

HIGH STAKES

by Chad Strong

SAMPLE CHAPTER

CHAPTER ONE

Curt Prescott led his horse down the worn, wooden gangplank and onto solid ground. The government docks at the foot of Wharf Street were bustling with merchants, seamen, laborers, and livestock. The late afternoon sun warmed the mud banks, infusing the air with the pungent odors of rotting seaweed and animal manure. Seagulls squawked raucously. Reeling above the harbor, they never tired of swooping to the ground to snatch whatever appeared edible, inevitably quarreling with each other over the tidbit.

Curt's gelding tossed his head and stamped a hoof. Curt stroked the buckskin's golden neck beneath his black mane. "Okay, Ace. I know you're as glad to be home as I am." He scanned the crowded area for a clear spot to stop and mount.

"Get on there, you!"

Curt spun toward the voice, for a split second thinking he was being given hell for holding someone up. But the herdsman's shout had been directed at a recalcitrant ox that was trying to avoid being loaded onto a small barge.

Locating a clear spot over by a stack of oak barrels, Curt tightened the cinch of his stock saddle — no little sissy pancake English saddle for him — and swung up. He rode up the dirt ramp that led to street level and turned northward along Wharf Street.

The waterfront had changed a lot since he'd been a boy scrounging for lost coins or bits of gold under the rickety stoops of ramshackle saloons. Since the gold rush of 1858, most of those old shacks had been gradually replaced by two- and three-story brick and stone buildings, many enhanced with decorative wrought iron detail.

The city of Victoria had come a long way from her roots as a Hudson's Bay Company trading post. Having weathered the growing pains of the Fraser River gold rush and its aftermath, she

was now the largest settlement north of San Francisco and the capital city of the new province of British Columbia.

Curt rode along the street at a walk, reabsorbing the essences of home. Victoria, named in honor of the Queen, claimed to be “more British than the British,” but nonetheless, it had seen a large influx of Americans, particularly during the gold rush years, and the fact was reflected in her architecture. The American-style streets with their long strips of side-by-side exposed storefronts could belong in any west coast town Curt had visited south of the border. But he had to admit, he thought the British colonial elements lent a quaintness and gentility to Victoria’s streets that made them unique.

Now twenty-three years old, Curt had been born in the States himself, somewhere in the Washington Territory, though he had no recollection of his childhood before Victoria. When rumors of gold began, his mother had bought passage to Vancouver Island for herself and her only child in return for her favors to a gold seeker. Less than two weeks after arriving on the island, the gold seeker was gone, and Lillian Prescott was left to fend for herself and her young son in the muddy streets of their new city.

Curt often wondered if he had inherited his wanderlust from Lillian. For the last three years, he hadn’t been able to resist the lure of the circuit of annual spring poker tournaments from Seattle to San Francisco. Yet, as driven as he felt each year to go, he was just as eager to return home once the last hand had been played. Victoria would always be home.

He turned right up Yates Street and rode the block to Government, the main street through town, but pulled to a startled halt at the crowded intersection. A parade of women marching southward blocked his crossing.

Two banners were strung across their ranks. The foremost one read: “Cast Out All Tarnished Doves and Gamblers!” The second one demanded: “Close Down All Dens of Iniquity!” The group of at least fifty women chanted the banners’ words repeatedly. Some of their faces were familiar to Curt, but he had never seen their leader before. She was middle-aged, plump, and carried herself with a confidence the others lacked. They paused, filling the intersection like a herd of milling sheep, and shouted their demands at the Carlton Saloon, which occupied the entire northwest corner of Government and Yates and happened to be the saloon over which Curt kept a suite.

“What the hell?” Curt asked out loud. Were they targeting just the Carlton or each saloon in turn? The Carlton Saloon and Dance Hall was one of the better establishments in town. It was in no way one of the seedy places that Curt could see them wanting shut down.

One of the bouncers came out the front door and politely asked the women to move on. They ignored him and chanted even louder. He shouted his request over top of their voices, but they refused to budge or be silent.

So much for a peaceful homecoming, Curt thought. He reined his horse close to the boardwalk, trying to get by them. A bonneted young woman raised her frantic eyes to his and pointed directly at him.

“Cast out all devil-worshipping gamblers!” she cried.

How she could spot him as such, he questioned, dressed as he was in his travelling clothes and a reliable brown oilskin jacket and hat. He deliberately 'dressed down' for the road, both for comfort and serviceability as well as for safety from the unwanted attentions of highwaymen.

