

THE CHARACTER COUCH

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This session: focuses on Collin Dailey and Ellie Lancaster from "The Curse Keepers," Book 1 in The Curse Keepers trilogy by Denise Grover Swank.

Staging: present time (as of publication 2014), summer, short time after the end of "The Curse Keepers," Manteo, North Carolina.

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I re-crossed my legs and shot a quick glance at the desk where the ham on rye I'd bought from a local joint called *Poor Richard's Sandwich Shop* sat. Did I have time to snag a quick bite? Difficult to tell how long the argument in the waiting room would be going on—and then the couple out there could finally come in here and meet with me—but it was starting to look like I wouldn't make it back in time to teach my Psych 101 class.

Besides teaching psychology at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hills I still met with clients as a counselor, and today I'd made a special trip to Manteo as a favor to a friend. A woman I'd gone to college with had ended up as one of the managers at an inn here called Tranquil House, and one of her employees was a young woman named Claire, who'd wanted to get some premarital counseling for her and her fiancé. Since I loved working with couples who were all bright-eyed and starry in love, I'd agreed to make the four hour drive from Chapel Hills to Manteo. Great decision on my part; Claire and Drew were delightful. We'd had such a wonderful time in session, in fact, Claire had asked me to stay on and see a friend of hers who was having troubles with a man. According to Claire, her friend and this man were something called "Curse Keepers."

Okaaaaay...

That was when the day had gone from delightful to weird.

“You don’t have to worry,” Claire was saying in the waiting room, trying to convince her friend, Ellie, to talk to me about the man, Collin. “I’ve already told Mrs. Malloy about the curse, so you can discuss it openly.”

“You did *what?*” That from Ellie...I think. The woman’s voice had come from around the corner, out of sight.

Claire huffed a breath. “Nothing bad is going to happen from telling the secret of the curse, Ellie, like it did before. The curse is already broken,” she added, the soul of reason.

Ah, yes, *the curse*. The explanation Claire had launched into had gone something like this: four hundred years ago two original English settlers contrived to lock a bunch of bad spirits into Hell. The plan had gone a bit haywire, with some of the wrong spirits getting imprisoned...but, anyway, once the spirits had been put away, the two men took on the unenviable task of guarding the gate, designating themselves as Curse Keepers. Somehow the caveat had been added that if these two Curse Keepers ever met and touched in the future, everything would fall apart. The evil spirits would be released to wreak havoc on the world. By right of inheriting this title through their ancestors, Ellie and Collin had become two modern-day Curse Keepers, and recently had—*not good*—met and touched. *Voilà!* Up had popped the Lost Colony of Roanoke. I’d heard about the miraculous reappearance of this entire town, fully intact, on the news...I just hadn’t realized it was a sign that an ancient curse had been broken and a bunch of nasty spirits set loose. So these two young Curse Keepers had raced against the clock to save the world, but...apparently, their working relationship wasn’t the best. Ellie was on the outs with Collin, and hence the reason Claire had dragged her friend in here.

“I’m not walking in there,” Ellie informed Claire. “So that some woman can put me in a straightjacket.” She paced into view.

Oh, pretty. Dark red hair set against fair flesh made a striking, almost exotic, contrast, although she was dressed more like the “girl next door” in jean shorts and a white tank top, the nice girl image enhanced by a sprinkling of freckles across her nose. I caught sight of a zigzag scar high up on her right arm, not some haphazard mark but something that appeared, interestingly, very precise.

“Mrs. Malloy won’t think you’re crazy,” Claire insisted. “She’s very open-minded, Ellie. Her mother is a witch.”

Out of long habit, I blanked my face. Too many years spent being made fun of for that, I suppose. The small town where I grew up had always thought of Mom as a kooky bat, who danced around candles and incense, chanting in tongues. Of course, that hadn't stopped the magistrate from showing up on our doorstep during the worst drought in history to beg my mother to make it rain.

