

BIG BEAR

Novel

Chapter 1

The smoke emerged from the campfire making the greyish-white air feel like a thick wall. Still, the old man's eyes penetrated it, somehow opening up a window to the listener whose future and purpose depended on connecting with him. "So, Paleface," Stalking Elk said through his 60 winters-old old mouth to the White Man on the opposite side of the teepee in Lakota. "What do you have to give us that we really need?" the Old Man continued as the view of four large framed younger braves and one Bitching Crow, a small framed elderly woman, became apparent to his Paleface Visitor's eyes. "What we can't get ourselves. Or make ourselves, Big Bear," Stalking Elk continued with a warm yet firm smile.

Big Bear looked at the sacs of wares he had brought down from the mountains, and the valley below, hoping that they would be of use to his old friends, and hoping that they still were his friends. The first 60 years of the century had belonged mostly to his hosts, but he knew the next 40 would not be so. Even this high up the mountains, and this far West of the cities of his boyhood in the East that put out smoke from their factory chimneys that blinded the eyes and clogged up the lungs far more than any produced by a Redman's fire. But no matter who he was back then before his journey west, he was Big Bear now. All five foot 3 of him, named so by the Indians who helped him survive the first two winters in Colorado Territory, then taught him how to thrive for the next twenty.

"Tell us, Big Bear," Stalking Elk continued as the itinerant mountain man felt the leather of his buckskin coat and leggings against his weather-beaten skin, and stroked his fingers through a beard that had grown on its own terms down to bottom of his neck. "Who has big legends around him. Big adventures taming wild horses. Big hunts against the wildest animals in the forest. Big musket between his legs that gets him into big trouble with women," the large Old Man continued with a warm smile as the even larger younger ones around him laughed.

"And bigger perspectives than any of you big mouths ever had," Bitching Crow interjected, reminding the men that Big Bear's experiences and insights went far beyond any other White man they had seen, or ever will. "Especially big mouths who want something to smile about under the blanket tonight, hmmm?" she whispered to her husband.

Stalking Elk 'serioused up'. He raised his hand up, silencing the laughter behind him. Bitching Crow winked to Big Bear, then subtly motioned for him to take out the wares that he had brought to the village.

Big Bear felt himself put into the role of a travelling salesman, one of those necessary low lifes who brought carts of goods from the East to points Westward, or Eastward bound publishers who brought with them dime novels about the Old West to his old

Neighborhoods in New York, Philadelphia and Boston. Indeed, it was a dime novel about the 'Wilds of the West' that drew Big Bear to points West of the Mississippi back in '37. Had he gone to south to the slave-permitting Republic of Texas rather than the northern hinterlands of the mountains, he may have become a dime novel celebrity himself. But Big Bear was horrible at being a manipulator, and even worse at being an asshole. He therefore had to settle for being a honest man, who gave according to his abilities and took according to his needs. Ironically, his ability to give exceeded what the degree to which he needed anything, and as there was a taker for every giver, he found himself making many 'associations' with people that left his pockets empty, and his heart broken. But his spirit was never broken, particularly with Stalking Elk and his tribe, who really DID give according to their abilities, and take according to their needs. Most of the time anyway. In any case, a man who lives alone, even with someone he loves, learns very quickly that love, and life, is about smart and cooperative horse trading. To maintain good terms with the Lakota, Big Bear had to continue being both smart, and cooperative, particularly now as there was a power-shift in the works amongst the tribe.

"Let me start by saying that the world in the valley is changing quickly," Big Bear began, stating what was obvious to him, but not so evident to all of the People in front of him. "And that no matter how far up the mountains you or I go, our world here will become that world unless we make ourselves smarter than the world of the valley.'

"Or stronger," the most virile, strong and charismatic of the young braves around Stalking Elk said. "We will not be conquered by them if we are stronger," Growling Wolf continued with a muffled voice that spoke volumes which everyone listened to, and believed.

Big Bear hesitated to bring out the item he originally intended to give to his friends, placing it back in the sac, particularly as every young brave around Growling Wolf said 'yes, stronger' with their mouths, and the aging Stalking Elk, still leader of the band, agreed with his eyes. Bitching Crow's sighed in disappointment, showing her face to Big Bear only. Such was Big Bear's cue to attempt another strategy regarding his real objective for this trip to his favorite Indian village and his favorite tribe, the closest thing he still had as a family.

"A knife," Big Bear said regarding the first item to show to his hosts. "With a new kind of metal. Steel! And an axe," he continued regarding the next implement he obtained while visiting Fort Jackson, bartering what he could to get the best of the weaponry available before ALL of the Blue Coats would get them. "A new kind of axe that can cut down trees like they are blades of grass, or stalks of wheat," he continued as he laid made mince meat of a chunk of wood and threw the kindling into the fire.

"Or the small thundersticks between a White Man's legs that they carry around like they are big muskets," Running Ram said as he took hold of the instruments of potential good, or destruction, feeling the sharpness of its blades, and enjoying the, all things considered, childlike laughter of the audience around him.

“And no bullets in those thundersticks, thankfully,” Growling Wolf added, looking at Big Bear, causing another round of laughter that lightened the room while he took the instruments into his hand felt their center of gravity.

Big Bear smiled at the joke, accepting that his impotence with regard to sperm was a colorful character trait rather than a deficit in manhood. And a character trait that thankfully has spared him the burden of having any children, at least that he knew about. Bitching Crow rolled her eyes, realizing in that subtle ‘men will be men’ way that allowed her to still be a woman who ruled her own destiny, and on a good day, helped the men ‘rule’ theirs. Sensing that something very special was in the next pouch the Big Bear was looking at with such promise, and hope, she nodded her approval to him, then nudged Stalking Elk to silence the laughter.

Big Bear reached into the next pouch. “A compass,” he said proudly, demonstrating the dial that kept pointing in the same direction no matter how you rotated its chamber. “So you can determine where the Four Directions are. Where North is. Where South is. Where West is. And Where East is.”

“We always know where East, West, North and South is,” Growling Wolf growled back. “North is where the Blackfoot who steal our horses get indigestion after eating them. South is where the Crow who steal our women realize that they are not real men.”

“West is where palefaces go to with proud faces,” Running Ram added. “East is where they run back to with smelly asses and downturned tails,” he continued as his humorous-intended comment got a bigger laugh than Growling Wolf’s jokes, or the ever-present gag about how five foot 4 ‘Big Bear’ towering size and love life.

