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IN GREEN PASTURES

❧ BOOK THREE ❧

MYSTERIOUS WAYS



A Frontier Novel by
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Excerpt from Chapter

❧ 15 ❧

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... A week or so later, LeFaye took the buckboard into Pueblo to get supplies, pulling out before sun up. Charlie was alone and, although he normally didn't have the luxury of taking a few days to rest, he didn't feel like doing much. He straightened up around the cabin, cleaned out the stalls, and filled the water trough. Nothing more.

After eating a simple lunch, he pushed his plate aside and laid his head on his outstretched arm. Guilt about not doing much around the farm began to plague him. *There's so much to do before winter, so many—*

He jerked upright. He hadn't intended to fall asleep. Late afternoon shadows were creeping across the farm as the sun started its western descent and the herd was moving up from the lower pasture. But what had awakened him?

He strained to hear. Only a raven's caw. No, whatever it was, was gone. He laid his head back down and was just about to doze off again when the noise floated to his ears once more. *I'm not dreamin',* he thought. *But who? And where's it comin' from?*

Silently he pushed his chair back from the table and tiptoed to the fireplace. Very carefully, he pulled Big Blue, Grandpa's old rifle, down from its pegs above the mantle and moved noiselessly to the back window where he glanced out, just long enough to see if he could get a direction from the voice in the hills. Dark shadows were quickly blanketing the small farm, limiting his view in the muted landscape. But he could hear, and the strange sound was riding the wind.

Stepping out onto the stoop, Charlie paused. Whoever was out there was getting bolder or coming closer. He clearly heard a chant, and it was growing louder. Strings of unfamiliar words in what sounded like a native tongue rose above the trees in a

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mystic rhythm before floating out onto the prairie and being scattered by the wind.

Gripping his gun, he crouched low to the ground and followed the noise. He followed it beyond the barn, through the trees, and up the hill where—

Charlie froze in his tracks.

He was standing at the mouth of a small clearing. Although until now the ground had been lit by the light of a full moon, it was suddenly dark and foreboding. A cloud had covered the moon, and he couldn't make out much, but his eyes must be deceiving him. He squeezed the bridge of his nose, but the strange sight stayed on the hillside. The exotic chanting filled his head. He raised Big Blue to his shoulder. The cloud passed and the brilliant moon revealed a spectacular scene.

A bear! Charlie couldn't believe it. Lowering the gun, he squinted in hopes of seeing better, but nothing changed. Raising the gun back to his face, he couldn't deny it was a giant grizzly standing in the clearing—a mighty bear with its back to Charlie. Its massive head was turned upward. Its dagger-like claws shining in the moonlight. It was a strange, yet magnificent sight.

Charlie'd never heard of a chanting bear. There had to be an Indian hiding somewhere in the trees. He wasn't sure of the Indian's intent, coming onto his land with a giant grizzly, but he knew what a bear could do to a human when angered. As a boy he'd come face to face with a she grizzly. Now he kept the butt of the rifle against his cheek.

He slowly pulled the hammer back. The click echoed through the darkness. The Indian stopped chanting. The bear stopped moving. Charlie held his breath. Bears don't surrender

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willingly, but he wasn't going to lower his gun for curiosity's sake.

He had one shot with Big Blue. He wasn't sure why he had brought it instead of his own gun, but too late now.

"It is Eagle Eye's gun, but not Eagle Eye holding it," an ancient voice spoke out of the darkness.

Charlie steadied the gun on his shoulder. His looked wildly around the clearing and through the trees. The bear still hadn't moved. He set his sight.

"Who holds Eagle Eye's gun?" came the voice again.

Charlie lowered the rifle. "*Eagle Eye*," he whispered. "I've heard that name before. Where've I heard that name?"

"Is Ute name for white brother, Suet Smit."

"Ute?" repeated Charlie. Lifting his head, he squinted into the trees. He called, "Are you the Indian my grandpa talked to in Denver last fall?"

"I am."

"Step out so I can see you."

"You promise no shoot."

Charlie lowered the hammer and let the rifle slide to the ground. "I promise, but tell your bear not to move."

"Bear move."

"Why?"

"I am bear."

"What?"

The bear slowly rotated, not stopping until it faced Charlie. Hidden inside the golden pelt was an old Indian, the one Grandpa had talked to in Denver.

"Me Nakima," said the old man. "I know grandfather for many, many moons."

Amazed, Charlie answered, "He told me about you—how

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you rescued him from the Cheyenne a long time ago.”

Nakima pushed the bear’s head off his own. “He repay debt by saving Nakima’s life, too. We brothers.”

Charlie nodded. “He told me about that, too.” Tears rose to the surface; he swallowed them back. He wasn’t going to show any sign of weakness in front of an Indian, especially in front of one wearing a grizzly hide. Yet, he missed his grandfather, and standing before him was a piece of Stuart Smith’s history, a part of Grandpa’s life that he knew very little about.

“I’m sorry you’ve come all this way to see him, Nakima, but Grandpa isn’t—”

“Yes, he is,” interrupted the old Indian. “He always here, young one. His spirit rides on wind. His voice speaks with eagle cry. Eagle Eye good man, brave man. He treat all men same. He learn from father, father learn from son. His heart, it beats in you. You are grandfather, Charlie Smit.”

Charlie slid his hand over his heart and closed his eyes. In the silence, he felt the rhythmic beats inside his chest and considered Nakima’s words. *His heart beats in me. I am Stuart Smith’s grandson. I am Charles Edward Smith.* He was proud of his heritage, but not just because of Grandpa. Something else moved within him.

“I am Theodore Smith’s son,” he murmured. He opened his eyes and gazed at the old man. Nakima appeared to be as tired and as worn out as the man Charlie had buried a couple weeks earlier. “Thank you,” he said. “I know what I need to do now.”