I sighed. By association, I'd also been labeled a kook, and so I'd spent most of my elementary school days alone, huddled in the corner of the playground at recess, pretending to read when I was actually spying on the other kids over the top edge of my book. I became extremely adept at figuring out people. Then high school had come and everything changed; I shot up to five foot ten inches tall, growing myself a mean set of long legs, a nice rack to boot, and long blonde hair. I'd nabbed myself the quarterback my junior year and had kept him from that day forward. We'd been ecstatically married for nearly fifteen years.

I was generally immune to other men, but...*oh, my.*

As the young man Collin moved closer to Ellie, he also put himself in my line of sight and...plain and simple, *wow.*

He was a hottie, for sure, with dark hair and a ruggedly constructed face, his strong jaw made to look more masculine by a disreputable shading of stubble. His body was lean, but ripped, his v-shaped torso stacked on top of slim hips. At the sleeves of his T-shirt, I could see that biceps were definitely defined from triceps. But more than outright physical appeal, this Collin radiated a kind of raw sexual magnetism.

My interest piqued, no bones about it.

"This is bullshit," Collin told Claire. "You said Ellie was going to let me re-draw the protection symbol on her. Now I find out you're trying to throw me in with a head shrink."

"I can protect myself," Ellie snapped before Claire had a chance to respond. "*And* I can handle these evil spirits on my own. Feel free to leave."

"Really?" Collin's eyebrows lifted. "Last I checked you still didn't know Ahone's symbol to put on your back. Or are you going to—?"

"Look, I have to go," Ellie cut in. "I'm already late for work at my family's inn, and then I've picked up an extra waitress shift at the restaurant, so that maybe I can actually *pay* the mountain of bills at the inn, not to mention my own—"

I loudly cleared my throat.

Everyone in the waiting room spun to look at me—Claire, Ellie, Collin...well, not Drew, the fiancé. He was sitting on a couch and flipping through a magazine.

“Just wondering if I should eat my sandwich.” I pointed to the deli wrapped package on the desk. The ham was nearly making me dizzy, it smelled so good. “Or not.”

“Definitely not,” Claire pronounced, grabbing Collin and Ellie each by an arm and escorting—pushing—them inside my borrowed room; I’d commandeered the local dentist’s office for a few hours. “You’re miserable,” Claire complained to Ellie. “And I’m sick of it.” She flapped her hand at the two chairs set before mine. “Now sit! And come to some sort of truce.” She sailed back out of the office, closing the door firmly behind her.

Collin and Ellie stared at me.

Up close, they were even more attractive. Which was pretty amazing. Close-ups and bright lights usually didn’t work out so well for most people. They made a nice couple. On the outside, at least. “I’m Regan Malloy.”

Collin made a slow inspection of me, calculating, strategizing...checking for weaknesses, maybe. When he was done, he met my gaze and smirked, the curl of his lips sexy as sin.

I cleared my throat. “So Claire thinks you two need to negotiate a ceasefire,” I said. “What do you two want?”

Ellie stood in place, her hands braced stubbornly on her hips, studying me with open suspicion.

I folded my fingers together on top of my notebook. “My mom sent me through college by putting curses on people. She was quite good at it and charged a mint.” I smiled benignly.

Ellie blinked.

“So you can talk to me about anything.” I waited. *Or not.* My ham on rye was very eager to be eaten.

“What I want,” Ellie said in succinct syllables. “Is for Collin to get it through his head that I don’t want a relationship with him anymore. Ever. He can’t seem to hear me.” She sat. “Maybe he’ll listen to you.”

“We belong together,” Collin countered in a matter-of-fact tone. “Maybe you can make *her* see reason.” Collin sprawled into one of the chairs, propping his forearms negligently on the armrests and leaving his thighs wide open in a pose of relaxed debauchery, like a man who’d just tumbled out of a wild night in bed. Damn, this guy was something else. He wasn’t even trying;

sensuality just oozed from him. I grabbed my notepad off the desk and set it on my lap. Nothing like having a couple in session with completely opposite goals. “So, besides being Curse Keepers together, you two were in a romantic relationship before?”

“Romantic?” Ellie *ha’d*. “I wouldn’t exactly use that word to describe Collin.”

