

## The Talisman

When she finished cleaning up, and Charles had brought in the suitcases, Kern put out his pipe, went to the gun rack beside the front door, and took down a rifle and a large leather pouch. The pouch he tied around his waist.

Charles went over and said to him, "Where are you going?"

"We're going hunting," he returned. This caught Sam's attention, and she drifted over to them.

"Great!" Charles grinned. "I'll get my gun." He turned and went through the left door into the bedroom area.

"I am not going," Sam wrinkled her nose. "I hate to see animals killed."

"Me, too, so I don't kill animals unless it is necessary," Kern returned.

"Necessary?"

Charles returned with his rifle while Kern looked at her and said soberly, "You must come if you want to go into the Chikalonee."

"Why?" she asked, puzzled by his statement.

“Talisman,” he returned and went through the screen door.

Sam was intrigued by his words. She knew what a talisman was, but she didn’t understand the importance of it in Kern’s mind. His ways fascinated her and she wanted to understand them, to understand this strange man.

“What is it for?” she asked, coming out behind him.

“Protection,” Kern answered, going down from the porch. “Powerful medicine.”

Sam and Charles followed him into the woods behind the house and he began to mutter something barely audible. It must have been something Indian, because Sam couldn’t understand it.

After a while she said, “What are we hunting for?”

Kern stopped and looked at them, then replied, “Whatever comes.” Then he said, “From now until the kill do not speak. Use your eyes, listen with your ears, and become one with your surroundings.”

Sam nodded and Charles did the same. Sam sensed something profound was happening here, and she wanted very much to be a part of it. They moved through the wilderness behind Kern, stopping when he did and proceeding when he did. Sam became aware of the sounds of the woods, and her eyes began searching, but she did not know for what. Coolness radiated from the trees, and the smell of earth filled her nose. Kern stopped again, and she strained with her senses to hear or see something.

Kern touched her on the arm, and his hand was very warm. He pointed off in the distance, where there was a beautiful bobcat lying on the lower limb of a tree. It busied itself cleaning a paw. Its silver grey coat was speckled with black to match the black that rose to a peak outlining its ears. Kern looked at her and she nodded with a big smile, raised her camera, and took a picture. Then he raised his rifle and took aim. Sam quickly put out her hand and lowered his gun shaking her head. He grabbed her hand and removed it violently from the gun, squeezing it hard for

punishment. Then he aimed the gun again and fired. The sharp sound of the gun made Sam jerk inside, and she watched in sadness as the cat seemed to rise up as though to make its escape, but instead it fell from the limb, landing with a thud beneath the tree.

Sam opened her mouth to complain about such brutality, but Kern was not there. He was dashing away to where the cat lay.

“Cool,” Charles muttered, taking off after him.

Men could be so brutal; maybe it was just the maleness in them, but it made her want to cry. Slowly she approached them, and Kern had slit the poor little thing’s throat and blood was running out on the ground. Sam tried to swallow the lump in her throat. It was such a beautiful cat and she could not resist squatting down and stroking its soft fur. Talisman or not, it was not worth the life of this creature.

Then she felt Kern’s eyes on her, and when she looked up at him, she could not hide the moisture in the corners of her eyes. He smiled at her for the first time, and his features softened. “You cry. That is good. Stick out your tongue.”

“What?”

“Stick out your tongue,” he demanded, and she didn’t know why she obeyed, but she did. It seemed like such a dumb thing to do. Kern quickly swiped his fingers in the cat’s blood and wiped it on her tongue.

“Uhhh!” She made a sound of disgust and turned her head to spit. Quickly Kern caught her under the chin with his fingers and lifted her head preventing her action.

“Don’t spit it out,” he said sharply, “Swallow it.”

The very thought of it made her stomach churn, but Kern held her chin, and she knew he would hold it until she complied. She closed her eyes and swallowed hard. She hated the salty taste it left in her mouth. Kern released her chin with a satisfied nod.

“Why did you do that?” Sam blinked at him. She was more surprised than angry.

