

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 Caleb Shaw and Harper Sinclair from “Collared” Book 4 in the Going to the Dogs series by Zoe Dawson.

Staging: present time, September (as of publication 2013), Midtown, Manhattan.

* * *

The buzzer on my desk went off, alerting me that my clients were on their way down the hall. I glanced at my secretary's notes to see who they were: Caleb Shaw and...wow, Harper Sinclair. Every self-respecting New Yorker knew her; the heiress's face was regularly splashed on the front pages of newspapers, magazines, and tabloids—especially lately, with all the speculation going on about her private life. *Oh, yeesh*. She was probably here about all of that hullabaloo.

I rose from my chair and crossed my office. I was located on the top floor of a building on 551 Fifth Avenue, just off Madison in Midtown Manhattan, about fifteen blocks from Central Park. The first floor was taken up entirely by Morton's Steak House, where the bill for a ribeye and a martini would have a poor soul dipping into the kiddies' college fund. And if that didn't say enough about where I was located, the stellar view of Rockefeller Center out my office window should.

I opened my door just as my two o'clock appeared, and—whoa.

I had to take a quick step back to allow the considerable bulk of the man to pass through my door.

Tall men generally didn't intimidate me. My dad's a former Marine, having finished his career at the Public Affairs Office right around the corner on Third, and he's 6'2", a decent 200 pounds. This dark-haired Caleb Shaw was equal in height, but had good ol' pop by another twenty or thirty pounds, and the extra weight was in the form of solid, rock-hard muscle. More than his height, though, I found myself fighting a small spurt of intimidation over his eyes.

Chocolate brown, they held more knowledge of grit and...violence than I ever cared to know. They were, however, also full of a healthy dose of *bedroom*, and that made a woman stop and note that he was also quite attractive...although in a rugged, mountainy sort of way. With his close-cropped beard and chiseled features, his face looked like it belonged on a “Men of Alaska” Calendar.

He brought the scent of leather inside with him, along with a hint of metal, and as his grey sport coat flapped open, I saw the reason why. He wore a gun in a holster on his shoulder and a badge on his belt. *Well, here’s a first.* I’d never had a police officer as a client before. Probably because my fees were exorbitant. But then...he wouldn’t be the one paying, would he?

No, *she* would.

So the rumors were true: socialite heiress Harper Sinclair was hooking up with a working man. She was dressed in understated wealth, jeans and a blue blouse that matched the color of her eyes: casual, but exclusive designer labels, for sure. She was tall, elegant, chic, with honey-blond hair that fell just past her shoulders and classically beautiful features, like Aphrodite come to life. Prettier in person, I’d say.

“I’m Regan Malloy,” I introduced myself.

As Harper shook my hand, she presented me with what I recognized from working with other wealthy clients as a public-viewing face. Rich folk, who were generally confronted with a fair share of people wanting something from them, learned quickly to keep their guard up. Understandable, but a bit of a challenge in session, where holding back didn’t lead to gaining insight.

“Come on in,” I added.

Harper offered me a professional smile. “Before we get started, I wanted to let you know that I’m on the Board of the American Cancer Society.”

“Oh?” *Sort of an odd thing to tell me.*

“A new research project is being launched that I thought might interest you in helping to fund.” Harper’s smile never wavered. “Your father died of Leukemia, didn’t he?”

I paused, then laughed. The woman had done some homework on me. “Yes, but my grandfather died of Alzheimer’s, and I donate to them. Besides, it would breach an ethical boundary for a therapist to involve herself in anything monetary—outside of fees for services

rendered—with a client.” I tilted my head. “And my secretary’s notes mentioned that you’d come to see me in my capacity as a Marriage, Family, and Child Counselor. Is that correct?”

“It is.” Caleb exhaled broadly. “Harper’s just circling you to see if you can be trusted.”

“Ah.” Time for my standard spiel, then. “That’s understandable in your position, Ms. Sinclair, so let me assure you that I hold the confidentiality between therapist and client as sacrosanct. Nothing said within these walls passes them.” I waited.

Lips pursed, Harper passed her eyes over me. “You know, usually when I’m schmoozing someone for a donation and they don’t want to give, they tap-dance around that—because they want to see what they can get out of me in return. Or just to be a flatterer. You gave me a straight answer. And you mentioned your ethics.” She glanced at Caleb. “Okay.”