He tipped his hat to her. "I swear, miss, I've never worshiped the devil."

"Then, young man, he has you fooled, hasn't he?"

Curt had no reply to that. He tried to ride past her, but she stepped in front of his horse at every attempt.

"Excuse me, miss, but this is a public road."

She flung out her arms, startling Ace into throwing his head and trying to get away from her. She screeched again and again: "Cast out all devil-worshipping gamblers! Cast out all devil-worshipping gamblers!"

Her cries brought the attention of the whole group to her and Curt. They converged toward him like a mass of madwomen.

"Jesus!" Curt muttered and, instead of holding Ace in, let him spin and canter away, back toward the Inner Harbor. On reaching Wharf Street, Curt halted and looked over his shoulder. The women had not pursued him but were cheering themselves at having driven him off.

Raising his eyes to the clear blue sky, Curt said to the horse, "Well, I guess it's a nice evening for a ride in the country, Ace." Hopefully, by the time he'd taken a ride, the women would have moved on.

He reined northward and swung east along Johnson to skirt Chinatown, crossed Government above his former destination, and struck northward again on Douglas. Just beyond the city limits, the road passed through a high meadow of Garry oak trees. The site was home to a long-abandoned, whitewashed church which, only a few months before, had been in serious disrepair. Both the church and its cemetery on the opposite side of the road appeared to have received considerable attention since Curt had been gone. The church's roof no longer sagged, and the old moss-covered shingles had been replaced with new cedar shakes. A new sign declared the building "The Garry Oak Church of the People" and welcomed everyone to worship services and Sunday school with Pastor Richard Andrews. Curt couldn't recall what it had been named before. Most folks simply referred to it as the pauper's church, where the poor and unwanted were buried far from their polite society neighbors. The clapboard had a fresh coat of white paint, as did the little picket fence around the cemetery. The tangles of weeds and scrub had been cleared away, giving the place an open, approachable, feel. Curt could even see the low marker of the place where his mother had been laid to rest. The tall forest of cedars and Douglas fir surrounded the site with a sense of protectiveness.

Curt came to a halt in the deepening twilight. Mist was beginning to form in the open areas. It was late May, and the nights could still be cool. Despite the chill, Curt loved the mist, the way it cloaked him, made him feel safe. He drew a long, deep breath of the sweetly scented air. Scotch broom dotted the clearing along the road, and there was just enough light left for him to make out the deep yellow flowers sprinkled amongst the spiky, green stems.

The horse fidgeted.

“All right, Ace. Let’s go.” Beyond the edge of the forest, to the east of the churchyard, was a pathway, hidden at the bottom of the ravine. It would be dark soon, but Curt felt a pull to ride along it. He nudged the horse forward across the clearing and into the woods then down the gentle slope at a walk.

A creek gurgled at the bottom of the ravine, half-hidden from the top of the slope by tangles of blackberry brambles and bracken ferns. Once down on the path that followed its course, however, Curt was always impressed with a feeling of humility, of being not only dwarfed, but guarded and protected by the great trees that rose up and arched over the creek with their massive limbs. Long strands of grey-green witch’s hair moss hung from the lower branches, and sword ferns colonized the brown earth beneath. It was almost completely dark in the shadows of the ravine, though enough light passed through the trees to show Curt his familiar path, to sparkle on the creek and shine on the wet rocks.

The path led him back to town, bringing him up on Johnson just east of Douglas. He took the roads the rest of the way to the livery stable on View Street, only a couple of blocks from the Carlton.

A lamp glowed above the big double doors of the livery stable, just bright enough for a man to see his way to the latch — or to be seen opening it. He let himself in, lit a lamp, and began to unsaddle his horse.

A few moments later, he heard booted feet trying to sneak quietly down the stairs along the outside wall. Then a shadow appeared in the doorway beneath the lamplight, the slim silhouette of a shotgun jutting out from a tall male body.

“Who’s there? I got a gun, so best you mind.”

Curt didn’t even bother reaching for the Colt .45 strapped to his hip. But the fleeting thought reminded him that he was now back in Canada and that he had best remove the weapon before walking onto the city streets. “Hiya, Phil. It’s me.”

“Oh, young Mr. Prescott. How you doin’?” The muzzle of the shotgun dropped and the long, bowed legs shuffled towards him and into his light, revealing a middle-aged Negro in nothing but long underwear and untied, flopping boots. His back was stooped from too many years spent bent over a shovel.