Bitching Crow took the compass across the ‘acceptance’ line, then nodded to Big Bear to continue. Stalking Elk allowed such, for now anyway.

“And as you know,” Big Bear said as he moved on to the third sac. “Diseases of the body and head from the valley below can find their way up the steepest mountain paths t anywhere here, and when they do...”

Big Bear’s next words were shoved back into his mouth by the abrupt silence from the Braves, and the threatening stare from their so-far uncontested leader, Stalking Elk. “No,” the small-framed, excessively-haired Mountain man said regarding the elegantly shaped bottles pulled out of the sac. “This is not firewater. These are medicines. Many kinds of medicines for many kinds of diseases,” he continued as he laid out the bottles and vials with labels containing Latin names describing their contents printed in Philadelphia, with pictures of the herbs they contained drawn by Big Bear’s hand. “Bitching Crow knows what to do with them,” he continued to the men, as he showed the labels to the elderly woman whose life as a slave in many cultures before being traded back to her people gave her more power than any of her captors. “And what she doesn’t know, I can teach her,” Big Bear continued.

The woman who knew more medicine than any medicine man nodded with approval, and appreciation, at the wide variety of medicinals which were now at her disposal.

“And this one,” Big Bear continued as he pulled out two pieces of hard leather with thin leaves in between containing marks on them which had the most mystical of meanings, and an Energy that needed no power to be expressed.

The business end of most every weapon in teepee was pointed Big Bear’s way as his guests saw that most special offering. “No,” he assured them. “Its not a Bible! But something more powerful, and human,” he continued as he showed them the markings on the book cover. “The complete Works of William Shaekspeare. English text with translations into Cherokee,” he said, turning to Bitching Crow. “A written language invented by Sequoia.”

“Who saved me from dying on the trail of tears,” she said with a warm but mournful smile regarding the Indian who took it upon himself to put his tribe’s spoken word into something that could be read. A man whose words, and presence, allowed her to survive the first forced relocation as a child from Georgia to Oklahoma, despite the fact that the Cherokee were more successful and accomplished in the White World than the Palefaces were in any world. With so much of that due to brain-smart rather than brawn-strong Sequoia.

“Smart man who wrote powerful words that will make any of you sound smarter than the stupid and well-armed White men from the village valley, or anywhere else,” Big Bear explained to the brown-skinned Mountain-based tribe. “You can always defeat them here,” he continued, pointing to his head, then handing the book over to Bitching Crow, showing her the pages marked by leather tassels. “By saying...”

“Be true to yourself and as sure as the day follows night, you cannot help but be true to anyone else,” she said in Lakota, Big Bear not being sure if she was reading from the English or the Cherokee text. “A rose by any other name would smell just as sweet,” she continued. “Better to have loved and lost than to not have loved at all,” she went on.

“True and interesting,” Stalking Elk commented regarding more than one situation he encountered in his many years of hard, and perhaps because of such, internally fulfilling life. A life in which the old man would have to be both strong and vigilant against those who wanted to change the way things had been since he was a boy. He slowly glanced over the goods Big Bear had delivered to them, stroked his chin, then stared into the Soul of the Paleface Mountain Man who had brought such wealth to such a small, insignificant village. “What do you want in return for all of this, and everything else you have offered us in your many other visits here?” he asked Big Bear, demanding the a truthful and accurate answer, with deadly seriousness.

“Besides one horse to pull your head to the East and another to pull your legs to the West so you can become taller?” Running Ram offered, breaking the tense silence between the Stalking Elk and five-foot-four short Paleface Mountain Mench.

The other braves broke out into childlike laughter, as did Bitching Crow, then Stalking Elk himself. But between the chuckles, Stalking Elk asked Big Bear again the most fundamental question of all.

“What I really want, and really need, Big Bear?” the life-tested Chief asked with a kind but firm smile.

“For all of you to laugh at me, and with each other, like you are doing now,” Big Bear replied, realizing himself at that moment that such was his most special wish, and important mandate.

”That’s it?” Growling Wolf asked, as a self-appointed, and perhaps silently elected, representative of all of the younger braves in the teepee.

“That’s it,” Big Bear replied. “And...hmmm.” He pondered, looking to both Growling Wolf and Stalking Elk. “Anything else you have up here in the mountains that you want me to trade for what I can get down there in the valley.”

“Trading that only you can do because you were born with an ugly white skin,” Stalking Elk replied.

“That has a red Lakota mind underneath it,” Big Bear replied. “On a good day,” he continued, as he looked around the teepee and saw every face calculating the pros and cons of trusting him with yet another load of goods to take down below. “And maybe this is a good day?” he asked them all.

“He has always brought back more goods than he has brought down,” Bitching Crow pointed out to her husband.

“So far,” Growling Wolf added as a cloud of doubt overcame the room. “White men are usually in the business of making money for themselves. And you, Big Bear, who is not taller than my youngest daughter, as I count it, seem to love losing money, or throwing it away.”

“It’s up to you,” Big Bear said to his hosts, still hoping they were his friends. And silently praying that they had not become his new enemies.

The council meeting took longer than Big Bear anticipated, but it was worth it. At the end of it, he was given five over-packed horses with goods from the mountain to be traded for wares down below. Those goods included warm furs from no less than 10 species, most of them taken from those animals which were too old to survive another winter. Dried meat and fish, spiced with herbs not obtainable in the valley was also loaded onto the horses. Such was common eating for the Lakota, exotic dining to Palefaces who left their homes in the East to create the same thing in the West, but with

them on top. Then there were very used hand painted and interestingly-beaded leather pouches, blankets and coats which were commonplace in the hills, but highly valued works of art, the worth of such increasing two fold for every five hundred miles East the buyer was.

Big Bear was confident that he could get all the wares his favorite and perhaps only adopted tribe needed, and wanted, with such goods. The best axes, knives, medicines, books, navigational devices, wagons, horses, pots, pans, heating oil and guns that he could obtain, keeping the 'ignorant Stone Age' savages one technological step ahead of the Palefaces coming their way in case things got competitive. Stalking Elk dictated the list of required wares to Bitching Crow, who wrote them down on paper with, this time anyway, not too many modifications. This time it was a tall order, amounting to \$2,000, according to Big Bear's calculations. The goods on the horses, along with the horses, could fetch maybe a thousand worth in goods. But, Big Bear would supplement it with something he never told anyone except Bitching Crow about, from a location that she did find out about, but never revealed to anyone, even her husband.

