

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 Jack Carmichael and Pippa Taylor from "Keeping the Peace" by Hannah Hooton.

Staging: Aspen Valley Racing Stables in Somerset, England, June, current time (as of publication 2012), approximately one month after the end of "Keeping the Peace."

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I swung open my car door, and was immediately engulfed in a potpourri of country scents: fecund earth, the fresh essence of hay, the musky perfume of horses with a hint of saddle leather, the more unpleasant odors of manure and sweat. A far cry from London and her innate stench of petrol fumes, rubbish bins, and the hume of too many bodies living in close proximity.

This was the first time I'd done this—gone to a client instead of having them come to my office—and now I was glad I'd chosen to do so. A respite from the city now and again was good for the soul. It'd been a bloody bear of a decision to make, though. Today was the last rugby game of the season and I'd had some smashing tickets to Twickenham Stadium. But at age twenty-three, I was fresh out of university and in need of building my clientele. The days of me running to mum and dad for financial help needed to end...no matter that they were loaded. Unfortunately, developing one's own business was a slow process. My youth tended to be a drawback, causing some people to hesitate when it came to entrusting me with their psychological welfare. I didn't have a great deal of life experience, either—I'd had one long-term relationship with a man who had only ever made nice, neat, proper love to me—but I possessed an uncanny ability to solve puzzles. People came to me with the scattered pieces of their lives, and I put those fragments to rights into a whole, understandable image.

Gathering my bag, I climbed out of the car, scanning the buildings in front of the car park that made up Aspen Valley Racing Stables. Spread out before me was an orderly arrangement of

well-constructed barns backdropped by a rolling lea of green grass and a patchwork of fields, some full with wheat, others left fallow to rest. Very beautiful. And impressive.

Spying Aspen Valley's office building, I shut my car door and started toward it...but only made it one step into my journey when my high heels protested the gravel underneath. I started to topple like a teacup jogged off its saucer, gasping as the ground rose up fast to meet my—

“Whoa there, lass.” A strong hand grabbed my elbow and stopped my descent, saving me from what would've surely been a good braining. “Y'alright?” he asked, speaking in an Irish brogue. “You almost tumbled arse over kick there.”

“Yes, I—” I cleared my throat, heat surging into my face. “Thank you.” I straightened and looked at my rescuer, obtaining a dim impression of sandy-colored hair and a body of wiry strength with...oh! Potty me. I pushed my glasses up my nose, and his image snapped into focus.

A pair of merry green eyes were giving me a thorough once-over. “Why, you're just a wee thing, aren't you?” He returned his gaze to my face, the humor lines around his eyes deepening. “And, mind, that's coming from a jockey.” He chuckled.

It was a deep, warm sound. His hand, still on my elbow, was equally warm, his touch spreading a disconcerting heat through my arm and into my chest. Disconcerting, because this was far from a proper way to meet a new client. Or was he? I trolled back through my memory. Wasn't I meeting with a racehorse trainer, not a jockey? “You're not Jack Carmichael, are you?”

“That I'm not.” My rescuer swept a hand across his chest and issued me a lavish bow. “Finn O'Donaghue at your service.” Straightening, he added, “Your man Jack's up on the Gallops.”

Up on the where? I glanced around. “You're employed here, then?”

“Used to be,” Finn answered, using the hand on my elbow to steer me, tottering on my high heels, across the car park. “I'm just in from Ireland for a pair of days to ride a horse tomorrow that the jockey who works here rode last month. The beast has a rake o' quirks, and I wanted to ask your man about it.”

I exhaled as I made it safely off the gravel. “Thank you,” I said again. “Um...” He was still holding my arm. I took a step away from him, removing myself from his touch, the absence of his hand inexplicably making me feel disappointed. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. O'Donaghue, but I suppose I should nip off to this Gallops place now.”

Finn grinned down on me, his eyes lighting with amusement. “It’s too far for you to go, lass, especially in them stilts. I’ll fetch the boss for you.”

“Oh.” I paused. That did make sense. “Very well. I’m also looking for Miss Pippa Taylor. Do you know where I might find her?”

“Aye, she’s right in there.” Finn pointed down a row of stalls. Some of the occupants had their horsey heads protruding over the top half of the doors. “Last one,” Finn added. “She’s with her horse, Peace Offering. Be back in a lick.”

As Finn trotted off, I strode carefully down the line of stalls, giving the horses a wide berth. Although, truthfully, they looked like pleasant enough sorts with those big, brown eyes of theirs. At the end, I spotted a petite woman—not as tiny as me, but definitely small—with a bounty of short curls framing a profile that was clean of line and untouched by life’s toils. Her hair was a beautiful chestnut shade with tints of red...which I suppose made it auburn.

