away.

And that was about it. Barracuda Flats was so small it most likely shouldn't have been called a town, it wasn't even large enough to be a village. And it definitely couldn't be counted as a settlement. It was just slightly larger than your average stage-stop, and that only because it was the last honest-to-God bit of civilization anyone was going to encounter after crossing the Snake and before reaching the other end of the pass. There were a few hardy farmers and small ranchers scattered through the wide box canyons and secretive deep valleys in the surrounding area; there was even a small tribe of Cherokee living peacefully in what was definitely not their native territory just a short ride away, in a tiny valley village they called Ayotlihi. But still, the area was so underpopulated that the territorial governor had appointed the sheriff himself, and arranged for the sheriff's wages to be paid out from the governor's own treasury. Because small as it was, off the beaten track as it was, underpopulated as it was...the crossing called Barracuda Flats couldn't *not* have a lawman on hand.

Joe Anders was that lawman. Currently relaxing in the sun in front of his jail, enjoying his book, and apparently not even sparing a thought for what trouble might come riding down the road the next day. Joe wasn't a man who borrowed trouble – although if trouble showed up he wasn't inclined to leave it alone, either. And he somehow always seemed to know when it was going to show up. At the very least, he was a hard man to take by surprise.

The sounds coming from the blacksmith shop grew more regular, and then took on a musical tone, and he smiled at his book. Joseph Freeman, the blacksmith, had a tin instrument he sometimes played, something like a

shallow polished metal bowl that was played like a drum but produced sounds reminiscent of a clockwork music box being wound up at the bottom of a small lake. It was pretty but unusual, and Joe had never seen or read about anything like it before he'd come to Barracuda Flats.

He read a few more lines in the book, finishing up a page, then tucked a scrap of newsprint in to mark his place and stood up, tucking the book into his vest and pushing back the wide-brimmed brown hat he'd pulled down to keep the afternoon sun's glare out of his startlingly bright blue eyes while he read. He looked up and down the road, saw nothing, and then ambled over to the blacksmith's shop. Joseph's workshop was behind the shop, and that was where the music was coming from. Joe went as far as the door, which was ajar, and leaned against the jamb. "That doesn't sound like a triumphal march," he called in, just loud enough to be heard over the music, "so I'm guessing the latest experiment didn't quite work out."

A watery sort of chord rang out, accompanied by a rich chuckle. "And I'd be guessing that my music did not properly accompany your musketeers," came from inside the shop in an equally rich accented voice. "You can come in; I was going in and out earlier, so the door is safe at the moment."

Joe pushed the door further open, grinning, but stayed leaning against the jamb. "What about the rest of the place? And it was sailors, not musketeers."

The dark-skinned man laughed and slapped his sticks against the tin bowl, producing a dissonant twang that echoed through the cluttered space before setting the sticks aside. "As long as you don't touch anything? It is all fine." He waved a careless hand toward the back of the room. "The coffee should be ready. You can touch that, if you are careful."

"Because if I'm not, it'll probably blow us both up." But the sheriff came the rest of the way in, blinking to adjust his eyes to the dimmer light, and wandered over to where an intricate mess of narrow pipes twisted between a small wood-fired boiler, a cistern, a capped cylinder with a pressure gauge on it, and a fat teapot. There was already a heavy porcelain mug sitting in the correct spot, and by cranking a small wheel he was able to set a gear-driven series of events in motion that ran brewed coffee through a series of sieves and filtering cloth and poured the mug exactly full of equal parts of clear, fragrant coffee and steaming, foamy sweetened milk. Joe sniffed appreciatively but handed the filled mug over to its owner before snagging

an identical mug off a nearby shelf and starting the process over again to make his own cup. Joseph had perfected his coffee-making machine the previous spring, and he fired it up whenever there was a new shipment of tinned milk to be had at the trading post.

Coffee finally in hand, Joe appraised the nearest tall stool to make sure all three of its legs were accounted for and were actually legs, and then sat down – carefully, because you could never be certain that anything was what it seemed to be in Joseph’s workshop, even if you’d seen and/or used it recently. He took a deep draught from his steaming mug and licked the foam from his clean-shaven upper lip; it wasn’t yet time to start growing out his winter beard. “Well?” he finally asked. “What happened with the experiment?”