But there was one 'surplus asset' from the Lakota village that found its way onto the pack line and onto the fur-covered one-axeled wheeled cart which neither Bitching Crow, nor Stalking Elk, nor any of the thus-far-anyway loyal braves on the council knew about. It moved on its own, and when prodded by Big Bear's hand and the sun hit its eyes, it evoked a loud, boistrous sound that both informed and irritated all within hearing range.

"I hate this place!" the 16 year old Lakota girl belted out with the nagging shrill of a woman twice her age. "I hate all of you people, and I can't wait to get away from all of you low, common and ordinary people!" the 'princess' proclaimed to her onlookers. "You are all stupid, ignorant, dumb Indians," she continued. "And these clothes!" she said of the perfectly-fitted, colorfully-painted leather dress covering her very attractive body, one that had a curve to the hip, a small waist, and ample busses over it all. "Are these the best clothes my 'dear old dad' can afford? And that 'dream husband' he's picked for me. His dream, not mine! I'm gonna find my own dress and my own husband in the 'mean, terrible, horrible' valley below where the Palefaces live and---"

Taking mercy on everyone, including himself, he put his hand over the young maiden's mouth. "This I don't trade," he said regarding her, addressing all of the men old enough to be the 'fair maiden's' father. "I won't bring her down there with me, no matter now badly all of you want to get rid of her. So, who does she belong to? Who's her father?"

The male congregation of the tribe remained silent, all of the faces in front of Big Bear shaking their head 'no'. Some with fear, some with denial, and some with relief.

"I'm not leaving here until someone claims her," Big Bear proclaimed, standing his ground, tapping his foot in perfect synchronized time with his watch. "I can wait here all day, which is, let's see, how many ticks of the watches I gave you and the tapping of my feet, at 60 tapes a minute, and 60 minutes an hour, and---"

“She’s mine,” came from apologetic and life-tired voice of the back of the crowd of onlookers finally. “Great Spirit help me, she’s mine,” Stalking Elk said as he walked forward towards the girl, whose mouth Big Bear released from his now-teeth-bitten hand as he gently pulled her out of the one cart and placed her kicking feet gently on the ground.

Stalking Elk welcomed her with open arms that was visible to the rest of the tribe, and a ‘you’re gonna listen and I’m gonna talk for your own good and my own sanity’ look in his eyes that was seeable only by her, and Big Bear.

“I’m a princess, you know,” she proclaimed in a growl to her father with arms folded.

“And I’m your father,” Stalking Elk answered back with as calm a tone as he could muster, the trembling fingers of his right hand now pulled in a tight fist. “And Chief of this tribe who---“

“---Is glad to have you with us,” Bitching Crow said with a warm smile and a matching tone, loud enough for everyone to hear, as she discretely pushed her daughter’s crossed arms down, and pryed open the fingers in her husband’s fist. “An essential part of our loving family,” Bitching Crow continued as she father and daughter into loving hug, visible for all to see, keeping them there by pushing them by the small of their backs. “Our daughter, who will marry only someone she approves of,” she said to Stalking Elk. “Since no Lakota enslaves another Lakota, and we three are all one happy family, in service of many Lakota families, yes?”

“Yes”, Stalking Elk said, yielding to reason, as well as the fingernails of his wife that were penetrating into his back, about to carve big holes in his flesh. The women of the village, particularly those with daughters, nodded with approval to each other, looking away from their men while doing so.

“And your father,” Bitching Crow said to her daughter. “He’s a wise and noble Chief, who always has your best interest at heart, and mind. Who has a Man’s mind. A Man’s heart. That’s always strong. Brave. And smart. Yes?, “ she continued in a loud voice. “Who I promise to talk some reason into this time,” Bitching Crow whispered to her daughter. Yes?”

“Yes,” the maiden princess said. The men of the village nodded boldly to themselves that all was right again. The women behind them rolled their eyes at each other.

“Then, yes!” Bitching Crow proclaimed, breaking out into song as she pushed father and daughter into an even tighter hug, and ‘encouraged’ them to dance with each other. At Bitching Crow’s signal, a quiet, uneventful man sitting on the ground started beating a drum. One by one, everyone else in the tribe began celebrating, except one. She stood outside her teepee, inviting Big Bear to come into her tent for a private celebration. Her face was beautiful, and her smile was warm. And her eyes, very loving. Even trustable.

Big Bear let stare linger upon her face, but before he could say anything with his lips, mouth or eyes, his horse nudged him. “Yeah I know,” he said to the steed who had been with him longer than any human being he knew, or wanted to know. “The day that you linger in Paradise, particularly if you helped create it, is the day it turns into...hmmm...something worse. For everyone. Just the way it is.”

With that, and all of the painful memories behind it that he told his horse but never his Lakota family, or the newest female prospect in his life, he smiles a goodbye to her, got on his horse, and led the pack of four legged compadres towards the hill that would take him down to the valley. And another world that would never really understand what he was about. As perhaps it should be. But in any event, as it was.

CHAPTER 2

The route down from places on the map which had no names to those that had too many of them led Big Bear to a lower plateau of grass smelling more like flowers. A gentle wind blew through his overgrown beard, reminding him that he had a face under it. A face that had been seen by more than his share of women who he thought he loved, and men who thought that Big Bear’s women loved them. But that was all behind him now. Two winters ago he said he would make a fresh start, and live life on the mountains’ terms. One of those giants, whose rock face jutted out of the dirt below, spoke to Big Bear in that language he could feel, but could not completely understand. The mountains also offered things to those who were bold enough to visit them. This time, it was a herd of wild elk in front of Big Bear’s eyes, which were wide open. The beasts spooked the horses, but they seemed tame enough to Big Bear. Masterable if someone with enough ambition, greed of skill took aim at them and converted them into meat. Good eating for hungry stomachs, and valuable furs to be had, along with the extract from the horns which were even more valuable as aphrodisiacs.

Maybe the Mountain delivered this very passive herd of elk to Big Bear, as it had delivered him game in the past as he needed it. Then as he wanted it. But, there was one lesson that Big Bear knew all too well regarding all of that. “A herd of meat, furs and potions for the taking,” he said to his horse. “But, we have enough meat for now and enough furs for next winter and the following one as well. And as we both know, if you take only from the mountain what you need, it won’t give you what you or anyone else can’t handle.”