So I’d passed her test. I hid another smile. An interesting beginning...

The two took a seat on the plush leather sofa, not too far apart, but not right next to each other, either. Troubled waters, then, but not treacherous ones. That was generally workable.

I took up residence in the matching leather armchair stationed across from them, a Perrier on the table at my elbow, alongside a Le Blanc pen and a notebook covered in genuine crocodile. I know, I know... It was for show with my clientele, I swear. “So, what brings you in today?” I asked.

Caleb snorted. “Isn’t it obvious? Blue collar mixing with white collar makes an ugly shade of grey.”

I picked up my Perrier and cracked it open. “That’s from the tabloids.”

“Yep.” One syllable, and very edgy.

I shrugged. “I never put much stock in what the tabloids print, Mr. Shaw. Truth is, it doesn’t matter what they have to say about your relationship, only what you two think.”

“I think they’re right about us coming from two different worlds,” Caleb admitted.

I sipped the bubbly water. “Are they right about it not working?”

“No,” Caleb answered without hesitation. “We’ve gotten over a lot of that crap. At least I thought we had, but now...I’ve moved into Harper’s penthouse, and a lot of shit in my life just seems to be happening without my consultation. I’m starting to get some annoying thoughts, and I don’t like it.”

I set down the Perrier. “Annoying how?”

“A socialite broke my heart when I was sixteen,” Caleb explained, “and some of the same worries I had in that relationship are coming back up.”

Harper’s head snapped around. “What?” Her eyes narrowed a bit. “Who?”

Caleb adjusted his shoulder holster with an abrupt motion of his hand. “Can we focus on what’s important here, Harper?” He kept his eyes on me. “I admit that I misjudged Harper at first because of my past, automatically thinking she was going to be snooty. Since then I’ve learned to see her for her personality and not her potential to be a rich bitch. But being steamrolled is making me feel like the socialite’s lapdog again, and fuck if I’m going to be that.”

“Steamrolled about what, Caleb?” Harper asked. “Wedding preparations? Come on. You’re a *guy*. What do you care about stuff like that?”

“It’s the principle, Harper. And a lot of money is getting spent.”

“I’ve never treated you with anything but absolute respect,” Harper defended. “Because I *do* respect you, Caleb. Heck, I did everything you asked of me in our competition, didn’t I? I *joined* your world; I don’t stick my nose up at it.”

I perked up. “What competition?”

Caleb turned to me. “She had to fit into my life, and I had to fit into hers.” He glanced down at his hands, and when he looked back up, his eyes had warmed with amusement. “Made her hang out at a tough Irish bar called McGinty’s, spar with me at my boxing club, and mud wrestle.”

I stared. “Mud wrestle?” *Harper Sinclair*? It wasn’t often that I got caught off guard in a session. Good for them. They’d definitely surprised me.

“Yeah.” Caleb’s voice deepened to a resonant growl. “I got the princess to step out of her Candy Land life for a while. And she loved it.”

Inwardly, I bristled. Just because someone was wealthy, didn’t mean he or she lived in Candy Land. “So you view Ms. Sinclair’s life as being perfect?”

“He’s quoting me, actually,” Harper inserted. “I do have a great life, wonderful girlfriends—although sometimes they accuse me of meddling too much—a loving family, more money than I know what to do with, and a fulfilling career raising funds for worthy causes. For the most part, I’ve always had my every whim fulfilled. The closest I’ve ever come to not getting my way was when Caleb tried to reject me, but”—she slanted a look at him—“I ended up getting him, too, didn’t I?”

A muscle beneath Caleb's beard flexed. "No, Harper. *I* got you. If you recall, you spent a good portion of our dating life keeping me at arm's length. I had to fight like hell to get you to lower your barriers."

Harper's brow furrowed. "You don't have to make that sound like an accusation. You know I had to be sure you weren't a gold digger. Considering my position, I think that's fair."

Harper's just circling you to see if you can be trusted. She'd done that with him, too, had she? Not that I blamed her, because, yes, considering her level of wealth, it was fair. "How did he prove it?" I asked.

Harper switched her attention to me. "Excuse me?"

