

THE CHARACTER COUCH

Regan Malloy is a Marriage, Family, and Child Therapist voiced by Tracy Tappan, a romance author who holds a master's degree in MFCC herself. Regan is inputted into different story realms, becoming the Regan Malloy of that time and place, to help fiction's favorite characters with life's challenges.

This session: focuses on Will Ludlam and Randa Thomas from "Omega," Book 3 in the Penton Legacy Series, by Susannah Sandlin.

Staging: Penton, Alabama, and nearby Georgia, August, current time (as of publication 2013), approximately two months after the end of "Omega."

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The flame on the burner of my stove flickered, and I stopped stirring the pot, just froze as steam curled up the wooden spoon and around my gnarled fist. A breeze touched the hairs at my nape. The sensation of being watched, of a certain...*essence* in my midst, tingled along my skin. I closed my eyes and squeezed the lids tight. *You knew this day would come, Regan. Stay calm.* I turned around, spoon held before me, liquid drizzling off it to make a Rorschach pattern on the wood floor.

The door to my cottage was open—how hadn't I heard that?—and a tall male figure stood silhouetted in the frame. Behind him, a bright wash of stars highlighted a body that was shaped into a masculine vee, broad in the shoulders, narrow in the hips: muscular, but with a lean athleticism that spoke of speed. His eyes gleamed out of the shadows, and even though he wasn't officially inside my cottage, his presence filled the space.

Drawing a secret breath, I schooled my features into something vaguely indifferent. "I don't know whether to be more upset that an Alabamian has invaded my cottage." I pursed my wizened lips at the young man. "Or a vampire."

He startled. It was only a quick hike of his highbrows, but I caught it.

"I told you she knew about us," a woman said as she materialized out of the haphazard array of pine and oak trees that fronted my cottage. "Now would you stop worrying," she added to him as she slipped inside.

Although she could've just as easily said that to me.

Yes, I knew about vampires. How could I not? I lived in the Georgia woods just east of the Alabama state line, situated about ten miles from a small town called Penton, which just so happened to be a vampire haven. Well, at least it had been until it'd been leveled several months ago, although the clan—or whatever they were—was currently rebuilding it. How on earth their kind hadn't stumbled upon me until now was a mystery.

As for me not stumbling upon them, the vampires were actually quite good at hiding themselves. I, however, could read auras, and vampires reflected a distinct burgundy tone. Maybe from all the blood they consumed? I caught back a shudder. Nothing like being in the presence of a pair who, for all intents and purposes, were part cannibal.

The woman took another step into my cottage, bringing herself out of the shadows and into the orangey glow cast by the fire in my hearth. She had dark-red hair piled on top of her head in a messy knot, a few curls carelessly dangling free, fair, flawless skin, and hazel eyes. A pretty girl, although she clearly wasn't interested in showcasing that; she wore no makeup, and was dressed in a unisex pair of jeans and an old T-shirt with *US Army* stamped across her breasts that did nothing to augment her femininity.

"I'm Randa," the woman introduced herself. "Krys, a doctor friend of mine, asked around for a woman of your skills. Would you have time to see us now?"

The man's nostrils edged upward. "What the hell are you cooking?"

I shrugged, setting my spoon on the counter. "Just one of my concoctions."

"What are you, a witch?" The man stepped forward now, too, his eyes narrowed on me. Oh, the firelight loved this boy, seeking out the cornsilk in his blond hair, caressing the golden hue of his skin. Handsome kid—if he could dial down the intimidating a bit.

"That's not a very PC thing to say," I came back blithely. I was a female version of Albert Einstein, my face stamped with the wear of time and my head haloed by a Brillo pad of wiry gray-and-white hair. Which meant I looked like a witch. Which *meant* he shouldn't have said that.

"Well, whatever you're cooking, it smells like a cheap Italian restaurant in—" The man broke off as his gaze dipped to the collar of my housedress. Realization dawned on his face, and a smirk began to tug at his mouth. "Or...?"

I fingered the spoon I'd set down, turning aside to escape his probing stare, but it was too late. He'd already spotted the lumpy evidence of the garland I wore around my neck under the

collar of my housedress, a garment which was roomy enough to disguise a figure that had gone distinctly gourd-shaped now that I'd reached my eighty-second year, and boobs I could belt to my waist—if I wore a belt.