The horse that had been Big Bear’s most trusted companion, though he still was given no human name, seemed to understand. Or so Big Bear wanted or needed to believe. He diverted the one-man, five horse caravan away from the Elk, letting them enjoy the grass. Or perhaps letting some other hunter, be it on two or four legs, take what he wanted, or needed, from that herd.

With each descent from the mountain, the brown grass got greener, and the hard rock turned into mud. Taking advantage of such was a farm, higher up than any other such endeavors Big Bear had seen. They had made the ground bleed with the plow, but coming up from those wounds were vegetables and fruits which Nature saw fit to not grow on its own, at least in this part of the Continent. From a distance the corn, tomatoes, cabbage and beans seemed as colorful to the eye as they were tasteful to the tongue. Big Bear recalled those days when he had more skin on his face than beard that he was particularly fond of the salads, during poor months, and stews, in more lucrative weeks, activated the senses of his tongue while the soot-infested air of Lower Manhattan clogged up his nose. During those days of childlike innocence working at his Uncle's shoe factory, he often lived under the impression that those vegetables and fruits grew in the slots of the wagons owned by the merchants, growing big and magnificent as said merchants sang exotic songs about the 'old country'. Song that were both sad and joyous. But all of that ended when Big Bear learned about how his dirt poor Uncle acquired ownership of the factory, and how he kept his 'loyal workers' from cutting his money-hungry throat. The real story had something to do with Big Bear's mother, and the accidental death of his father. When Big Bear finally found the letters that supported the forbidden fables, he presented them to the Sheriff of Lower Manhattan and the Mayor of Brooklyn. Both decided it was best to burn the letters, and send Big Bear to a hospital, where his blasphemously-literary imagination would be quenched by reading only the Good Book, passages of such selected by the Good Fathers there and enforced by the Sisters of Mercy.

It was there that Big Bear read the Good Book between the lines, and other books when the Good Fathers and Good Sisters were in private chambers, spawning the odd accidental 'devoted Catholic' nine months later. Or calling in the Doctor sooner. It was from Doctor Stone, a Jew who had the good sense to change his name from Stein so he could more effectively practice his craft, that Big Bear got more books, and got private lessons about people from the Rabbi-physician which were not printable in any book. But, as Big Bear reflected now, not enough lessons about people. The apprenticeship ended prematurely, with Big Bear becoming of age for the Military and conscripted to fight the Mexicans in a War that was supposed to be about preserving Freedom. He learned very well how to use a gun, knife and bayonette, but not how to deal with the horror inflicted on his soul after he took another man's life with such tools. Little did he know that life on the run as a deserter from a War that was about nothing except Americans getting more money, power and slaves, would involve more killing just to stay alive. And to keep the people who helped keep him Alive, the Indians, from getting killed. But, that was then, and this was now. The Mexicans were all pushed into moving South of the Rio Grande, and the American Army was busy trying to hold onto whoever it could in the face of mass desertions to another American Army South of the Mason Dixon Line. Maybe the Indians and Big Bear would be left alone. And maybe these farmers, dots on the distant horizon to Big Bear's eyes, who dared or were forced to come this far up the mountain, would be left alone as well. As would the domestic livestock of horses, pigs, cows and chickens behind the fences they build to keep them, and themselves, protected from the wilderness. But the animals of the wilderness who chose

to see what was going on in their territory were not so lucky. One of them let known his presence to Big Bear with a blood curdling, barely-audible whine.

A day ago he was a healthy, four-legged coyote, most probably playing with his brothers and sisters like domestic puppies do. But now, he was a three and a half legged beast who struggled with all of his might to pull off the leg that was caught in a trap set amidst a maze of metal fencing which had barbs on every three inches of its length. His siblings were dead, all strangled by the wire or poisoned by the meat put within it, and most certainly the still alive coyote envied them. Big Bear ran over to the injured animal as quickly as he could, cutting up his own hands on the wire to see if there was any hope for the canine whose only crime was being born a coyote adopted for the woods rather than a dog designed to live inside a cabin. There wasn't.

Big Bear looked into the face of the coyote, noting that his eyes had been retracted deep into the sockets. Yes, he was ready to go. Yes, it was that look which every animal gave its predator before it gave that predator permission to send him to the beyond realm. And yes, Big Bear was no innocence lamb in the pasture or babe in the woods with regard to taking the life of another animal. But every one of Big Bear's traps were designed to kill the animal immediately with a blow to the head. Not so with the less expensive standard traps used by greedy White men or the snares used by lazy Indians. And like the Indians who still were Indians, Big Bear thanked the ghost of every dead creature he killed for its sacrifice, knowing that one day he would be killed for the welfare of another creature. One of those rules of the Mountain that everyone who lived on it had to follow. But this was the valley, and the rules were different here. Still, they could be followed according to Mountain morality.

"I apologize for whoever built these wires that got you tied up," he said to the coyote as he pulled out his knife with his right hand and gently caressed the dry, blood-stained fur of the coyote's neck. "You can come back as something that kills or eats him, or her," he continued. "I do know that assholes come in both genders, though we often realize that fact too late to do anything about it," he confessed. "Now...rest easy, because you have a long and interesting journey ahead of you, my friend," he whispered, after which he slit the coyote's throat with his knife, then cut the spinal cord just below the neck. To be sure that no other creature would get into the concoction of wires that intentionally or non-intentionally had been set as a trap for wildlife trying to investigate what happens on the 'civilized' side of such fences, he buried every bit of the poisoned, 'industrial' smelling coyote bait in a deep hole, along with the creatures who had succumbed to such. As he threw dirt over the hole, he thought about the inefficiency of it all. The waste. And the cruelty. Sure, the wars between Indian tribes were often as vicious as any war between European or European-derived nations. But there was an efficiency to it. A purpose to it all. But there was never one party who won everything and another that lost everything. Such was not the case in the worlds Big Bear rode into next on his way to the valley trading post where he usually got the best deals for his Indian friends in the mountains.

"Hmm...Entering Utopia," Big Bear noted on the freshly-painted sign on the road which only last season was little more than a path. "Population and prospects, growing!" he

read, thinking that whoever chose the name for this re-named town that fancied itself as a city was well read with regard to books, and imaginative with regard to how to make friends and influence people. But there was something about Utopia that smelled different than its pledge, beginning with the irritating odor that penetrated Big Bears nostrils and seemed to make his horses not want to open theirs. The source of such was below, somewhere underneath a fog further down the valley that was co-created by Nature as well as the hand of its most powerful species.