"I'm assuming that since you two are engaged, Mr. Shaw proved to you that he's not in this relationship just for your money."

"Oh." Harper considered that. "I suppose...by just being *Caleb*, so solid and reliable. He's never let me down, and...he's never really even asked me for anything. In fact, he's a complete giver." The color of her eyes deepened with affection, bringing out the darker midnight hue that haloed her pupils, offering a peek of the real woman. "He offered to quit the force for me so he could be the kind of 'prestigious' man he thought my life required."

Wow. "That's very generous."

Harper's smile turned genuine. "Yes. But I would never want him to do that," she said sincerely. "He loves his job."

Generous back. There was a lot of positive stuff going on between these two, definitely. *Blue collar mixing with white collar makes an ugly shade of grey...* I wasn't seeing that, but maybe I was missing something. "This talk of needing to be prestigious has got me thinking back to your competition. How did Mr. Shaw bear up in your world?"

"Oh, well..." Harper laughed. "The opera was a bust. But he did great drinking tea with all the little girls at the Fairy Ball I threw him into."

I blinked. The—?

"That was play time," Caleb said in a low voice. "In real life, I'm the man I am, Harper, rough around the edges. In *real* life, I'd rather go to a Yankees' game than the symphony any day. That's never going to change."

Harper gave him an astounded look. “Why on earth would you think I’d ever want you to change? I fell in love with you exactly because you’re grumpy and rough. If I wanted some brownnoser to bow and scrape to me, I would’ve hooked up with your boss, Tripp McDonald.”

“Then why do I feel differently, lately?” Caleb set his palms on his knees. His hands were everything a man’s should be—broad and powerful with a light dusting of dark hair on the backs and long, capable-looking fingers. “I’m a man of action, Harper, and recently, I’ve been sitting on the sidelines. I hate that. It’s just... Look, when I was young, I watched my parents slave away at their restaurant, busting their humps to give me and my brothers a better life. The whole time I felt too helpless to relieve them of some of their burden because I was just a kid, and that was a rotten feeling. I swore I’d never do that again. So when I grew up, I damn well contributed. Now you’re asking me just to sit back and be a kept man, letting you pay for everything. I can’t do that.”

“What do you want us to do, then?” Harper exhaled. “Live only on your income?”

Caleb flushed a deep red.

I nearly winced.

Harper pressed a palm to her forehead. “Oh, Jesus, I’m sorry,” she rasped out. “I didn’t mean it like that.” She sat back, two small lines between her brow. “It’s just that money doesn’t matter to me, Caleb. Okay? We’re not doing a pre-nup, so after we’re married, we’ll share everything. I genuinely feel that it’s not a matter of my money versus yours. It’s *ours*. So I’m having trouble understanding the problem.”

Caleb gripped his knees. “I appreciate you saying that, Harper, and I do believe you. But I was raised in a family of hard workers. I don’t like things being handed to me.”

Harper glanced at the ceiling. “This feels like us going back to you thinking that you don’t have anything to offer to me, when what I need from you—what I get from you—has nothing at all to do with material possessions.”

“I know that,” Caleb said tightly.

“Then what do you want?” Two bright spots of red appeared on Harper’s cheeks. “Please tell me how to fix this.”

Mute, Caleb stared out of my office window.

Despite Harper’s good intentions, I had the feeling that Caleb didn’t care about the solution as much as he just wanted Harper to validate his position. But she seemed very

concerned about making everything pleasant again, like she was getting too far out of her comfort zone. “So what happens,” I asked her, “at times like this, when you’re no longer in Candy Land?”

Harper’s brow lowered. “What?”

“Or do you have no experience with tragedy?” And if she thought I’d believe that, then I’m sure I was ripe for buying some beachfront property in Florida she wanted to sell me, too.

“I...of course I do.” Pain flickered through Harper’s eyes. “My mother died of cancer when I was sixteen and my brother was wounded in Afghanistan. Those were...very rough times.”

I jerked up my eyebrows. *Very rough* was a bit of an understatement.

Caleb cleared his throat. “And she was kidnapped and held for ransom. She always likes to forget that one.”

“I don’t see the point in dwelling on it.” Harper straightened. “On any of it.”

“Well, there’s ‘dwelling,’” I pointed out, “and then there’s ‘working things through’.”