The man chuckled low in his chest, two devastating dimples coming out to play. “You’re wearing *garlic*.”

I gave him a noncommittal stare.

His laugh took on a wicked edge. “A smart precaution. I give you high marks.” Chin down, he started to saunter toward me, his arrogant swagger marred by a slight limp. “I won’t be able to get near you now,” he added in a tone of exaggerated *uh, oh*. And even as he said it, he halted a mere hand’s breadth away from me, the heat of his body somehow both alluring and alarming.

I drew myself up. I was too old to let myself be toyed with by an impudent pup of a vampire. Or get frightened by one: if he was here to make a human juice box out of me, so be it. “I’m not a fool, son. I know garlic doesn’t drive off your kind.”

He considered me for a moment. “You think it covers the scent you give off of an unvaccinated human?”

“No.” Damn him, yes. Ever since a vaccine to save the population from a pandemic had turned human blood to poison for vampires—I’d overheard talk of this in my woods—I’d lived a life of care against becoming one of the hunted. Using garlic to mask my scent had been a somewhat effective tactic...until now, and this particular vampire. Did he have a heightened sense of smell, annoying boy?

Over by the door, the woman, Randa, exhaled sharply. “Will, would you quit being such a prick.” She appeared at his side, looping an arm through his. “Please excuse him,” she said to me. “He’s just nervous about being here. C’mon—” Randa led Will over to the hearth and planted him on one of my couches.

I had two facing each other and positioned at a perpendicular angle to the fireplace, a sturdy oak coffee table in between.

Looking at the cozy pair, I pressed my lips together. Had I said I had time to see them now?

A sudden draft down the chimney made an eerie moaning sound and whipped the flames outward toward Will. Or maybe it was the peculiar primal force radiating from him that had

caused the commotion. My skin prickled. Will watched me with still eyes. They were golden-hued, like a cat's. Like a predator's.

Deciding to go ahead and *make* time to see them, I grabbed a hot pad and lifted the pot off the stove, pouring the contents into a wooden pitcher. Collecting two wooden mugs, I brought the pitcher and cups to the coffee table and set them there. I sank down on the couch across from the couple, poured my concoction from the pitcher into one mug, then set it before Will. "Drink."

One blond eyebrow slanted upward. Will glanced at the mug, looked at me, then glanced back at the mug. Lifting his leg, he used the tip of his steel-toed combat boot to shove the mug back over to me. He lowered his foot and smiled amiably.

I set my hands in my lap, one on top of the other. It was going to be like this, was it? "I *can* read your aura without that." I nodded at the mug. "But the drink makes your essence much clearer."

"We're not here to have our auras read," Randa jumped in to correct me. "We came for, uh..." She cleared her throat. "Krys said you're a therapist. Right?"

"A witch," Will muttered.

Randa flashed Will a look. "Would you rather go talk to Cage instead?"

"Jesus," Will said, exasperated. "For the hundredth time, Randa, psychiatrist or not, Cage *works* with us when he's not in London."

"Okay, then." Randa turned a questioning gaze on me.

I paused, studying the two. I'd already made time for them, hadn't I? "Yes," I answered. "I'm a therapist." I stood up and crossed to my refrigerator, using the moment to regroup. A *therapy session*. It'd been a while. I grabbed a can of Coke and returned, sitting back down. I probably wouldn't be so gourd-like if I didn't drink three to five of these a day. "Who wants to start?" I pop-fizzed the can open.

No one, it seemed.

I sipped my Coke, waiting. *Your dime, kids*. At my age, I had vast amounts of patience. I could sit for—

"Well..." Randa cast a sideways look at Will. "Will has some...stuff he needs to work out."

Will snapped his head over to Randa. “Excuse. Me. This isn’t about me, Randa. I agreed to come here because you wanted to talk about us. And could you *please* take off that garlic?”

I blinked once, then sighed huffily. Pulling the strand of garlic over my head, I turned and tossed it onto my kitchen floor.

Randa went on, “The fact that you’ve never faced your past does affect us, Will.” Randa looked at me, the color of her eyes a silvery-green. “We’ve been mated for two months now, and we still have this...push-pull relationship that I don’t think is healthy.” She shifted her attention back to Will. “Sometimes you’re so connected to me I feel like I’m living in a dream, and other times...God, you’re miles away. Please, Will, just talk your troubles out with this woman, okay, purge yourself of them so that we can move on.”