“Come on there, lads,” Big Bear heard in a big voice from a small man atop of wagon in front of a dusty, foul-smelling hole at the base of the mountain. “That mountain was made by the Good Lord fer all of us to get rich!” Foreman Sean O’Neal continued to the soot-covered laborers whose exhausted bodies kept picking away at the rock, and whose blistered hands shoveled more of the dirt which because dust that caused them to cough up phlegm and blood. “I know ya be White under all that soot, and yer all here by yer own free will, but if ya see to it to leave, there ain’t no one stoppin’ ya. We can always get cheap Nigger labor of Chinks to do your job, and unlike the arrangement we made with you, the boss gets to keep EVERYTHING that comes out of the ground for himself, and me,” he continued as the workers grinded their labors to a halt, feeling the pain in their overworked muscles, the grumbling of their underfed bellies and the aching in their immigrant hearts. “But I can see that it makes good sense fer ya to think about maybe headin’ back East ta Boston or New York, or maybe, if ya can, stow away on a ship headin’ back to the Emerald Isle, or wherever else is the Old Country for ya. No disgrace to go home a loser, ya know, since God didn’t create this world so that everyone can be a winner, don’t ya know. Two week’s free wages to any man who wants to quit now, give up, and head on home. Home sweet home.” O’Neal flashed twenty dollar coins up in the air as proof of his intentions. “Any takers, now, lads?” he continued. “Twenty dollars wages to any lad who wants to quit now. But,” he went on, taking out three jugs of whiskey from below the wagon board. “As many swigs as ya can handle for any MAN who decides to continue strivin’ for the American Dream! Twenty percent of the take from a Mountain that’ll pay off Millions once ya get to the inner core of it! Unless ya want to Niggers and Chinks to get all of it!”

O’Neal looked up towards Big Bear’s vantage point behind the trees, but didn’t see the Mountain Man. Or maybe he did. Somehow it didn’t matter. What did matter, to Big Bear anyway, was that win or lose, these immigrant laborers had lost more than most of their body fat and fistfuls of healthy tissue from what was left of their lungs. He had seen it many times before. Men who had gold fever became vicious animals against each other once it was fueled with firewater, decimating each other long before the bosses would come on board to pick their pockets and the ravens would pick their bones. This time Big Bear was determined to stop it. But before he could emerge from behind the bushes, the head laborer took the first jug of brew from O’Neal, took a swig of its contents, and pounded the rock with the furocity of a Herculean hero. His comrades did the same, all of their voices joined in song, initiated by a harmonica played by O’Neal’s huddled up driver on the buckboard. The Gary Owen, a stirring tune from the Old Country that Big Bear had an ominous feeling about. A tune that perhaps one day would be used by Irish Blue Coats drunk with power who would come up the mountains to the

High Plains to exterminate the Red Man, along with taking no prisoners with regard to Red women, and children as well. But, that was only a dream Big Bear had. Actually, a nightmare. For the moment, in the land of the living, the expatriate White Mountain man had wares from the mountains to trade for goods from the valley, to take back up to his people in the mountains. And, if possible, do some good for people in the valley who deserved it, and needed it, most.

As Big Bear proceeded further in toward the center of Utopia, he rode past a graveyard at which several still living men were burying what seemed to recently-deceased ones. A young man was burying a man whose bloody clothing, and gaunt ghostlike complexion matched the workers at the mine. The young man noticed Big Bear and stared into his face, connecting to the old before his time Mountain Man. Under the black soot on his face, his skin was very white, and fair. His bright blue ocular portholes picked up the brightest rays of light from the sun and reflected them back with warmth and a not-yet-defeated sense of optimism. “Berkholder!” the foreman in charge of the burial detail yells out at the blonde-haired lad of 30 years whose eyes were still that of a 19 year old. “That there’s a dinosaur,” John McFearson shouted out with a Scottish brough so thick that it penetrated into every fiber of Big Bear’s skin. “A dinosaur from the PAST!” he continued. “You ist eine worker in das present,” he went on a mocking German accent. “Eine rich American worker with a future! Der ye ken, laddie? Verstehen? Understand?”

“Yavol,” the clean shaven young man in wool clothing said to McFearson as he continued to stare at the overly bearded buckskin-clad Big Bear, admiring who the Mountain Man was, and the soon to be bygone era he still held onto. “I mean,” he continued, feeling the pain of reality hit him in between his tired but still open eyes. “Yes,” Berkholder continued. With that, he smiled a well intentioned ‘I wish you well, though I can never go where you are going’ farewell to Big Bear and proceeded to bury the the miner in a grave that seemed to be a prelude to his own. But not quite yet, somehow.

With all of the men under his command going back to work, McFearson looked towards Big Bear, about to ask him his business. But Big Bear knew that it was better to be spoken to by such men, as he would have to speak back. Such would start an argument which would create the need for more graves. And by the stench of death in the air, there had been enough dying that day. Death of the body, and more dangerously, death of many souls who didn’t know they had become walking corpses, or worse.

CHAPTER 3

Big Bear remembered the main street of Utopia when there wasn’t even a path between the buildings, and when there was only one building. Blackjack’s Trading Post was still standing, having survived the winds of summer and winter, along with the various manifestations of precipitation from the clouds above. But the question about the log cabin with nothing more than a coral next to it and a water trough in front could

economically, and perhaps otherwise, survive the buildings around it. Saloons, Mercantile Buildings, Banks, Clothing shops, Hardware stores, Bordellos, Opium Dens and Boarding Houses that cast shadows over the Trading Post no matter where the sun stood in the sky. Each of them reeks of 'progress', the lumber no more than three years away from the tree, the brick not yet baked into a rustic color by a summer of heat. Some of the people walking into, out of and around them seemed to be prosperous, looking down on those who weren't, or not looking at the less fortunate at all. The less fortunate looked at the ground mostly, or the dead air in front of their dying eyes, particularly as they carried the goods for the 'fortunate'.

"Yeah, this town does have a hierarchy of skin tone," Big Bear said to his horse as he rode through the middle of the street, noting that the 'fortunates' had faces as white as snow, while everyone else was a redskin, blackskin or 'sootskin', the latter category being those Caucasians whose stubbly haired faces were caked with foul-smelling mud which reeked of toxins that would eventually kill them. IF they were lucky. Indeed, the first signs of affliction were evident in their unsteady feet and shaking hands. "We'll have to do something about all of this," Big Bear said to his horse, as he himself was being ignored by the 'fortunate' adults, and seemed to be scaring the Fortunate's kids. But one set of eyes did give Big Bear acknowledgement. The tune he was singing as he came out of the Sheriff's office was Polish, but by the way he wore his badge with pride, bravado and superiority, he was an American now. Complete with an oversized belly that seemed to keep up with his inflated head, both perfectly color coordinated with the double barreled shotgun that rested on his hip and two shiny pistols on either side of his fat ass.