“She’s asking if we used to screw.” Collin’s lips made another trip into a sensual curl. “We did.” He shot me a wink that could’ve melted iron.

A tingle swirled through my belly, which was...very disconcerting. I was supposed to be immune. “Um...not anymore?”

“No,” Ellie answered.

“Any desire to return to that...the sexual part, I mean?”

Slight pause.

“None.”

“See,” Collin drawled. “Ellie’s the type of woman who joneses after a guy who’d rather fiddle with his crotch through his polyester pants and spend the evening talking about his stuffed unicorn collection than give her the high ride. She’ll sacrifice the best orgasms of her life for nose-dripping stability to lull her to sleep.” He snorted. “Sorry. Can’t give her that.”

“I go for *honest* men,” Ellie corrected, tight-lipped. “And you’re so far from truthful there isn’t even a word for you.” Hurt and anger flashed across her face. “You lied to me, Collin.”

“I didn’t lie.” Collin’s lids hooded. “I warned you not to trust me, didn’t I?”

“I’m not naïve,” Ellie shot back. “I went into this relationship knowing that you’d eventually walk. But then in the very next breath after telling me I shouldn’t trust you, you said I *should*. So I did.” Ellie shook her head, her eyes glistening. “I gave you my heart, and you threw it away to—”

“I gave you my heart, too!” Collin straightened in a sudden motion, his spine rigid. “What happened to you being the angel to save my soul? *You* were the one who *walked*, Ellie.”

“What soul?” Ellie bit out. “You gave it to the evil god Okeus.”

Collin’s chin jerked back as if he’d been slapped. He drew in a deep breath, the muscles across his chest pushing against his T-shirt. “To end this fucking curse,” he said, tight and low. “Once and for all.” He slouched back in his chair and stared at a spot on the floor between his knees, the line of his jaw taut. “I’d think you, of all people, would be able to appreciate that side of it.”

“Yes,” Ellie whispered. “You’re right. The curse has been the torment of my life, too. But people are dying, Collin, and it’s our job to fix that.”

He shrugged. “Things will even out once the spirits settle down. Just leave it be.”

“We have a responsibility to—”

“Screw responsibility!”

Ellie stared at him for a long moment, her eyes growing heavier with tears. “What happened to the man who took his Curse Keeper role so seriously, who saw it as his sacred duty?” She swallowed. “I don’t even recognize you anymore.”

Collin’s head bolted up. “Maybe I’m taking a page from your book and trying to forget it all.”

Ellie’s face stained red. “I forgot for a reason.”

The ensuing silence was brittle.

I sat there for several seconds, observing both of them. “What was the reason you forgot?” I asked Ellie.

Ellie looked at me, then glanced down. She smoothed her hands down her thighs. “One of the dictates of the curse was that it had to be kept a secret. When I was eight-years-old, I told Claire about it.” Ellie curled her fingers around her knees, gripping them. “Shortly thereafter my mother was murdered one night at home, practically in front of my eyes, by a man who broke in.”

Dear God. “I’m sorry,” I said quietly, sincerely. “That’s a devastating experience. For a child especially.”

“Yes.” Ellie ran her bottom lip through her teeth. “I’d spent my whole life listening to my mom scoff at the curse while my dad endlessly preached about the importance of the role I’d been privileged to inherit from him.” She glanced up and lifted a single shoulder. “Subconsciously I must’ve figured that forgetting everything my father had taught me about the curse would honor my mother’s memory. Because after her death, it was all just...gone.”

I mulled that over for a moment. “You’re remembering now, though?”

Ellie nodded. “Little by little. It’s been a struggle, and he”—she jerked her chin at Collin—“hasn’t helped much, doling out information to me on a need-to-know basis only.”

I looked at Collin. *To end this fucking curse, once and for all.* “So what’s your issue with the curse?”

Ignoring me, Collin picked up a set of fake human teeth off a side table and opened and closed them with a *clackity-clackity*.

“Did your father also—?”

“My father’s not in the picture.” The sentence was terse, concise. Subject-ending.