“Hello there!” I sang out as I drew up to her. “Are you Pippa Taylor?”

The woman turned from the bay horse she was petting. “Yes.” Dressed with practicality in mind, she was wearing trousers, a button-up blouse, and a fashionable pair of boots—much to my envy. She was also pretty. Not a woman anyone would call drop-dead gorgeous, but definitely good-looking.

“I’m Regan Malloy,” I introduced myself. “In from London.”

Pippa’s blue eyes brightened. “Oh, yes! I appreciate you popping down.” Her gaze lowered to my feet. “Nice shoes!”

“Thank you. I fear they’re getting buggered, though.”

Pippa laughed. “Stables do muck them up. I know from my own experience on that score. What kind are they?”

“Manolo Blahnik’s.”

“Oh,” Pippa practically squealed. “My best friend Tash would swoon.”

Tash, yes... I’d worked with a couple from Tash Bradley’s advertising firm, and apparently they’d mentioned me. Tash had been the one to refer Pippa and Jack to me.

“Pippa!” a deep voice bellowed from the other end of the stalls, nearly sending me leaping out of my flesh.

I whirled around to find a tall, broad-shouldered man stalking towards us, dressed in blue jeans and a flying jacket over a beige T-shirt, his booted heels ringing sharply on the packed earth. His blue eyes were pinned purposefully on Pippa.

Pippa glanced my way and sighed. "I'm afraid we're going to have to treat my dear Jack like a hostile witness."

"A— What?" I widened my gaze on the looming male figure, his long strides bringing him toward us with intimidating speed. "He doesn't know about the therapy?"

Pippa smiled benignly. "We'll tell him together, shall we?"

I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. No, we bloody well shan't.

Jack came to a steaming halt in front of us. "I told you I don't have time to conduct any interviews today. If I don't put Smoking Ace through his paces, then the Penningtons' will get up my nose will all of their gripes."

"Miss Malloy isn't from a racing mag, darling." Pippa gestured vaguely. "She's a therapist, come by to help us with—"

Jack whipped his head around to scowl at me, dark thunder sitting on his brow. "A what?" The words issued forth on a sibilant hiss.

I stumbled back against the stall. My heart stopped beating, then surged forward into a runaway pace when a large, velvety nose nuzzled the side of my neck. A hot breath was blown against my flesh, and my eyes bulged.

"Oh, don't worry about Peace Offering," Pippa assured me. "He's a sweetheart."

The horse softly lipped my shoulder. Nice or not, he was getting horse drool on my best duds. I lurched forward, forcing myself to draw a calming breath. Blimey, I would've rather nearly tripped at Jack's feet, as I'd done with Finn, than greet him like a frightened lamb. He was surely a good chap—how could he not be, looking so handsome?—just thrown off by this therapy surprise. I straightened my blazer with a short tug. "Now then, um..."

I faltered as Jack Carmichael set his hands on his belt and raked his gaze over all five feet of me. His lids narrowed and his lips thinned, as if he was wondering if I were some new breed of horsefly that he wasn't sure should be squashed or just brushed aside.

Drawing myself up, I tried again. "Is there someplace—?"

"No," Jack pronounced, looking about as moveable as bedrock. "Sorry to trouble you, Miss Malloy, but Pippa and I don't need a...a...any help from you."

“Crumbs,” Pippa inserted. “We’ve been having a lot of rows, lately.”

“No, we haven’t.”

Pippa tutted. “We’re having one now.”

“This isn’t a row,” Jack countered, the soul of reason. “This is frustration over being pulled away from work *for no sound motive whatsoever.*”

Pippa’s chin came up, her expression tightening. “Jack Carmichael, you either agree to talk to Miss Malloy with me or I’ll dash about the barns in nothing but my Wellies.”

A disbelieving bark of laughter burst out of him.

Brows arching in challenge, Pippa turned around, flashing me a conspiratorial wink when her back was to Jack.

I maintained a neutral expression. An ineffective tactic, really, to get into a conspiracy with one member of the couple one would soon be doing therapy with.

Pippa sauntered to the next stall. “Hello there, Dexter, my boy.”

I held my breath.

Into the silent battle of wills, the distant thunder of hoofbeats rolled through the stalls, growing louder, then fading away.

It didn’t look like Pippa was going to retract her threat.

“Oh, you’re a right one, Pippa.” Jack pointed a rigid finger at his girlfriend, although he looked at me. “Do you see what kind of craziness I’m forced to deal with?”