Big Bear nodded a pleasant 'howdy' to the pot bellied law enforcement office, getting nothing back except an indignant stare. One of those 'just take care of your business and get out of town and we'll be fine' stares that Big Bear had experienced in many towns before. Though everything in Utopia seemed clean, it smelled dirty and toxic, even the troughs of water lining the streets. But, thankfully, the water in trough in the coral next to the Trading Post smelled trustable, and palatable, particularly to Big Bear's horse. "Don't know what Blackjack put in here, but I'll see if I can get more of it," he said to his horse as he removed his bridle, then unhitched the other equines from each other and the one-wheeled wagon designed for hard mountain country rather than easy street valley strolling. "And I'll be sure to get you some of Blackjack's specially blended sweetfeed," he continued. "If it's more feed than sweet. And...hmmm," he continued, noting that the smell coming from the window as more industrial than homey. "If he's still Blackjack."

To Big Bear's relief, the Trading Post did still have what a man needed, rather than what a spoiled wife or bratty kid wanted. Beans, flour, dried meat, saddles, guns, knives and books that were not tall tales about Western legends who either never lived or would not allow the writer to live if they read what was written about them. But in the New West portion of the store, which covered 80 percent of the space in the newly expanded cabin, there were books about brave, heroic souls who tamed the West and conquered the Heathen, just below a collection of long, black haired wigs that looked more like scalps upon close examination. Big Bear perused three of the books, looking for mention of

himself in it, thankfully not seeing such. Satisfied that he was still unknown, and that the secrets regarding his real Calling and reason for being in the West was still not public knowledge, he went passed the rack of colorfully-shiny dresses and wrinkle-less black suits to the hardware department, wondering what marvels from the ground were being used to dig further into it.

“It’s called a plow,” a gentleman with a French accent called out to Big Bear from behind his back. “For growing crops,” he continued in a slow, explanative tone, as if speaking to a child. “To make crops.”

“And to make the earth bleed,” Big Bear said with a sad smile. He continued. “And turning old friends into...”

“...What we have to be,” the clerk said as Big Bear turned around. “What we’re paid to be anyway,” Blackjack confessed to his old friend once he recognized him.

“I see you got a haircut, Blackjack” Big Bear smiled at Blackjack, who was now as proper in attire as any of the photographs in the male fashion pages of the catalog lining his shelves. “And a shave.”

“And you didn’t,” Blackjack smiled back at Big Bear, as he pulled a jug of unlabeled elixir from under the shelf, then proceeded to pour its special contents into the two leather-lined clay ‘antique’ mugs which were the only drinking vessels they owned back in the winter of 43 after they lost most everything else in an avalanche. “How long has it been, Big Bear?”

“Longer than I thought,” Big Bear said, measuring his chest length beard and nearly two foot long topknot with a ruler hanging from the wall, and doing the appropriate calculations. “Unless living up in the hills made my hair grow faster.”

Blackjack offered one of the mugs to Big Bear. Big Bear smelled its fragrant and familiar contents, terrified somehow of what would happen if he let it pass his lips.

“Apple juice,” Blackjack assured him. “Not hard cider. I know how you feel about firewater. As you put is, ‘water that puts OUT the fire in the Soul’. N’est pas?”

“A view that is not very popular, but which I still hold is true,” Big Bear said. He took two moderate swallows of the special ‘brew’, and letting it quench his dry mouth. Then a third gulp which he felt warm the spice-starved walls of his grumbling stomach. “Good. Real good. Exceptionally good,” he continued, shocked that something so pleasing to the palate could come from Blackjack’s non-culinary hands.

“Because of exceptional spices, my friend,” Blackjack said by way of explanation, showing Big Bear to two shelves loaded with new arrivals, in glass jars with shapes Big Bear had never seen. “Imported from---“

“---Places I read about, or hope I never have to see again” Big Bear said regarding the labels on the bottles indicating that they all came from cities lining the East Coast of America, and the rest being from the other side of the Great Pond. Places and experiences he never told Blackjack about, or for that matter, no one else West of the Mighty Mississippi. Better that way for everyone, for reasons that they didn’t have to know about. But reasons that Big Bear would have to deal with on his own, one day.

“So, how’s it been, where you’ve been, Big Bear?” the ex-mountain man asked regarding his old home, and life he had carved into it.

“Not all that different from when we were both up there, Blackjack” Big Bear replied, hoping it was not a lie or self-deception. “And here?” he continued, looking up at the store, then straight into his old friend’s tired and defeated eyes. “How’s it been here?”

“Different,” Blackjack said, his attention drawn to a young woman wearing a tattered dress and freshly-bruised face who commenced stealing some candy, then a pair of shoes, then a blouse. “Yeah, very different, and...” he continued. “Not welcomed in my store!” he yelled out to the wench.

“For the candy, the shoes and the dress,” Big Bear said to Blackjack, handing him small nuggets of gold, two coins and two fur pelts from his waist.

“But not that---!” Blackjack yelled at the woman, ignoring what Big Bear had put on the counter. Blackjack stepped in front of the wench just before she was about to grab the handle of a knife with the most expensive handle and sharpest blade from the display counter. “This is my store. And these are still my goods!” he yelled at her, his anger covering what felt like fear. “No matter who wants to pay for them!” Blackjack barked out at Big Bear as the mountain man pulled out some more money from his still-fully-filled pouch.

Blackjack put the goods the woman was ‘sampling’ back in their appropriate places, then put the money back Big Bear had put on the counter back into his pouch.

“You DO know who I am,” the wench in the long, red hair and shapely figure with firey green eyes reminded Blackjack with a heavy Irish accent.

“A woman in need of a knife to cut up meat,” Big Bear interjected as he put his money on the counter again, adding some more to it, grabbing hold of a side of dried beef, wishing it was elk, or buffalo. He took the knife from its place in the display, inserted it into the meat and presented it to the woman with a courtly bow. “A knife to protect her from the man who tore her dress apart,” he continued.

“Why don’t ya buy her a new dress while yer at it too, you stupid----“ Blackjack said.