“Hell.” Will paused, his mouth working. “Okay.” He stretched his arms out along the back of the couch, slouching deeper into the cushions, his knees jacked wide. “Well...” he began, affecting an exaggerated look of distress, his forehead forming puppy-dog creases, “I was born a poor black child...” He grinned, showing me a nasty set of fangs. “Until the transition, of course, so—”

“Damn it, Will,” Randa snapped. “Could you park your smart mouth for one second. This is important.”

“No, it’s not.” Will straightened, his golden-brown eyes catching sparks of firelight. “It’s stupid, and I’m outta here.” He surged to his feet.

I looked up at him. “You’re spotted like a leopard.”

“Ah.” Will pulled out an iPhone from the back pocket of his jeans and began to tap the screen. “Hold on, let me just run that through Google Translate. I’m sure they have a conversion for crazy-ass witch-speak somewhere.”

I ignored him. “Some people wear their pain in marked-off sections of their aura, meaning they can compartmentalize it, for the most part, so it’s not a constant burden. Pain that’s worn all over the aura, in spots, is pain that is integrated into the character, affecting everyday life.”

Jaw tight, Will gave me a flat stare. “Fascinating. Really. You should write a screenplay.”

Good Lord, but I’d never met a more emotionally defended man. “You doubt yourself.”

“Big whup, lady. Throw a rock and you’ll find someone who doubts himself on occasion.” He shoved his iPhone back into his pocket. “Tell me that *you* don’t have any doubts and regrets.”

I tightened my hands in my lap. My voice backed up as I thought of a true love long passed, children that never were.

Will turned to look at his girlfriend—or mate. “You’re over-thinking this relationship, Randa. Neither of us has been close to anyone before, so we’re just figuring this out. You need to trust me. Mated vampires *commit*. All right? I wouldn’t have jumped on board with the idea of sharing my life with you for the rest of eternity if I thought that was going to be a hardship. I spent too many decades wandering this earth not to *really* like the idea of settling down with you.”

I shifted my Coke from one hand to the other. “So you don’t think you’re pulling Randa close, then pushing her away?” I asked him. That speech *had* made him sound pretty dedicated to her.

“No, I don’t.” Will plopped back down on the couch. “Sometimes when things don’t happen according to how Randa has set up the rules, she’ll worry something is off, when maybe it really isn’t. I think it comes from her liking things regimented. But I’m *here*, I’m connected.” His mouth twisted tight at the corners. “Just because I’m not available for some kind of skull-fuckery thing, with her shining a flashlight around my psyche 24/7, doesn’t mean I’m pulling away. I just need to do my own thing on occasion.” He sat back, his fingers draped over his thighs. “Hell, if I wanted my every movement monitored and controlled, I’d hang out with my dad. Oops, that’s right. He’s slated for execution. I guess that’s off the board.”

I observed Will’s expression. Not exactly torn up about that, was he?

“I’m not trying to control you,” Randa argued. “I’m just...” She squeezed her brow between the stretch of her thumb and forefinger. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I do get too regimented in my view of things, but I can’t help it when I feel out of my comfort zone; it’s like going home to the Mother Ship for me. And, frankly, I don’t one hundred percent know how to operate in this relationship.”

I slid my fingers along my collar. It was actually kind of relieving to be *sans* garlic. “Explain the Mother Ship.”

Randa turned her attention to me. “It goes back to the way I was raised. My mom died of cancer when I was a toddler, leaving my dad to raise five kids.” Sorrow touched her features. “He’s an Army officer, or was, and the only way he knew how to deal with the situation he’d been handed was to run the family unit like a military brigade. It wasn’t an optimal way to be raised, but I don’t fault my father for it; I know he was just coping. But now it’s familiar to me, you know—my default mode.”

I sipped my Coke thoughtfully. “Such regimentation can keep life predictable, wouldn’t you say? I mean, I’m guessing that you always knew what to expect from your father. No surprises?”

“Oh, yeah. Absolutely.”

“There can be safety in that.”

Randa lifted one shoulder. “I suppose.”

“So when Will changes the way he’s acting toward you, maybe it’s the change itself, rather than his behavior, that disconcerts you.”

She frowned. “I never thought of it that way. But, yeah...every time he changes, I stop and assess if I’ve done something wrong to have caused it.”

I arched my eyebrows. “Why would you have done something wrong?”