Joseph waved the long-fingered hand that wasn’t holding his mug and shrugged. “I cannot see what is wrong; I have been concentrating on it too much. So I will leave it alone for a time and then return to fix it, that is all.”

“That usually works,” Joe agreed, and took another drink of his coffee. “And then?”

“And then it will be doing what I intended for it to do all along,” the other man grinned. “I will tell you what that is when it happens, not before.”

Joe snorted, but he was smiling. “Unless it blows up, and then I’m gonna have to try to figure it out all by myself while I clean up the mess. *If* I can clean up the mess without getting blown up myself or taken out of commission by one of your traps.”

“I have every faith in you.” He did, actually. Joseph Freeman may have been a scientist, an inventor – not to mention a damned fine blacksmith – but he knew Joe Anders was at least his equal when it came to thinking his way through a tricky problem. The sheriff of Barracuda Flats was a literate, well-educated man, and he had an inquiring mind. He and Joseph were close in age and of similar temperament, and they had become good friends over the years.

George Mann who ran the trading post was a trusted friend to both men as well, but he was a grizzled old mountain man type who kept mostly to himself out of a stubborn combination of habit and long-standing preference. The two other in-town residents, however, Joseph did not trust so much – hence the traps on his workshop door, and inside the shop itself. Miss Lottie who ran the hotel cum saloon cum boarding house, was a nosy,

troublemaking sort of person, and as there was little for her to cause trouble with in a town with a population of five, she was often bored enough to get into things she had better have stayed out of. And her long-time lodger, a doctor named Jacobs who had washed up in the area on a quest for altitude to improve his consumption, had a sly stickiness about him that both Joseph and Joe were hesitant to turn their backs on. Although they didn't have to worry about him all that much anyway, as he rarely left the confines of his room – and when he did it was only to come down to the saloon portion of the hotel. To be honest, however, nobody who'd ever met him had ever complained that they didn't see enough of him, and no resident of the area had ever asked him to practice his profession on their behalf.

Luckily, none of them had ever needed to. Joseph appraised his friend over the rim of his mug, thinking about that. Barracuda Flats had needed a lawman because of the traffic that came through the little-used and fairly dangerous crossing – some of the traffic was equally as dangerous as the crossing itself, in fact. And Joe Anders was not a man who backed down if he could help it. It was a miracle that no one had shot him yet, as he wasn't anywhere near a fast draw. Accurate, yes; Joe could drop a bullet in the center of just about anything he set his sights on. But fast? No. Joe was no gunslinger, a fact of which he was fully cognizant and not at all ashamed. Accuracy was more valuable than speed, to his way of thinking, because that meant that your first shot would always be your last as well. Unfortunately, it also meant that your opponent was going to get his first shot off before you did, which meant you were quite possibly going to be taking a bullet yourself if his aim was any good at all.

It had never come to that yet; Joseph, not one to borrow trouble either, sincerely hoped it never would but knew better than to believe that it wouldn't. Trouble showed up at the crossing on a regular basis. And he was no hand with a gun himself to back Joe up – he could shoot one, of course, and he had other tricks up his sleeves, but he wasn't what was going to be needed if something eventually came along that Joe couldn't think his way out of. Joseph raised an eyebrow at his friend. “You know...”

“I need a deputy, yeah.” Joe's intense blue eyes twinkled. “We've had this discussion before, my friend, and I don't think you're volunteerin' for the job this time any more than you were the last ten times.”

Joseph snorted loftily. “You know I am not a fighter. I am a man of science.”

Joe snorted right back, much more earthily. “You’re also a man who invented a gun that rapid-fires pea-shot from a rotating cylinder when you turn a crank – for someone who’s not a fighter you damn sure know how to bring one to a quick end.”

“Bah.” Joseph waved it off. “That was for wars, which *should* be brought to a quick end.”

“Amen to that.” Joe saluted the idea with his mug. “The quicker the better, to my way of thinking.” Joseph cocked an eyebrow at him, and Joe sighed. “You know, it’s not like I can pull a deputy out of thin air, or grow one in the ground. And most of what trots its way down our road is more likely to be tryin’ to kill me than it would be wantin’ to sign on to keep it from happening.”