Nakima nodded. “Then go,” he said quietly.

“I will,” replied Charlie. “But what are you doing here?”

“I do bear dance to honor Eagle Eye. He strong, coura-

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geous man. Mighty hunter like bear. I pray Great Spirit favor him.”

“Will you show me? May I see this dance?”

“I come back tomorrow when the moon make full circle. It will be my last. Come, tomorrow.”

Charlie smiled and nodded. “I’ll meet you here tomorrow night, Nakima.”

The old Indian moved so swiftly, Charlie almost didn’t see him slip between the trees and disappear.

Somewhere in the hills, a wolf howled its ghostly song. Charlie shuddered and turned to leave. It was then when he realized where he was standing. Just inches to his left were his grandparent’s graves. Nakima had been standing just beyond Grandpa’s freshly dug burial site. “He’s come to honor you, Grandpa,” Charlie whispered hoarsely. Turning away, the young man wiped his eyes. Stars twinkled above and a cool wind blew through the trees.

The next day, Charlie tried to keep busy, but caught himself checking the position of the sun every few minutes. It seemed at one point that the giant ball got stuck in the sky, but finally, its radiant beams slid behind the mountains and traded places with another pale moon. Charlie strapped his gun around his waist and headed for the gravesites.

Just as he said, Nakima was once again standing on the other side of Grandpa’s grave. Wrapped in the bear pelt, he stood waving his arms slowly and softly chanting his Indian song. Charlie sat on the ground and watched. As the darkness intensified, so did Nakima’s voice. The faster his arms moved, the louder he chanted. Reaching a crescendo, he started to move his feet. To the younger man, it looked like the Indian was skipping, but staying in one place.

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Suddenly the old man lowered his voice to a raspy growl, arched his back, and like magic, the bear came to life. Charlie knew the real bear was dead, but watching the movements made by the man hidden within its hide seemed to awaken the animal. That unnerved him.

Nakima chanted louder until it was all Charlie could hear. The Indian chanted and the bear danced. Charlie didn't know the meaning of the bear dance, but he found it enthralling. The growling bear threw his front legs up toward the moon. He did this four times then came to an abrupt stop. The unexpected ending took Charlie by surprise. Thinking the Indian had heard something in the trees, he jumped up and drew his gun.

"That's all," said Nakima.

"Oh," muttered Charlie. "I thought—"

"You try?"

"Wh . . . Who, me?" said Charlie, holstering his weapon. "No, I don't think so. I'm not a great dancer, and as for the words, well, I don't even know what you're sayin'. I know a little Cherokee, and it's not Cherokee you're singin' in, so you can bet I'll get the words to this song wrong," he said laughing nervously.

But something about seeing Nakima standing in a bear skin on top of a grave with the moon beaming down on him made Charlie stop laughing.

"Dance go this way," the Indian said firmly. Slowly, he showed Charlie the steps. "Do four times then turn slow. That is all. Young one can do!"

Charlie nodded mechanically. "Okay." He took a deep breath. "I'll give it a try." He got up and stood beside the bear. At first, his attempts to follow Nakima's lead were clumsy and

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off beat, but before long, his feet were in perfect sync with those of the old man.

“Now bear move,” instructed Nakima, and he showed Charlie the stride of a hunting bear. It took a little longer for Charlie to get his feet to move in a different pattern than the rest of his body, but when he finally did, he felt a connection between him and the old Indian. “Now arms,” barked the teacher. Nakima threw the bear’s front legs up towards the moon and started the motion that Charlie had witnessed earlier.

When they were finished, Nakima turned to him and nodded. “You make good bear,” he said with a hint of a smile. “Eagle Eye be proud. Now we do words.”

Charlie threw a hand up, “Now wait a minute, Nakima. I don’t mind learnin’ the dance, but it’ll take me ages to learn the words, so I think I’ll just leave those up to you, if you don’t mind.”

“No matter,” grunted the old man. “I say Ute. You say Cherokee; English. No matter. Great Spirit make all words. Hear all words. Now, we do words!” he said decisively.

“Okay,” muttered Charlie. “But I warned you.”

The two started the bear dance again, slowly. Charlie watched Nakima. The ancient one seemed to fall into a trance, taking each step with grace.

Charlie closed his eyes and cleared his mind. He thought of nothing else, but the steps that he was taking, the emergence of the bear, and the howling of the words coming from the Indian beside him. Lost in the moment, he too began to chant. At first he chanted in his limited Cherokee, but soon moved into English. He understood what Nakima meant. It really didn’t matter what tongue he sang in. He chanted in

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English, and then back in Cherokee. With each step of the bear dance, words flowed from his heart, words of love and remembrance of his grandfather, words of peace and love for God.

High pitched, low pitched, Charlie soared with every word. *This should be a bird dance*, he thought. *Not a bear dance*. Then he realized he was the only one singing, and loudly at that. He stopped and opened one eye.

There was Nakima still standing awe-inspiringly on Grandpa's grave in the glow of the moonlight. He was staring at Charlie. Finally, he spoke. "Okay, Screaming Cat, you dance, I sing."

Charlie looked up incredulously. "Screaming Cat?"

Nakima looked down at him, eyes twinkling like the stars. "I call you Screaming Cat," he said. "It is Ute name for Charlie Smit."

Charlie smirked. "Great," he said with a smile. "My grandfather is Eagle Eye, strong and courageous and I'm Screaming Cat. Just great."

"Cat is strong and courageous," said Nakima encouragingly. Then he added, "Just not when singing." With that, he burst into laughter.

As Charlie strolled back to the cabin, he could still hear Nakima's laughter echoing off the hills.