“To make you one with the creature. The bobcat is now your totem. With him comes good or a warning of bad.”

Sam was busy dealing with the sick feeling in her stomach that the blood put there. She was at a loss to understand this crazy event and this man’s thinking.

Charles looked on with interest because it appealed to his professional ideals. “That is so fascinating. I have read of warriors or hunters drinking the blood of their kill for some mystic attachment to nature.”

“It is not necessary to drink it. Blood is a token.” Kern answered. Then he turned to Sam. “You want the fur?”

“No,” she shuddered, “the blood was enough.”

Then he turned back to Charles. “Take her over there by that tree,” he pointed, “and I will join you when I am done.”

Charles came around and lifted Sam up, put his arm around her and walked her over to the tree. She leaned weak-kneed against it, allowing her head to tilt back. “You okay?” he asked softly. Sam wasn’t sure, but she nodded anyway. Charles moved her hair back off her shoulder and looked at her. She looked at him and needed to feel his arms around her. She leaned against him and he hugged her tight. It was so comforting and helped settle the shaking that was disturbing to her. She felt him nuzzle her hair and it sent a longing through her. She needed him, and it was the first time in a long time that she allowed herself to feel her need. She put her arms around his neck and looked up at him. Their eyes met and he lowered his head and took her lips gently in his. The kiss was sweet and stirred something in her. Maybe tonight, she would seek fulfillment in him. She knew he would be willing.

Suddenly, she became aware that Kern was standing there watching. She let go of Charles. She cursed silently

because she didn't want Kern to see her weakness. She wanted him to see only her equality. Charles now looked over at Kern and went to him.

"Now you," Kern said to him and pointed into the woods. Charles nodded and headed off. Samantha looked up into that chiseled stone face of Kern's searching for a clue as to what he thought about finding her in Charles' arms, but saw no expression. She couldn't help but wonder if he had any feeling at all. He seemed so cold, so successful at hiding everything. Then he did something that surprised her. He reached up and tenderly removed a piece of tree bark from her hair. This was not the action of a cold unfeeling man, and she felt warmed by what he did.

Charles shot a beaver near a small lake. Kern told him it was appropriate since beavers were creatures of their domain as he was a creature of his profession. Sam got a shot of it, too, standing by the tree it was working on before Charles killed it. He too took a swipe of blood and put it in his mouth, grinning at Kern. Kern nodded his approval and again told Charles to take her down by the beaver dam so she could get a picture of it. She did and then Kern joined them.

"Let's go back to the hogan now," Kern said and turned into the woods. "We have much to do."

When they were almost back and the house could be seen through the trees, Kern stopped abruptly and Sam almost ran into him. He turned quickly, placed a finger to his lips, and squatted down. Sam and Charles squatted too. Kern pointed off through the trees, and there was a family of deer walking leisurely down a game trail. She shot several pictures of them. When she looked up at Kern, he was watching her with interest. Then he stood and went on to the house. Once inside, he motioned for Sam to follow him, and he led the way to the back porch, which was a screened-in room off the kitchen, and opened a freezer. He filled her arms with several large frozen things wrapped in tinfoil.

“This is Naan bread,” he explained, pointing to the three long round loaf-like packages. “These two are deer meat. Let them thaw and then make as many Panini as you can out of them. Do you remember how?”

“Yes,” Sam nodded.

“Good,” he returned. “You feel better now?” His voice resonated with concern.

“Yes,” she nodded and looked into the holes in his eyes and saw her reflection there. His features were soft now and it gave her a very strange feeling to gaze at him. She was trying to decide what it was about this strange man that fascinated her. Was it his odd ways? He certainly was different from anyone she had ever met. Then he turned abruptly and went back in the house, leaving her standing there.

When she came back into the kitchen, she heard him tell Charles to go to the barn and feed the horses. Sam grinned and came around the snack bar to see Charles staring after him scratching the back of his head. Then Kern went over to a cabinet in the corner of the living room beside the fireplace and took out a large bag, grabbed the pouch he had with him when they went hunting, and went out.