I adjusted my eyeglasses, rallying myself to this task. “Mr. Carmichael, I understand that many people fear therapy is an unconscionably personal affair, but it doesn’t always have to be that way. I wouldn’t doubt if you and Miss Taylor just need a few wrinkles ironed out.” I glanced between them. “Is there someplace private we can meet?”

“Jack’s office,” Pippa said.

Jack glowered at the both of us, an expression more suitable to a castle gargoyle than a man of his rugged attractiveness.

Pippa fingered a button on her blouse.

Jack followed her movements, and his chiseled, very masculine jaw looked dangerously close to cracking. “Jesus Christ. All right, ten minutes,” he barked. “That’s it.” He started forward.

I turned to go, as well, but my heel snagged on a rough patch of ground and caught, throwing the top half of my body into Jack's side. My arms automatically flung around his neck for support, and I caught a whiff of his cologne. *Armani Code?*

Jack stiffened, then exhaled and peeled my arms off him, setting me back on my feet. "Bloody urbanites," he muttered as he set off once more.

Heat crawled up the back of my neck. *Well, then.* That just about covered it.

Jack's office was done in masculine shades of dark wood, slate-colored carpet, and, not surprisingly, decorated along a distinctly equine theme. Against one wall there was a display cabinet with all manner of racing prizes; quite a few, in fact. It appeared Jack was good at what he did.

There were two chairs in front of Jack's desk; I took one, Pippa the other. Jack landed behind his desk.

I frowned inwardly at the positioning. "Perhaps you'd care to pull your chair 'round so that we might all sit together, Mr. Carmichael."

Jack hooded his eyelids at the suggestion.

I paused a heartbeat, then turned my attention to my bag. Not worth putting up a stink about. "Shall we get started?" I pulled out a pad and pencil. "Why don't you tell me what's going on?"

"Well—" Pippa began.

"She doesn't listen," Jack plowed over her.

Pippa laughed, casting a wry glance at Jack. "For someone who was so resistant to the idea of therapy, you're getting off the mark rather fast."

Jack's teeth flashed. "With only ten minutes set toward this endeavor, I thought we should attack matters straight away." He looked at me. "I've told Pippa I don't want her for my secretary anymore, but she keeps pushing it."

Pippa folded her hands tightly in her lap. "Because you'll want your best rider, Emmie, off the desk and back in the saddle once she's had her baby. You'll need someone in the office, seeing to things."

"I'll *hire* someone," Jack returned. "Someone who I don't happen to be dating."

Pippa rolled her eyes. "Your 'no relationships in the workplace' policy is rubbish."

A dark frown reappeared on Jack's brow.

“I’m just trying to help you,” Pippa said matter-of-factly. “Why won’t you let me do that?”

“Because.” Jack’s jaw set at a stubborn angle.

An interesting riposte. I chewed the end of my pencil. *To be a secretary or not to be one...*? Seemed a bit like they were arguing over nonsense, as if they were fighting just to fight. But why?

“In plain terms,” Jack continued in a succinct tone, “this isn’t only about workplace ethics. You should be dedicating yourself to your art.”

“I am,” Pippa argued. “I do. I paint all of the time.” She paused, then slanted a look at her boyfriend. “Now that I’m so hopelessly in love, I never lack for inspiration.”

Jack stared at her, eyebrows leaning together, then a flush rolled up from his neck to his hairline.

Those blushes of his were starting to become rather endearing.

Laughing, Pippa glanced at me. “I can’t make sense of my feelings, though. Jack is my exact opposite.”

I was beginning to cotton on to that. “That can be a gift or a curse.” I smiled. “In my work with couples, I’ve noticed that the characteristics which often initially attract one person to the other can later annoy. Let’s say, for example, a quiet girl is lured to an outgoing lad because he draws her out of her shell. Over time she might start to get miffed that the bloke never wants to stay in for a night.”

Pippa sighed. “That somewhat was the case with my ex, Ollie. At first I liked that he’s an extravert, but then—”

“She discovered he’s a selfish prick,” Jack interrupted to finish her sentence.

I glanced over at him.

Jack leaned back in his chair, his eyelids dipping low again. “He treated Pippa like she was only around to serve his needs, to make him happy, and to hell with her feelings.”

Pippa snorted. “You’re one to talk, Jack, considering your own past. Your ice queen bitch of an ex, Melissa, didn’t care who she hurt to forward her career, did she? Your star horse lost an essential race because of her conniving.” Pippa crossed her arms over her chest. “But more to the point, did she treat you how you deserved, either?”

Jack seamed his lips together.

I studied them each in turn. “So it seems,” I ventured, “that you’ve both made some poor choices in the past with partners.” Which was actually quite interesting. Were these two taking a stand against being treated poorly in this relationship, as well, a sort of preemptive strike, if you will?