My antennae perked up. I dropped in an “Oh?” then went quiet.

Cold washed through Collin’s eyes.

The silence was cloying, stretching out uncomfortably long. I held my ground. Someone would hate the quiet and eventually speak up.

It was Ellie. “When Collin was ten,” she said, “his father walked out on his family. Collin had to become the man of the house, dropping out of high school to—”

“What the *hell*, Ellie?” Collin’s head swiveled around. “Talk about your own shit, not mine.”

“If you’re really here to figure things out,” Ellie said. “Then you’re going to have to get down in the mud.”

Collin turned away from Ellie and narrowed his eyes on me. “My dad, or lack thereof, has no bearing on this. If he’s going to be the topic of conversation, I’m out.”

I spread my hands. *Okay*. “Where do we go from here, then? Ellie doesn’t want a relationship with you. She’s made that pretty clear.”

Collin set the fake teeth down. “Ellie can trumpet her opinion from the rooftops if she wants, but it won’t change a thing.” His gaze intensified. “Our souls are *bound*. Forever. No man will ever be able to give her what I can, and she damn well knows it.”

Ellie stared straight ahead, her voice going toneless. “Collin’s lies led to me losing the most important person in my life. I’d sooner stake myself out for every wind god in creation to devour my Manitou than ever get back together with him. *He* damn well knows that.”

I ran a hand over my brow. *Oh, boy*.

The skin across Collin’s cheeks tightened. “Being together was like nothing either of us had ever experienced in the past—even before our souls were bound. Deny that, Ellie.”

“No, I— God, I’m so sick of this.” Ellie pressed her palms over her face for a moment, then dropped her hands and spoke more quietly. “Honestly, Collin, I hope someday I can forgive you for everything you’ve done—I want to be that type of person—but it’s nearly impossible for me to imagine getting over it enough to be with you. I need you to accept that.”

“Well, I don’t.”

More silence.

“I think we’re starting to go in circles.” I blew out my cheeks. Talk about feeling like an utter failure as a therapist. I unclipped the pen from my notebook and drew several squiggles on a page, stealing some time to think. After a moment, I set down my pen. “It’s not my place to talk either of you into something you don’t want or that may not be good for you, but I will say I think you two are connected beyond having bound souls. You’ve both suffered the difficult loss of a parent, which is an experience that generally gets in the way of a relationship, making true intimacy difficult for a person who fears more loss.” I looked at Ellie. “I’m guessing that’s why you’ve been picking ‘boring’ men to date, Ellie, because you can safely avoid getting too close to them.” I shifted over to Collin. “And why you became a womanizer.” Hadn’t been too much of a stretch to reach that conclusion. “However, I sense that for you two this shared loss has enabled you to understand each other on a very deep level.” *Being together was like nothing either of us had ever experienced in the past—even before our souls were bound.* “It’s something very special, but whether or not you’ll ever end up together—or are even completely right for each other—I don’t have a crystal ball on that.” I exhaled broadly. “It’s the idea that neither of you may ever end up with *anybody* which concerns me.”

Ellie frowned slightly.

“The thing about guilt,” I continued, “is that it keeps a person trapped in shame. Nobody can change if they’re mired in such emotion. So you two will cycle through relationship after relationship, never able to grow truly close to anybody because you’ll keep making the same mistakes and wrong choices over and over.” I swept my gaze across them. “And you two are seething cauldrons of guilt.”

Ellie’s frown deepened.

I concentrated on her. “Think about it, Ellie. This curse planted you smack in the middle of your mom and dad—just like a kid caught between her parents in a divorce. You had to choose sides. One parent believed, the other didn’t. You chose your mother. The tragedy of her death foisted the choice on you, but when you went over to her camp, you unavoidably left your father’s. I think you feel extremely bad about that.”

Ellie glanced down at her hands in her lap.

“Didn’t you mention earlier that you pay the bills for your family’s inn? And now it sounds like you’re chasing down evil spirits on your own at grave risk to your life. I don’t mean to negate the nobility of such an act, but it sounds a bit like a woman scrambling to do justice to a legacy she at one time forgot.”