“Fool? I’ve been called worse, and been worse.” Big Bear said. He pulled down a dress, the best in the store, then placed it in front of the woman, as he put twice desired price of the item, in gold, onto the counter.

Blackjack put his foot down, or more accurately his fist, directly on the dress as the wench was about to pick it up. A battle of wit and wills get set into motion between the half-breed Frenchman who passed as White and the very White ‘lady’ who had no trace of black or Indian blood in her.

“He is allowed to be a fool if he wants to be,” she said regarding Big Bear. “And you can be a selfish idiot, or a self-destructive one,” she continued to Blackjack as he tries to put Big Bear’s money back into his old friend’s pouch, said old friend not letting him do so. “It is a free country, ain’t it?”

“But not an honorable one, with women like you around,” Blackjack barked at the wench.

“Who’s he?” the woman asked, finally seeing the face of her benefactor, and letting herself become absorbed into his loving eyes. As he became absorbed into hers.

“Someone who you’ll have nothing to do with I have anything to do with it,” Blackjack said. He observed his old, now love-struck friend reach into his pocket for an item that always got him into trouble, placing his own hand over it as he faced the wench into her eyes, with all the courage he could muster. “And he wants nothing to do with you if he has any brains. Or balls...Or---“

“---Beans, bacon, flour and shells,’ a woman interjected as she walked in, or perhaps magically appeared. “Got heap big wompam,” the very female and very armed Indian woman in a wide-brimmed gunslinger hat said as she strolled into the store in her fringed chaps, leather coat and spurred moccasins that somehow shook the floor with every stride, though they didn’t make a sound that could be heard by the human ear. “Wompam that wasn’t stolen from any man, or woman,” she proclaimed as she delivered the goods to the counter.

“Neither is my money...” Big Bear observed coming out of his mouth, before he could think about what he was saying. “Not stolen from any man, woman, OR mountain,” he went on, by way of necessary explanation that he hoped he would not have to explain.

“You people usually call me Gwen,” she said by way of explanation as she rolled her eyes, ignoring Big Bear’s insistent claim. “And I know who and what all of you are,” she continued, while perusing the contents for sale in the store, and perhaps what they would do for, or to, the buyer.

Blackjack bit into the wompam she had put on the counter. “It’s real gold,” she said, having seen every one of his actions with the eyes behind her head. “I need everything on that list,” she continued.

Blackjack filled the order while Big Bear and the wench had a conversation of their own with their curious, then adoring eyes. A situation which both Gwen and Blackjack seemed to be more interested in than the commercial transaction between them.

“They call me Big Bear,” the short, over-bearded Mountainman said to the woman.

“And they call me Kathleen, Big Bear,” she replied with a welcoming diction that came straight from the depth of her God Fearing Soul and the heart of the Emerald Isle.

The rest, they related with their eyes, their lips and their nods of escalating approval.

“Interesting the way they look at each other and don’t say anything,” Gwen said to Blackjack regarding the Mountain man who was losing all sense of direction and altitude behind the emerald green eyes of the red-haired Valley Maiden.

“Yeah, strange, romantic coincidence,” Blackjack commented. “Just like you coming in here just after he did,” he continued.

“No such thing as coincidence,” Gwen smiled back as she lifted a jug of water from the counter and raised it up to her parched lips. She then allowed herself to slip on the floor, most of the contents of the jug landing into Big Bear’s face, the remainder on cold water fell upon Kathleen’s chest.

“You bitch!” the simple peasant Irish woman shot back to Gwen, in very American English as she covered up her cold and very visualizable breasts. “Fucking whore! This is my best dress. My only dress. My—“

Gwen’s very satisfied smile was met by the business end of Big Bear’s pistol. “Who are you!” he demanded to know of the halfbreed woman, who was armed better than he ever could be, and with more than just firearms. “Who the hell are you!” he blasted out again.

“It’s the WHAT that should concern you, Little Cub,” she replied.

“And that what is?!” Big Bear growled back, with more fear behind his bark than he figured on.

“A needed coincidence,” Gwen replied, staring into the vastness behind her eyes. She turned reflective, then dead serious, then terrified, then she started to laugh. But at something Big Bear both didn’t understand and feared.

“What are you laughing at?” he asked, then requested, then demanded to know.

“I be laughin’ at me, don’t ya know,” Gwen replied in an Irish accent that seemed as authentic as Kathleen’s, at least to Big Bear. “Ya be fixin ta do somethin’ ‘bout that?”

As the crazy gunslinger Indian woman got lost in her own mad laughter, Big Bear saw fit to deal with the world on the seeable side of reality. And the woman from that realm that had captured his heart, who was in need of a wardrobe change very quickly.

“Blackjack!” Big Bear shouted out as he saw another piece of apparel Kathleen had eyes for while huddled in one of the Trading Post owner’s blankets. He threw another nugget of gold Blackjack’s way. “The dress and anything else in here. For my lady here...”

“---Whose ‘eyes you have known forever’” Gwen said, knowing somehow exactly the words Big Bear was preparing to come out of his parched mouth, and whose finger he was about to surround with the ring in his pocket he was saving for the next woman of his dreams who would be that Final One.

“Whose Christian name is Kathleen,” Blackjack interjected regarding the DESIRED mystery woman in Big Bear’s life. “But whose surname is---“

“---Something and someone in my past!” Kathleen bolted back at Blackjack. “Who’s now way back in my past,” she continued, looking at Big Bear with affection, trust and that elusive emotion called love which required Big Bear to seal the agreement that both of them had already signed in their hearts.

He pulled the silver and lead ring out of his pocket with his firm right hand, and with a trembling left paw took her fair, find fingers into his sweaty palm. “May I have the honor, Kathleen?” he asked her on bended knee.

“It’s me who is honored,” she replied as Big Bear slipped the ring on her finger. “And touched,” she continued gazing at it as it it was a fifty karot diamond.

“It’s me that’s touched,” Big Bear said. “By the joy of giving you whatever you need, and want. After what I surmise has been a history of people denying you what you deserve. A history that’s now officially ended.”

Gwen observed the two lovers fall into an embrace, then going on a shopping spree for their new lives together. Or, to be accurate, Gwen’s new life with Big Bear. But she also observed Blackjack, who was thinking twice about pocketing the coins and nuggets that his old friend had insisted he take for his wares.

“You should keep it. Your old friend is paying for his education,” Gwen said. “And you’ll need it for your own getaway money when the time comes, one day.”