“Because I always do...well, I don’t. But I feel like I’m on the verge of it a lot of the time.” Looking down, she smoothed a palm down her thigh. “The fear of not fitting in is pretty constant.”

That sounded like a stressful way to live. “Constant since when?” I asked.

“Always,” Randa answered with a dry laugh. “When I was growing up, my brothers turned everything into a competition—who could do the dishes the fastest, who could haul out the heaviest load of trash—and as the only girl and one of the youngest, I was always a step behind. In the Army, I never got much past being a rookie before I was turned, and now I’ve got to figure out how to be a freaking vampire.” She folded her lips in and out, as if fighting back a tremble. “Sometimes it feels like the moment I draw close to getting a handle on things, I’m thrown another curve ball.” She looked at Will. “Here I am, once again scrambling to figure out how to be a God-blasted, hateful vampire, now *in a relationship*.” Tears sprung into her eyes. “I would think you of all people would be able to appreciate how shitty it feels not to fit in.”

“I do, Ran.” Will dragged a hand through his hair, waves of blond pushing through his fingers. “I just don’t know what you want me to do about it. Sometimes you just...it seems to me like you stall out in your unhappiness, almost as if you want to be there, and I don’t...honestly, I don’t understand it. I hate being miserable. Yeah”—he glanced at me—“that means sometimes I don’t deal with everything I should, but I *will*,” he insisted. “I’ll get to it, in my own damned time.”

Randa turned her body all the way toward Will, her hands fisted on her knees. “I don’t know how you can say that I want to be miserable. I hate it. I...” Her voice cracked. She paused and restarted. “Do you know what I hate even more? Worrying about if I can figure out how to be a good mate to you. I don’t want to *not* fit again, Will. Not with you.”

Will’s expression softened. “C’mon, you don’t need to worry about that, Randa. You know I think you’re amazing. *Scary* amazing, in fact.”

I set my Coke can on the coffee table. “Figuring out this relationship will be difficult for you both. I don’t think you have the market cornered on that, Randa. By the sounds of it, neither of you grew up with a mother and father who modeled a proper husband-wife relationship. Will just alluded to a less-than-stellar father, and your mother passed away, so the challenge will be to—”

A log in the fireplace tumbled off the grate, shooting sparks up the flue like an angry mob of fireflies. “Excuse me.” I heaved to my feet and grabbed the poker, using it to reposition the log. The coals roiled under the grate like burgundy lava rock, throwing off heat with...I hesitated.

Burgundy... I frowned. *Solid* burgundy.

I spun around and stared at Randa. *Some people wear their pain in marked-off sections of their aura, others, all over their aura, in spots.* Oh, my, how had I missed this? I carefully set the poker back among the other andirons. Randa didn’t have marked-off areas or spots. No, she was a solid sheet of pain. “I’ll be damned if this isn’t a classic case of projection.”

Randa’s brows furled together. “What?”

I gestured imprecisely. “Projection is a defense mechanism in which a person subconsciously rejects something unacceptable in themselves and instead projects that same trait onto another.” I moved over to the couch and lowered myself back onto it. “You didn’t bring

Will here because he has stuff he needs to work out, Randa.” I picked up my Coke and cradled it in my lap. “But because *you* do.”

Soft color crept into Randa’s cheeks. “No, he...he does have stuff...”

“I’m not saying Will doesn’t, and he’ll need to work that out.” I exhaled softly. “Honey, this isn’t an accusation. It’s an opportunity to heal your own pain, which is a good thing.” I pursed my lips, thinking back over what I’d learned about this woman. “You said your dad raised you the way he did because he was coping, isn’t that right?”

“Yes,” she agreed, barely moving her lips.

“So he loved your mother?”

“From what I understand, yes. Very much.”

I took a large drink of my soda, staring at Randa over the rim of my Coke can, peeling away layers of her aura. “You look like your mother,” I pronounced.

“We have the same hair color and...” Randa fingered one of her dangling curls. “Yes, I look like her.”

I nodded gently. “I can’t help wondering how that was for your father.”

“I don’t know.” Randa’s throat moved in a slow swallow. “We never talked about that kind of stuff.”

“Do you think it might be a fair to guess that being around you sometimes caused your father pain, especially as you grew older and came to resemble your mother even more?”

Randa didn’t answer.

Will’s attention was pinned on her.