“I do work through things,” Harper countered. “I mourned my mother and...well, my brother is still dealing with some issues, but I’m there for him.”

“Still,” I pressed, “sixteen is an extremely difficult age to lose a mother. If there’s one time a girl needs her mom, it’s in her teenage years.”

Harper’s face tightened. “No one knows that more than I do.”

“I can’t help thinking that you were deprived of your safety net at an important developmental point in your life. I wouldn’t be surprised if there are some lingering effects.” I angled my head to one side. “Are you a risk-taker?”

Harper smiled thinly. “I mud wrestled, didn’t I?”

“So you did,” I conceded with a small smile of my own. “I meant emotionally.”

Harper set tightly clasped hands on her crossed knees. “I’m not afraid of confrontation, if that’s what you mean.”

“No.” I adjusted my notebook on my lap. “I’m just getting the sense that you like to maintain pretty firm control over your environment. You test people, right, and sometimes meddle in other’s affairs—at least according to your friends.” *Maybe also to avoid your own affairs?*

Harper sighed, as if tired of explaining this next point. “My social position—”

“I understand that,” I cut in. “But you also need to consider what happens when life throws you curve balls: you get kidnapped, your mother dies, your brother is wounded—”

“You discover a secret half-brother,” Caleb added quietly.

Oh, boy. I nodded. “Your subconscious mind might be warning you off from—”

“What do you want me to do?” Harper interrupted, her tone growing sharp with impatience. “Apologize for wanting to be a happy person?” She shook her head. “Just because I don’t work through my problems the way other people do—or the way you think I should—doesn’t mean I’m not dealing with my issues. I didn’t get to the position I hold today by being the type of woman who doesn’t pull herself up by her bootstraps.” Harper’s chin came up. “I get knocked down; I get right back up. I refuse to wallow, Miss Malloy. I just don’t see any benefit in it.”

“Fair enough,” I said. Maybe she was right; maybe she was dealing with things adequately...but my instincts told me that her past was still making her run scared of feeling too much for Caleb, this woman who’d experienced firsthand the fragility of life. As deep and as close as Harper and Caleb clearly were now, a more profound depth waited for them to discover. That wouldn’t happen until Harper learned to lean on Caleb more, but she didn’t seem ready to move further out of her comfort zone. Which meant that, as kind and as loving as this woman appeared to be, it would be difficult for her to listen to Caleb’s position, to *really* hear him, about the wedding or anything else that might question her definition of their relationship. Not until she was ready to truly trust that, even through the roughest times, she could count on him to be with her.

She would need Caleb to continue to be as solid and reliable as he’d already been. *I had to fight like hell to get you to lower your barriers.* I could only hope that he wasn’t too frustrated to keep up that fight.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but our time is up. I hope you consider making another appointment with my secretary.”

They thanked me and rose, heading for the door. Harper’s back was straight as a telephone pole, and Caleb’s stride was stiff.

Frowning, I stood in the doorjamb and watched them head toward the elevator, two people I felt like I’d turned into strangers. A sense of sorrow invaded my chest.

Caleb punched the elevator's down button. They waited, silent. The doors swished open, and they moved forward.

And that's when I saw it...

Caleb's large palm settled onto the small of Harper's back, guiding her inside with a loving caress.

A relieved breath emptied from my chest.

... To be continued.

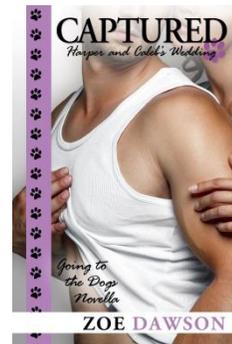
Discover Caleb and Harper's happily ever after in Zoe Dawson's wedding novella, CAPTURED, from Blue Moon Creative LLC.

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Zoe Dawson is the pseudonym for award-winning author Karen Anders. Zoe writes across multiple romance genres, including romantic comedy, new adult, urban fantasy, romantic erotica, and scifi/fantasy. "Going to the Dogs" is Zoe's fan-favorite series about four vastly different women who meet in a dog park and become friends; they each have their own New York based story for readers to enjoy, as well as a companion wedding novella.

Visit Zoe's website to find out more: <http://zoedawson.com/>



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