“Just fine, Phil.” Curt hoisted the saddle onto the nearest empty rack. “Expecting a horse thief?”

“Well, it’s gettin’ a tad late. Cain’t be too careful.”

“No, I suppose you can’t.”

“If ’n I’d’a knowed it was you, I wouldn’a brought the gun.”

“How’s the missus and your boy?”

“Just fine, thank you.” Phil leaned the shotgun in a corner and reached for Ace’s bridle. “Here, lemme do that. You musta had a long trip.”

“I sure did.” Curt surrendered the reins. Unbuckling his holster, he stuffed his firearm into one of his saddlebags and slung them over his shoulder. In a pinch, he always had his concealed derringer and his boot knife. “Thanks, Phil,” he said and started toward the door.

“My pleasure, Mr. Prescott. You have yerself a good evenin’, now.”

“You, too, Phil.”

He paused barely a moment, just enough to cast a glance beyond the door, then stepped out into the night.

Walking westward toward Government Street, he noticed the clapboard building several doors down and across the street from the livery. It had been empty when he’d left a few months ago, but now it appeared to be in use as a saddlery. Things had certainly moved along while he’d been gone this year. When he reached the start of the boardwalk, he climbed the steps, and his boots were startlingly loud on the hard wood. This end of town was dead quiet at this time of night, but his senses were on guard just the same.

The Carlton Saloon and Dance Hall seemed to light the entire corner of the intersection by itself. Lamps blazed from the windows, and music from a decent orchestra rolled out through the open batwing doors. A few yards from the saloon, Curt halted while some drunk staggered out the doors and pitched face-first into the street. The fellow clambered to his feet and stumbled off, disappearing into the mist.

Curt took one step forward and halted again as another man emerged from the saloon. This one walked awkwardly as well, but that was because the shoulders of his coat were bunched up in the hands of Willie, the Carlton’s owner and chief bartender.

“I asked ya nicely, preacher. Now I’m tellin’ ya — stay outta my saloon! You ain’t wanted here!”

“But, Mr. —.” The preacher tried to turn around to face Willie, but his foot slipped off the edge of the front step, and he fell. Willie just let him go.

The preacher crumpled on the muddy street while men and dance hall girls pointed at him and laughed. Willie stared at him until he sat up and gingerly got to his feet. Then the bartender turned and marched back into his saloon.

The stocky preacher bent slowly and picked up his hat. He brushed the muck off it before replacing it on his grey head.

One of the men yelled, “Go on, get outta here!”

“Yeah!” added the girl on his arm. “We ain’t buyin’ what you’re sellin’! But hey — if you wanna buy what we’re sellin’, now that’s different!”

A fresh chorus of laughter rose above the music. The preacher gazed up at them, stiff with his pain, but said nothing.

Curt strode forward then, having waited long enough. “Show’s over, gang.” He cast a glance at the preacher, who met his eyes for a second before Curt angled for the door. The group’s guffaws dropped to giggles, and one of them muttered to his buddy, “That’s Curt Prescott. I told you about him.” And the crowd moved back to let him pass.

Curt stepped over the threshold and scanned the room with his eyes. Though modest by big city standards, the Carlton was, in Curt’s opinion, the best saloon in Victoria. It served good liquor, presented decent entertainment, and, tucked discreetly into a back room, offered all the games of chance a man could ask for: poker, faro, roulette, monte, dice, hazard, chuck-a-luck,

and billiards. Even on a weeknight, most of the games were engaged with men who didn't care how poor their chances were of beating the house.

Curt strode directly to the bar though his eyes roved the room attentively. To his right, a dozen round dining tables were all in use by men, some with female companions supplied by the establishment. Beyond them was a small dance floor, sprinkled with sawdust and dotted with couples. Ensconced in an alcove centered before a raised stage, a small orchestra struck up a new tune.

Right on cue, a young blonde woman strode gracefully out onto the stage from the left wing. She wore a low-cut, off-the-shoulder dress of rich emerald satin. Every head turned to watch her, every hand laid down its cards. The raucous laughter, the clack of the roulette wheel, the roll of billiard balls — all stopped.

A big, open smile on her face, the woman known only as Delores spread her arms as if to embrace them all. Curt watched her through the haze of cigar and cigarette smoke as he moved toward the bar. She saw him and blew him a kiss. The other men turned their faces to follow the airborne caress. They did not appear surprised to see Curt Prescott on the receiving end.