Charles did the chores; Sam cooked up a ton of Panini and Kathi Rolls, finding a pitcher of Ferocactus drink in the refrigerator. She made both her and Charles a glass and went into the living room, handing Charles his before she sat down.

After a few hours Kern came in with finger paint on his face. “I need you two now,” he said, and went back out. Charles looked at Sam and shrugged. They both went out on the porch and saw Kern going up the hill. They followed him, and when they came to the top of the rise, there was a campfire built with rocks around it, and there were two Indian rugs sitting in front the fire. Kern went to one, seated himself, and motioned to Sam. She came over and he patted on the rug beside him. She took the seat offered,

and Kern picked up her dainty hand and turned it over, looking at it. Set upon a flat rock before the fire were two shallow ceramic bowls, a small but very sharp looking knife, and two small jar like containers. One had a red lid and the other a white one. There was also a small piece of leather with a little pile of a reddish substance on it, and a small pile of white rags.

Kern said, "You have nice hands."

"Thank you," she blinked at him.

"Look at Charles," he told her. What was Charles doing that she should see? He had just sat down like she had on the other rug. When she looked, she saw nothing out of the ordinary, but she felt a sharp pain on a finger of the hand Kern was holding. She let out a little cry and tried to draw her hand away, but Kern held on to it. She looked at it and saw her index finger was bleeding as Kern was laying the knife down. He had cut her finger. She looked at him, startled, and her eyes widened as she watched him milk blood from the cut into one of the bowls. It was rather painful, and she frowned but said nothing, because he was chanting something very softly. He released her hand and took up a white stick a few inches long, stirring the liquid in the bowl and mixing her blood into it. Sam took her wounded hand in her good one, holding her fingers up in the air, and clutched it to her breast.

Kern turned and looked at her, his features soft. He tenderly reached for her hand and she reluctantly let him have it. He took up a small stick that laid on the small piece of leather. He dabbed it in the reddish goop and spread it gently on her cut. Then he took one of the white rags. Sam watched in stunned silence while he wrapped up her finger and tied a knot in the cloth. Then with a deliberate movement, he replaced her free hand around her hurt one just as she was holding it before and pushed it gently against her breast. His eyes ran over her face, and she watched them warily. She was so taken aback by what was happening that she couldn't say a word.

He turned back to the bowl into which he had put her blood and stirred it again. Taking up one of the jars, he opened it and dripped blood from it into the bowl. Again he stirred it, chanting softly to himself. He sprinkled some ash from the edge of the campfire into it and gave it a final stir. Sam held her wounded hand and watched him pick up the bowl, hold it high over his head, and mumble some words. Then he brought the bowl down and turned to Sam, holding it out.

“Reach into the bowl and take the talisman,” he instructed. She reached out with her good hand and fished out a long leather tong with two fang teeth on it. On each side were stones, first a long polished whitish stone and then an irregular turquoise one. The two fangs curled in toward each other and between them was a polished reddish stone in the shape of a teardrop. Sam looked at it for a long time. “These are the teeth of the bobcat that will protect you,” Kern explained. “The long ones are for the long path in your coming and going and the blue ones are health. The red one in the middle is the tears you shed when you saw the blood of the cat poured out on the ground.”

“Oh, Kern, it is beautiful. I will always wear it. Thank you!”

Kern nodded and looked pleased; as his face brightened, Sam fought the desire to kiss him. She knew she was just being sentimental because he had made the talisman for her.

Charles’ talisman had the two beaver teeth on it, and there were several brown stones with streaks of white, blue, and red in them on each side of the teeth. In the middle was a flat round stone of turquoise. The brown stones represented his searching in the earth for treasures like the colors hidden in the stones, the beaver teeth represented his ingenuity and persistence, and the turquoise one was protection. The blue in it represented the water that hid the beaver when in danger.

Charles grinned as he tied it on his neck, “Thank you, Kern!”

As they went back to the house, Charles asked, “Are you a shaman, Kern?”

“The ways of the Medicine Man are in my blood, but there is no longer a profession.”