“Your senses are so finely tuned to what it feels like not to be connected, Randa, it would make sense to me if your father pulled away from you on occasion, not overtly, certainly not on purpose—he loves you dearly—but in order to cope.” I worked the tab of my Coke can back and forth. “No wonder you often feel like you’re on the verge of making a mistake. No wonder you always feel like the square peg in the round hole. You were trained to feel that way from childhood by that subtle sense of feeling sort of ‘wrong’ around your father on occasion. And no mother to offset that, either.”

Randa squared her jaw.

“You said you didn’t care for being a vampire,” I went on. “Frankly, child, I think you’re still trying to like *yourself*.”

A low curse slipped past Randa's lips.

Will reached out and gave her hand a quick squeeze.

"I recently was reunited with my father," Randa said in a strained voice, "and even though it was great to see him, and I love him very much, I didn't have any desire to go back and live with him."

"Thank God," Will murmured.

"I...didn't know what that meant." Randa shook her head, her loose curls brushing her cheeks, the red color more pronounced against flesh that had gone extra pale. "I think I figured that the Penton scathe is my family now." She looked at Will, her eyes catching and holding his. "That you are."

Will's smile was intimate and tender, for her alone. "Absolutely."

Randa's gaze warmed on him for a moment, then she glanced back at me. "But the stuff you said...that makes sense, too." Her voice lowered. "But what do I do about it?"

"Funny enough, sometimes just understanding why you feel the way you do can be enough to help you change." I ripped the tab off my Coke can and tossed it onto the coffee table with a soft metallic *chink*. "Try and see yourself through Will's eyes. He obviously thinks you're 'scary amazing.' And if at times Will has to travel his own path toward healing, fight against letting your rejection alarm bells get tripped. It sounds to me like he's not withdrawing."

"I'm not." Will leaned toward Randa and slipped a hand around the back of her neck, giving her a little shake. "Because here's the thing, baby, there's nothing you and I need to do to *fit*. You're already locked and loaded in here." He pointed to his heart, then his eyes brightened as he sang softly, "Randa, Randa, bo-ban-da, fee fi fo fanda. Raa-nda." A purely male smile curved his mouth. "You're my girl."

Laughing, Randa wiped the back of her wrist over her eyes. "Gee, if I was in kindergarten, I'd be giving you my strawberry fruit rollup right now."

Laughing, too, he pulled her against him. "Feel better?" he whispered into her hair.

She nodded.

Will brushed a kiss over Randa's cheek, then looked at me, his lips twitching toward one of his devilish smiles. "Maybe you really *are* a witch." Winking, he came to his feet, pulling Randa up with him.

I made a moue of my lips. “After you get your leg fixed, you should come back and see me...Leopard.” I added that last just to prick him.

He chuckled, granting me a flash of his dimples. “Don’t think so.” He headed for the door, then stopped and turned around. “Well, maybe.”

“I’ll keep things amusing.” Picking up the wooden mug filled with my concoction, I flung the contents into the fire with a snap of my wrist. A small explosion whipped the flames into a brilliant white.

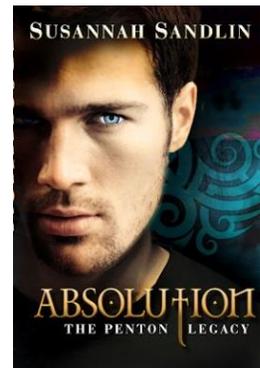
Will stared at the fire in mummified shock. “Holy shit.”

I cackled.



Susannah Sandlin (aka Suzanne Johnson) is the author of both Urban Fantasy and Paranormal Romance, including the Sentinels of New Orleans series and the Penton Legacy series. Her roots are in journalism, and she has won many writing awards. In fact, Romantic Times Book Reviews has nominated OMEGA (focus of this month’s Character Couch session) for the prestigious *Reviewers Choice Award for Best Paranormal Romance*.

Available now at Amazon: <http://amzn.to/1bJ3akF>



The next book in her Penton Legacy series, ABSOLUTION, is coming soon from Montlake.



Tracy Tappan, founder and creator of The Character Couch, is a multi-genre author of gritty romance. Her latest release in her dark paranormal series, THE BLOODLINE WAR, about an endangered breed of human who are kidnapping genetically enhanced women to save their race, is available now <http://amzn.to/18XDygs>

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