“A day which I think, and fear, is...today,” Blackjack replied. “Especially if Big Bear, or as you call him, Little Cub,’ is true to his reputation and old habits.”

“What old habits?” Gwen asked.

Blackjack replied with guns and ammo, both delivered discretely into Gwen’s satchel and pockets. Deliveries for which he refused any payment, save Gwen’s not asking him any

questions. Particularly when an entourage of very powerful well dressed 'New West' aristocrats arrived on the stage outside of his window, their suitcases and belongings carried by those who were far less fortunate, and whose power had been stolen from them.

CHAPTER

Though Big Bear looked and smelled like the animal for which he was named, he felt like an aristocrat when walking arm in arm with Lady Kathleen down the walkway of town. The wench in the torn dress who found her way into his life made him feel respectable. Respectable enough to perhaps fit in with the well dressed city slickers in this settlement that was indeed becoming a city. The city of Utopia, where any man can get rich, feel rich, and be looked at as being rich by the sweat of his brow or the luck of the draw. "Maybe I can settle in here," he thought. "Go up to the hills only when I want to rather than because I need to," he continued as he envisioned himself with the Lady next to him, and the well-dressed gentlemen and ladies in Utopia were looking at him like he was a gentleman. Maybe such was because he walked with his head held high and a confidence in his stride, and that he kept enough distance from the onlookers so they couldn't smell the High Country 'natural aromas' that he could never get out of his skin, no matter how long he lingered in the river or scrubbed up in a hot tub.

As for who Lady Kathleen was, the answers would come to Big Bear in time, in their natural time. God and the Great Spirit knows that secrets are best revealed in their natural time, after all. But, Lady Kathleen, elevated to such status as a result of Big Bear's financial intervention, did have questions about him.

"So, tell me about YOU," she asked.

"Like what?" Big Bear replied, not used to anyone caring about his comings, goings and origins.

"Where, I was thinking," she inquired with an inviting smile, and eyes that seemed to be able to handle the real stories that Big Bear had never told any of the other women who had come into his life, then left it. "Where do you come from?"

Big Bear pointed to the mountains to the West, letting them do the talking for him. They knew what to say better than any man or woman who he had ever met.

"And where are you going?" she continued, surprisingly satisfied with his last answer.

Big Bear let his finger have its way, bringing her attention and his imaginations to the Mountains to the North. Canada, maybe. A place where there was more reading going on than shooting, so he read anyway.

“And why did you come down here?” Kathleen pressed, this time wanting a very specific answer, and not settling for anything less.

Big Bear stopped, then pointed to ten colored-skinned souls with aching backs moving around heavy goods for those with White skins. Though those laborers with red, yellow and black skin did not wear any chains, only the most insensitive of two legged creatures could not feel the shackles around their legs, arms and necks. The Masters of those once-free souls decided to have a social meeting amongst themselves, the men talking about prices and prospects, the women gossiping about the men. Their underpaid or unpaid servants were left to the task of loading their goods from one wagon to another, watched over by two Overseers with whips on their belts and deputy badges on their chests, and jugs of whisky in their grubby hands.

Two of the servants, a Blackfoot brave with cropped hair with roots in the mountains and a black-skinned kinky-haired man with origins in Africa, still had eyes that were open, and alive. It was to them that Big Bear threw the first two bags of gold from his pocket, motioning for them to leave their masters and grab one of the horses from the coral he brought into town to make a getaway to a new life. As they slithered away from the deputized Overseers, Big Bear threw another eight bags of metallic material to the rest of them. This time, one of the Overseers did take notice of something other than the whiskey going down his throat. But before he could wield his whip upon the slaves, Big Bear pointed his gun at him and his half-drunk pal. By this time, the Masters had taken notice as well.

“So, ya’ll got some pennies from heaven, or maybe it was gold from the devil,” the most Preacher-like of the gentlemen said as he looked condescendingly at Big Bear, then with fear at the large amount of wealth in a pouch that hit the ground but not the hands of a frail ‘servants’, then how scared his other gentlemen were to pull out their guns on the bearded half-Injun demon from hills. “The right, moral and smart thing to do, of course, is to hand over those bags of temptation to your Masters, so they can spend it as it should be spent,” he said to each of the ten servants, with a kindly, paternal smile.

Five of the slaves saw, or accepted, the reasoning for giving Big Bear’s liberation money to their Masters. They were rewarded with a pat on the back, a piece of jerky or a compliment that made them feel ‘safe’ again. The rest walked towards the excess horses Big Bear had brought down from the hills, climbed on top of them, and were rewarded with something else as they rode out of range of rifle fire.

“It’s called freedom, Kathleen,” Big Bear explained from the side of his mouth as his eyes kept focused on being sure the Masters let their hard ‘earned’ property make their getaway. “Freedom’s instinctual to some folks, findable by others, scary to most. But, if something doesn’t scare you or make you work harder than you intended on, it ain’t worth a...”.

Big Bear’s witty, humorous, and heartfelt analogy was not voiced, as the woman he intended on sharing it was well behind him, huddled behind a set of coffins. To Big

Bear's right was something of more immediate danger. "I'm Sheriff Ditka, and it wise idea to drop that gun, Stranger," an over-fed, overconfident and over-backed man with a burly mustache announced in a heavy Polish accent, five men with rifles drawn behind each of his waddling legs. "If you do so peacefully, we'll let you ride back into the stinking hole in the mountains you crawled out of. Or maybe decide to not rape that wench you just bought. Is that a deal, Stranger?"

Kathleen, more scared than any of the liberated slaves, nodded 'yes' to the proposal. Particularly when a man in a clean white suit puffing a fat cigar on the second story of the saloon looked her way. Big Bear considered the proposition not too unwise, as he assessed the odds and noted that he was outflanked on three sides. Until he saw a face in nessed between the Bank and the Mining Claim Office behind the growing posse. She shook her head 'no', but said an affirmative 'yes' with her eyes. Her hips were a lot bigger than he had remembered from the last time he saw her, and loaded up for some big time fireworks. Indeed, Gwen was now a walking arsenal, but could she use those impliments of destruction fast enough to neutralize twenty armed men, without killing Big Bear's new woman, and, if possible, himself? Big Bear would find out in five seconds as she counted down with her fingers, then thres CLOUD OF DUST>>>.

Well hidden behind the posse of well armed and

Blackjack hesitated, as if praying that he didn't

GROWLING WOLF

RUNNING RAM