I turned toward Collin. “And you, Collin, became the man of the house at a very young age. You took on the load of caring for your family at ten-years-old and made a lot of sacrifices. You showed incredible strength.”

Collin found a sudden fascination with a pamphlet about proper flossing.

“But it was too much, too soon, and you wanted out.” *Screw responsibility!* “Why else give over the burden of the curse to Okeus if you didn’t feel done with it all? Problem is, I think that you thought you *should* have been proud to be the head of the family and for all you did. Anyone would have, right? But, you didn’t. You hated it, and that makes you feel guilty as hell.”

Collin tossed aside the pamphlet and sighed.

“The two of you need to learn to forgive yourselves,” I concluded. “Otherwise, I don’t see you ending up with anybody long term. You’ll simply continue to think you don’t deserve to be happy.”

“Well, that was uplifting. Thank you.” Collin rubbed the side of his nose. “Got some rope?”

“I…” Ellie hesitated, her brow furrowing. “I actually think what you said makes sense.” The creases on her forehead lengthened. “I just don’t know how to go about fixing it.”

I smiled slightly. “This may sound cliché, but recognizing it is the first step. Now you can look for times when you might be undertaking too much, ask yourself what the motivation is behind your actions. You might be trying to pay a debt you don’t owe. Because here’s the thing: you didn’t betray either of your parents. They knew that.”

“Okay, I…” Ellie nodded slowly. “I’ll try.” She glanced at Collin.

He rolled his eyes.

Ellie’s expression closed. “Well, thank you,” she said to me, standing stiffly. “I’m going to give everything you said a lot of thought.” With another sideways look at Collin, she left.

I stared at Collin, curious about his next move, not really expecting any kind of *thank-you-for-showing-me-the-light* out of him.

Collin pushed to his feet and moved to stand over me.

I gazed up at him, watching his eyes darken and his lips soften—the comfortable shield of his sexuality was coming back up. What a shame.

“A witch, huh?” he said.

I felt a swallow work its way down my throat. He was shifting the focus from his own pain onto mine, and was doing a pretty effective job of it. I didn’t know what to say. Finally, I managed, “Good luck.”

“With what?”

I retrieved my sandwich from the desk. “Getting the girl.”

Collin took a single step back and stared at me. Had he expected some psycho-babble answer like, *healing your pain* or *finding your soul* or *working out your father issues*.

After an elongated moment, he nodded once, then left.

I grabbed my purse and stood, gripping my sandwich tightly. Not feeling so hungry anymore, I shoved the food in my purse and went out to find my car.

* * *

THE STORY CONTINUES!

Find out the fate of Collin and Ellie’s relationship in Book 2 of the series, **THE CURSE BREAKERS**, and in the thrilling conclusion, **THE CURSE DEFIERS**. Now available!

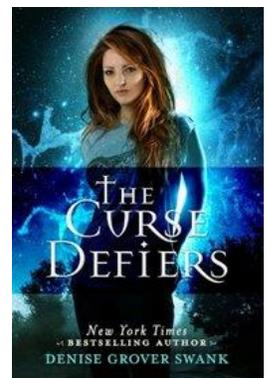
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Denise Grover Swank is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of several exciting series: The Chosen, Rose Gardner Mysteries, On the Other Side, and the mega-popular New Adult trilogy, The Curse Keepers. She also co-authored THE NAKED TRUTH, considered one of the premiere guides for Independent authors. She has six children, and has been writing since the fourth grade.

To learn more, visit her website:

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Tracy is the award-winning author of gritty romance, her books spanning genres across paranormal (The Community series), military suspense (The Wings of Gold series), and Historical (The Baron's War trilogy). Tracy holds a master's degree in Marriage, Family, and Child Counseling, and has used this background to create a fan-based website called The Character Couch, where romance's favorite couples are brought into a fun session with therapist, Regan Malloy.



Her debut paranormal novel, THE BLOODLINE WAR, is a Bronze Medal winner for romance of the prestigious Independent Publishers Book Award. <http://amzn.to/18XDygs>

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