She began to sing, and their faces returned to her voluptuous form. She had a legitimate voice, rich, smooth, and strong. Curt believed that, with the proper training, she could belong on the big stages of San Francisco, St. Louis, Toronto, and even New York. He had even offered to finance her venture, but she wouldn't go because he could never stay long in a big city. So here she remained, belting out bawdy lyrics to miners and lumberjacks in what places like New York would consider a common, small town saloon.

She leaned over the stage and, like a single animal, the men sucked in their breath and stared, hoping beyond hope that her ample breasts would spill forth from her stiff bodice. She straightened without mishap, pivoted, and wiggled her fanny at them, provoking a chorus of shouts and whistles. She finished her song, blew them a kiss, and glided off-stage. The entire house clapped, cheered, and whistled for several minutes before returning to their games.

From behind the bar, Willie approached Curt, a frothing mug of beer in his hand. He was short, thickset, and bald, save for a fringe of white hair from ear to ear. When he smiled, his ruddy cheeks popped out like two little crab apples. He set the full mug before Curt, who slid a coin over the polished bar top to him.

"Thanks, Willie."

"Glad you're back. God, I swear Del gets worse every time you go."

Curt's eyes flicked to the now empty stage, and an amused smile quirked his mouth before he lifted his beer to take a sip. "You can handle her."

"Me, yeah. But the girls are wearing pretty thin. She really gets wicked with them."

Willie Carlton was an ex-ship's cook who, despite his stature and one bad hip, could handle any sort of fracas man or woman cared to test him with. With only the barest education, he'd had the savvy to save his wages instead of blowing them on liquor and sport and then turned around and bought himself a saloon from which to sell the liquor and sport to others. Willie ran a tight ship — he took no guff from any man. Policing his own house the way he did, he was rarely

raided by the city police, and if he was, he was always discreetly warned ahead of time. The games room would be shut down, locked up, and presented as a storage room for the inspection. The Carlton Saloon and Dance Hall passed every inspection and was noted as providing excellent fare and entertainment for local men and visitors alike.

Curt had never thought the name ‘Willie’ suited Carlton — William or even Bill Carlton would have been better. But somewhere the man had been tagged ‘Willie,’ and it had stuck.

Curt hadn’t responded to the bartender’s last statement, and a few seconds later, Willie drifted away. Curt sipped his beer through the froth, casting his eyes in habitual sweeps over the room, now and then focusing on the door when movement there caught his eye. At night, the large-paned windows along the front of the building reflected the interior and acted as a shield for those on the outside. Curt found a familiar comfort in the walnut wainscoting and the golden yellow upper walls. He dwelt on them briefly before turning his attention to the naughty positions of the naked women in the large painting behind the bar.

As he took another swallow of beer, Del rounded the corner of the bar to his left. She walked straight to him, a huge smile on her face. A young waitress darted out of her path, nearly spilling the drinks on her tray. Del’s amber eyes glistened as she met Curt’s, and she held out her arms to him.

“Curt, my lover, you’re home!”

He enveloped her in a tight, warm hug, feeling her bosom press against his chest. She nestled her face into his shoulder.

“Curt, my Curt.” She lifted her mouth to his firm, lingering kiss. “God, I missed you!” she cried as they drew back a bit. “Why do you gotta stay away so long?”

He eyed her without speaking while she stared up at his face. She ran her hands through his dark hair and sighed. “I know,” she said, answering her own question. “I just hate it when you go.”

As much as he loved her and understood how she needed him always close to her, her very neediness often strangled Curt. But he’d had his getaway and come back refreshed. “I won’t be going anywhere for quite a while now.”

She smiled, showing even teeth only slightly yellowed. “Good.” She tipped her head back coquettishly. “So?”

He snaked his hand into one pouch of the saddlebags he’d set on the bar next to him and pulled out a thick fold of large denomination bills fastened with a silver clip. “And there’s more tucked away safe.”

Her amber eyes widened. He peeled out one hundred dollars and gave it to her. As always, she was delighted. She never seemed to get used to his gifts.

“Thank you, lover.” She kissed the corner of his mouth and tucked the money snugly in her cleavage.

He watched it disappear between her silken swells and felt his loins stir.

“Anything else for me?” She batted her eyelashes at him and smiled demurely.

“Of course.” He removed a small package from the same pouch and handed it to her.

Eagerly, she unwrapped the brown paper that hid it from her. She sucked in her breath when she saw it.