“Very true.” Joseph thought on it a moment more, and then set the discussion aside to be brought up another time – perhaps when he had a better idea. “I suppose we will just have to hope that someday the road will bring us something of more use and less trouble.”

Joe just smiled and kept drinking his coffee.

Two days later, the morning started out in its same lazy way – sans the fancy coffee, because the ‘post had run out of tinned milk, and without the music as well because Joseph was in his forge making horseshoes. Joe was back in his chair in front of the jail, a cup of strong, plain black coffee he’d brewed himself sitting beside him as he read his book and enjoyed the sun and the mountain breeze. And then a new sound intruded that brought Joe’s head up.

The sound of a wagon, coming up the road.

By the time the wagon came into view, Sheriff Joe Anders was...back to reading his book, looking for all the world as though he hadn’t noticed a thing. The wagon pulled up to a halt, closer to the jail than to the hotel, and one of the young men who had been driving it jumped down. “Are you Sheriff Anders?” he called out in a clear, strong voice.

“That would be me, yes.” Joe put the book aside and levered himself out of his chair, still looking at his ease but ready for anything. He eyed the wagon. “You boys making for the crossing?”

“No sir.” The young man tipped his hat. “Michael Grayson, at your service. Mr. Taylor,” he waved a hand back toward the wagon, and the other young man tipped his hat as well, “has purchased a homestead allotment in

the area. We were told that we should stop here to replenish our supplies, and introduce ourselves to you at the same time.”

Joe cocked his head, suspicious. “Who told you that?”

“Marshal Overton, in Redmond Valley.” Grayson was standing ramrod straight, like a soldier reporting to a superior officer. “He spoke quite highly of you as a man who could be trusted, sir. And he said we should tell you... that his horse still hasn’t recovered and it is all your fault?”

Suspicion fell away. “It was his fault for trying it,” Joe laughed. Bart Overton would not have told anyone the whole story behind those words, but his purpose in sending that particular message was clear; he liked these men and he wanted Joe to know it. “Someday I’ll have to tell you about that, but for now we probably have more important things to talk about.” He pushed back his hat and held out his hand. “Pleasure to meet you Mr. Grayson. Welcome to Barracuda Flats.”

The handshake he received in return was firm. “Thank you, Sheriff Anders. We are glad to be here.”

Joe smiled, and waved at the man still on the wagon’s box. “Mr. Taylor, it’s safe to come down – and to bring your wife out, too.”

Taylor started just slightly, but after exchanging a look with Grayson and receiving a small nod he grinned and swung down from the box, disappearing around the other side of the wagon. Grayson was frowning. “Sheriff...”

“Mr. Grayson, it is usually all too obvious that the man who stays behind with the reins in his hands is the one with the most to lose,” Joe told him. He cocked his head, sizing the younger man up. Tall, dark hair and eyes, fair skin browned by the sun. An honest face, intelligent manner of speaking in his deep voice with its hint of a familiar Northern accent. And that stance...Joe’s smile became a grin. If this boy didn’t have a red coat stashed somewhere in his recent past, he’d eat his hat. “You all are Canadians, right?”

“We are from Canada, yes.” The distinction he made wasn’t lost on Joe, who only nodded. He’d already known they weren’t just plain old settlers looking for a place to settle; Bart wouldn’t have bothered with the message if they had been. “May I present Mr. and Mrs. Taylor, sir.”

Taylor was shorter than Grayson, just about the same size as Joe himself, with a sturdy, compact build and light grey-blue eyes, and Joe knew at a glance that he hadn’t been a redcoat – there was no martial discipline in his

stance, although the handshake he proffered was just as firm as Grayson's had been. And the girl was a beauty, all golden hair and forget-me-not eyes and a complexion like white rose petals; the shy smile she bestowed on him was like the sun peeking out from behind the morning clouds. Joe smiled back, his best and most reassuring smile, and bowed over her hand, which made her blush prettily. Joe's pleasant expression didn't change, but he was groaning on the inside; this was the kind of wife men got killed over, and not just out here on the wild frontier. Another glance at Taylor showed that her husband knew it, which was a relief. There was also a little girl with them, hiding behind the wife's skirts, which presented another problem entirely; with her brown skin and black hair, there was no way that child belonged to the Taylors. Joe gave her a smile as well. "Aren't I going to be introduced to this little lady as well?"

Something passed between Taylor and Grayson, but to Joe's surprise it was the wife who spoke. "This is Kimi," she said in a soft, sweet voice. She patted the little hand that was clutching her skirts. "It's all right, Kimi, you don't have to be afraid."

"Kimmimela was a...gift from the Sioux," Grayson explained quietly. "We don't know what nation her family belonged to, although the braves who brought her to us believed she may be a half-breed." He shrugged. "Not that it matters now. All of her people are, apparently, dead."

"The Sioux we encountered said there was no family in their village willing to take the child," Taylor continued. He was watching Joe closely. "They asked us to take her, to raise her. She's just a baby, it wouldn't have been right to say no and leave her with people who didn't want her."

"I agree," Joe told him, nodding. "Does your 'encounter' with the Sioux and the fact that you survived it have anything to do with that Indian sign painted on your wagon canvas?"

"It does." Grayson looked relieved. "It identified us as trusted friends of the native peoples – friends who were passing through, not seeking to stay."

Joe nodded again. "Lucky thing to have, crossing the plains these days." He gave the wide-eyed little girl another smile before returning his attention to Taylor. "Well, if you want to move your wagon on up the road a bit, we can use the territory map at the 'post to see exactly where you're going – I'm guessing you've got the little valley southeast of town, nice green little place and not all that much of a ride from here. You planning to camp out there tonight or stay in town?"

Another look between the two men. “We’ll most likely stay there,” Grayson said.

Mrs. Taylor smiled another one of those husband-dooming smiles again. “It will be good to know we’re home, finally.”

Taylor put his arm around her. “Yes it will, honey. Yes it will.” He tipped his hat again and led his wife and girl back to the wagon, tossing the little girl up onto the box and making her laugh. Joe was even gladder to see that; some men didn’t take well to raising another man’s child, no matter how or where they got it, and he was glad Taylor wasn’t afflicted with that sort of stupidity.

Grayson walked beside him the short distance to the trading post, every disciplined stride convincing Joe more and more that the young man had been one of the red-coated constables who were making such a name for themselves up Canada way. He just as obviously wasn’t with them anymore, though – and near as Joe could tell by looking he wasn’t brother to Taylor, or to Taylor’s wife. And he didn’t really seem like the homesteading type. So what was he doing here, just escorting the Taylors from Canada to Wyoming Territory? No, he acted like a man who was sticking around, he’d travelled with them all that way and he had not introduced himself as a guide – which a guide would have done almost immediately, hoping to drum up more business for an outgoing trip. Joe smiled to himself. If nothing else it was going to be an interesting story once he heard it, of that he was sure.

Over the next few weeks, Barracuda Flats saw a lot of Michael Grayson. He came into town for supplies and the occasional telegraph message, and once the Taylors’ cabin was built he would sometimes pass through on his way to scout around the crossing. He avoided the saloon for the most part, and after a time Joe came to the conclusion that the young man didn’t drink – which might have been an issue in some places where rotgut was the local beverage of choice, but didn’t cause anyone to turn a hair in a place where most of the residents drank coffee or tea by preference over the hard liquor that was so expensive to have shipped in.

Joe also eventually came to the conclusion that the young man didn’t know quite what to do with himself now that Toby and Lucy Taylor were settled into their little homestead, and he decided that it was time to hear the Canadians’ story so he could get a better idea of what he might do about it

himself. If he could do anything, that was. So he picked a good day when the sky was clear and the road was too, and he rode out to the homestead to ask his questions.

On arriving at the neatly built cabin he was immediately offered hospitality by the lady of the house, which he accepted with pleasure. He didn't want to drag things out, though, so he got down to business just as soon as Taylor had taken a seat across the table from him. "I don't like surprises," he said bluntly. "We're not in a good place for it, as you can well imagine. So to keep myself from being unpleasantly surprised somewhere down the road, I'd like to know exactly what it was that brought you down from the North...and where you picked up an ex-redcoat to bring along with you." He shook his head when Mrs. Taylor covered her mouth with her hand to hold back a frightened gasp. "Ma'am, it's not that I care what chased you down here – nobody washes up at this end of Wyoming unless something somewhere drove them this way and they don't want it to catch up with them. And Marshal Overton vouched for the three of you, whether you knew he was doing it or not. But if that something does ever show up looking, it would be better all the way around if I knew what to keep an eye out for. I don't want to set the devil on your track just because I didn't know what name he was using."