“Is it the one you wanted?” he asked.

“Yes! Oh, yes!” She held it up so it caught the light. It was a silver tussie-mussie in the shape of a cornucopia, with tiny dried flowers spilling from the mouth of it.

“Here, let me ...” He took it from her and deftly pinned it to her bodice. “When are you free?”

“Right now.” She took his hand and started to lead him from the bar, but he held back.

“Just a second — I’m still thirsty.” He picked up his mug to finish off his beer.

“Is that all you’re thirsty for?” she asked. She took his beer from him with both hands and chugged down the remaining portion for him. Then she took his hand and led him up the crimson-carpeted staircase.

The entrance to their suite was a short distance down the hall, the first door on the left. Curt opened it with his key and locked it behind him once they’d entered.

It was dark, save for one wall lamp glowing softly in the doorway between the sitting room and the bedroom. He hooked his hat on the rack in the corner and retrieved his gun and holster from his saddlebags before following Del into the bedroom. He slung his gun belt over the bedpost and then turned his full attention to her.

She was eager for him and began undressing him with trembling hands. He removed his concealed weapons and placed them on top of his nightstand then spun her around and swiftly undid the fabric-covered buttons at the back of her dress. As the garment fell from her, she gasped and caught at the tussie-mussie, unpinned it and placed it on top of the bureau by the window.

He took both her hands in his and placed a kiss in each palm. She shivered, and he began to strip her of her lacy underclothes. She clung to him, holding on to his belt for support as he kissed her wherever he uncovered her flesh. With each kiss he inhaled the familiar scent of her, with each caress he found the places on her body that had always fascinated him. His arousal became more fierce as he allowed himself to revel in the sensations she stirred in him, and fleetingly he wondered why he ever felt the need for time away from this intoxicating woman.

“Three months,” she gasped, “I’ve been waiting for you to touch me again. Don’t make me wait even longer.”

In seconds, he was out of his trousers, backing her towards the bed, and covering her with his lean, sinewy body.



Curt awoke when a stiff breeze blew in through the half-open window and pushed Del’s tussie-mussie off the nightstand. It hit the floor with a clack. He eyed it momentarily then decided to get up. Judging by the brightness of the room, it had to be mid-morning.

Carefully, so as not to disturb her, he slipped out of bed and retrieved the tussie-mussie. It was undamaged. He walked past the alcove where their bathtub stood and placed it on her cream-colored dressing table. After pulling on his short underwear, he grabbed a chair from next to his bureau and set it down in front of the window.

Theirs was a corner suite, and this particular window faced south, giving him a good view of Yates and Government. A pair of etched glass doors opened off the east wall of the bedroom onto a railed balcony overlooking Government.

They had forgotten to close the velvet curtains last night. The bedroom was spacious and bright. In keeping with the rest of the suite, the lower thirds of the walls were covered in pure white wainscoting, the upper two-thirds painted in deep, natural colors. Curt's armchair and footstool and Del's chaise longue were upholstered in rich green velvet. A fireplace dominated the wall between the sitting room and the bedroom with a hearth opening on each side.

The floor beneath Curt's bare feet was cool, like the breeze lifting the sheers across the window. Familiar sounds of the city street below drifted in as well, along with an odd sound Curt couldn't quite place. He thought he heard chanting. He nearly dismissed it as a trick of the wind, but it steadily grew louder. He got to his feet, pulled on his trousers, and went out the doors to the balcony. He leaned over the railing to get a closer look. Below him, on the street, appeared the group of women from last night. Startled, he watched them a moment.

What the hell was going on?

As they passed out of view, he spun round and strode back into the bedroom, about to wake Del to ask her if she knew anything at all about the group. But she was sleeping so peacefully, he decided to let her be.

He made quick use of the water closet down the hall then washed and shaved at the basin in the alcove. The Carlton had been among the first to install indoor plumbing once water began to be pumped from Elk Lake a few years ago. Del awoke as he was patting his face dry. Stretching, she dragged herself from the comfort of the bed. She crossed the floor completely naked and kissed him good morning.

Hooking his hands around her hips, he asked, "Know anything about a group of women marching in the street?"

Her eyes flickered in surprise that he already knew. "Yeah. That's been goin' on about a month now." She brushed a strand of her flaxen hair off her face then laid her hand upon his chest and patted his crisp curls of dark hair. "Lemme get a cup o' coffee or two in me, and I'll tell you all about it."

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