"That would be Geoffrey MacGregor, Lucy's father," Toby told him heavily. "I was working as a log driver when I met her and started to court her, and her father didn't like it. He had his sights set on a better match than some working man...and he didn't seem to care that the man he'd picked over me was cold and cruel and didn't care any more for Lucy than he would have for a horse or a dog. Or that she couldn't stand the sight of him."

"So you eloped?"

"Not exactly." He sighed. "I hadn't come up with a plan yet. Sneaking off to get married doesn't do a woman's reputation any favors, or a man's either for that matter, and I'd been hoping that I could think of something more civilized. But then there was this incident..."

"It was at a party," Lucy broke in. She sat down next to her husband and leaned into his arm, but her eyes were on Joe. "I didn't hear it, but some of my friends did and then told me about it before I went home. My father had already made arrangements to marry me off to someone I hated – and who apparently only wanted me to be the kind of wife that would be a silent

ornament on his arm or in his drawing room and be kept out of sight the rest of the time.”

“He was going to forbid her to sing anymore,” Toby said. “Even in church.”

Joe winced. He’d heard the young woman singing one day, when the air had been clear and still and just crisp enough to carry the sound of an angelic voice caroling up from the valley. He could only imagine what she sounded like if you weren’t miles away and relying on echoes to bring the music to you. “I can see why you wouldn’t have wanted to marry him then, yes. Your father wouldn’t listen?”

Lucy shook her head. “Mama wouldn’t either, she said she was sure Papa knew what was best and would certainly never choose someone so unpleasant as that for me to marry. And when I told her I loved Toby she told me Papa would never hear of such a thing and not to be silly.” She sniffed. “I locked myself in my room that night and started making plans of my own. I’d rather have died lost in the woods than been married to Garreth Dennison.”

Toby slipped his arm around her shoulders. “I didn’t know about that part of it, I’d just left the party and gone back to the logging camp to try to think of a better plan. And then Michael appeared out of the woods near my tent.” He shook his head, smiling just a little sadly. “He’d overheard Mr. MacGregor and his garrison commander discussing what to do about the situation, and when he realized their plan was to take me out of the picture permanently and force Lucy to marry Dennison before the month’s end, he’d felt he had to do something.”

“You knew him?”

“No, I’d never met him before that night. He was one of their newest recruits; I was given to understand that they’d brought him in to strengthen ties with some of the local tribes, because he could speak several of the First People’s languages.” Toby shook his head. “Michael’s commander gave him the message to deliver that would have signed my death warrant, and instead Michael sent the two brutes who were to be sent to deal with me off on a wild goose chase and brought the message to me at the camp. I took it to the logging boss – I knew I could trust him – and he gave me the pay I was due and put the message in the paybox to keep it safe; he said he knew someone he could trust at the North-West Mounted Police headquarters in Ottawa, and he would make sure the message got there so

something could be done about the garrison commander.” The sad smile came back. “I realized while I was packing up to run that Michael hadn’t thought much beyond getting the message taken care of and warning me; he’d planned to just disappear off into the mountains, and I know he had the woodcraft skills to do it, but…”

“But they’d eventually have found him.” Joe was nodding. “He’d have been shot on sight as a deserter, or hauled off for court martial so they could shoot him in front of an audience. You asked him to come with you?”

Toby nodded. “I said that I’d share our stake with him, but he wouldn’t take it. He did help me get Lucy out of the settlement though – in fact, I don’t think I could have done it without him.”

“He woke our housekeeper and told her Colonel Norton and my father had sent him,” Lucy said. “He managed to let me know that he was there to help Toby, and since there was a ‘criminal’ possibly coming for me, he told me to barricade my door from the inside until morning,” here she cast a mischievous sidelong look at her husband, “in case he tried to break into the house to get to me.”

“Once Michael came back out, I brought a ladder and came to Lucy’s bedroom window, and then the three of us headed out on foot for the nearest settlement that had a minister on hand.” Toby smiled fondly at his wife. “I wasn’t going to compromise Lucy’s honor any further than circumstances required us to. We were married before the day was out and then heading on our way South.”

There wasn’t much Joe could say to that, except that he was glad they’d gotten away. He stayed there a little longer, just making conversation, getting to know them a bit better, and then he rode back to town, putting together a few plans as he went. And then he rode straight back out of town again to find Michael.

Joe had a fairly good idea of where to look. He himself had frequently gone exploring around the crossing when he’d first come to the Flats, learning the territory that was under his jurisdiction and just enjoying the wild, rugged beauty of the place – and he still did, on a regular basis, as the terrain could change drastically after the spring thaw. He found Michael’s horse tied outside one of the caves that riddled the heights above the crossing, and waited there with his own mount until the ex-constable came out. “Thought you might be up here,” he said. “Once I’d found these caves,

I couldn't see enough of them. You don't want to be here if the water comes up, though. Place is a deathtrap."

"I know. I came up here because I heard the water, it was..." Michael smiled, shrugged. "It was amazing, I wish there was a way I could see it."

Joe grinned. "Yeah, me too. There's a place up in the north of the territory called Yellowstone where I hear you can watch it go hundreds of feet straight up into the air, now that would be something to see." He sat down on a rocky outcropping, and slowly, cautiously, Michael did the same. "I came up here to talk to you, Michael. About why you're in Barracuda Flats." He tipped his hat back. "I already talked to Toby and Lucy – told them I didn't want to be caught by surprise if whoever made you all leave your home country showed up in my jurisdiction. So they told me some things."

Michael swallowed, but he didn't look away from Joe's intense blue gaze. "So you know that I'm a deserter."

"I know that you're honorable to a fault, brave as all get-out, and crafty as a winter fox in the woods," Joe answered. "Down here, we call that a damn fine man. What they call it in Canada is not my problem."

The younger man appeared puzzled by that. "But, Sheriff..."

"Joe."

Michael shook his head. "It would be disrespectful of me to use your first name."

"Not if I asked you to." Joe cocked his head. "And especially not if you were my deputy – I'd expect my deputy to call me by my name when we're not on official business, or when strangers are in town."

Now Michael was even more confused. "You found out that I'm a deserter – in Canada," he added quickly before the older man could correct him again. "But still. In my own country, I'm a criminal; were I to be caught, I'd probably be shot on sight. And now you want me to be your deputy?"

"That's what I said, yeah." Joe shrugged. "I'll keep repeating it until you catch on: This is not Canada. This is Wyoming Territory. And Joseph's been riding me for years about needing a good man to watch my back. Not to mention," he smiled, "I believe you've been tryin' to figure out a way to get yourself out of the lovebirds' nest without ruffling their feathers for a few weeks now, and unless you've already come up with a plan you like better I'm offering you an opportunity to do just that."

Michael thought that over; Joe stayed quiet and let him cogitate in peace. “I believe I would like to give being your deputy a try, Sh...Joe,” he said at last. “Would I need to stay in town?”

“Job comes with a room – because my cabin’s got one to spare, and I don’t think you want to take up residence in the hotel with Doc and Lottie,” Joe told him. “They’re the reason I came up here to find you instead of waiting for you to come back to town, after all. If you want to build your own place later, that’ll be up to you. Pay’s not much to speak of, ours comes in with the supply wagon every month, but it’s plenty for a man on his own in a place like Barracuda Flats. And best of all,” he leaned forward, dropping his voice, “the likelihood of someone who might know who you are stumbling across you by accident out here is just about nonexistent.”

“That is true,” Michael agreed. He stood up. “Shall we get back to town, then, so you can begin showing me my new duties? And I’ll need to go back to the valley for my things as well.”

“Sounds good to me,” Joe said, standing up as well. He slapped the younger, taller man on the back in comradely fashion. “The first thing we’re introducing you to, though, is Joseph’s coffee machine. It’s for lawmen and blacksmiths only, and with three of us buyin’ the milk that means we’ll hopefully get to use it more often.”

END SAMPLE

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