Jack and Pippa both looked at me.

I abstractedly pushed my pencil through the hair at my temple. “I’m wondering how you know you’re not doing the same here.” I swept my pencil back-and-forth between them. “What’s different this time between you two?”

Pippa and Jack exchanged glances.

“Well...” Pippa began, then petered out. She heaved a breath, and started again. “It’s *very* different. I’m just not sure how to explain it.” A small smile tugged at her lips. “Jack’s Jack, you know.”

I nodded, my chest warming. That was very sweet. I looked at Jack. “And for you?”

Jack’s hands moved awkwardly—an uncharacteristic gesture for him, I would guess. “Pippa is...when she’s not driving me crazy, she’s very useful to have around. She’s efficient and a remarkable problem-solver.”

My eyebrows hiked up before I could stop them. *Useful. Efficient. Problem-solver.* “That’s a very practical list of attributes, Mr. Carmichael.”

He shrugged. “It’s the way I think.” He exhaled a noisy breath. “Look, I’m not some fairy book romantic hero. If Pippa wants me to be Richard Gere from *Pretty Woman*, it’s not happening.”

“I know that,” Pippa came back. “I’m fine with it, but...”

Jack’s mouth turned down. “But what?”

“You could just sometimes be a bit more openly affectionate is all.”

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t care for public displays of affection, Pippa. You know that.”

I touched the rim of my glasses. “How’s the sex between you?”

Jack snapped his chair straight. “No,” he said in a tone of authority. “We’re not discussing that.”

“It’s an important aspect of a relationship, Mr. Carmichael.”

“But it’s not,” Jack gritted, “in keeping with your promise not to get overly personal.”

Well, I hadn't exactly *promised*. "If it would help, we can discuss matters in a very clinical manner. Like...the stallion to the mare, perhaps."

Jack tucked his chin back and curled his lip at me, clearly appalled.

Oops. I actually...didn't know what that looked like.

"The sex is fabulous," Pippa interjected, but then an edge entered her tone as she added, "if you don't count the first time when Jack ran from my bed like a cat with a prickly pear up its bum."

Jack rounded on Pippa and pointed a stiff finger in her direction. "*You* left me, Pippa."

"Only because you built a chasm between us." Her gaze darkened. "I don't need the romantic hero, Jack, but sometimes I feel like the main way I know you love me is by your jealousy."

"I'm not jealous," Jack shot back.

"Ha! When Finn kissed me after Peace Offering's win, I thought you'd implode."

I blinked. Finn did what?

Pippa flung her hands out. "I don't know...cripes. Maybe I do want a bit of the romantic hero—just a bit, Jack. I want a man who cares enough to chase after me, at least."

"I've since told you why I didn't come after you, damn it." A muscle leapt in Jack's cheek. "Are you saying you haven't forgiven me?"

"No, of course I have. I just... I don't know what."

I aimed my attention at Jack. "Why didn't you go after Pippa?"

He glanced at me with stark eyes, then looked aside, his Adam's apple bobbing.

Several beats of tension throbbed past.

Pippa answered quietly, "He said the emotions he feels for me scare him."

Tight-lipped, Jack muttered something under his breath.

I stared down at my notepad, but only a blank page stared back at me. I hadn't written a thing on it. I used the rubber of my pencil to massage my temple while I scrolled back through the session. Something pricked at my mind. "Did Melissa ever scare you?" I asked Jack, looking up.

He worked his jaw. "No. She was always quite reasonable."

An ice queen, Pippa had said. “She allowed you to keep your ordered existence, and that’s why you stayed with her, right? Because I get the sense that order and structure are very important to you.”

Tension etched lines into the sides of Jack’s mouth.

I softened my voice. “What happens when life gets out of order, Mr. Carmichael?”

Jack rearranged some papers on his desk. Beneath the tan of his skin, his face was suffused with color.

“What happens when you let yourself feel too many emotions?”

Silence, weighted and powerful.

“Jack,” Pippa urged gently.

Jack leveled a look at me, his eyes darkened to indigo, his face a tight mask. “If a man isn’t careful,” he said tautly, “he might get the mistaken notion he has the luxury to dream.”

The intensity in Jack’s expression was nearly palpable. “Why would that be a mistake?” I asked.

“Because...” He paused, and in his face, I thought I caught the trace of an old pain, but the emotion was there and then gone so quickly, I couldn’t be certain. “Because dreams only get crushed,” he said.

Blinking behind my glasses, I glanced out the office window at the sprawling vista of stables. As successful as this operation appeared to be, had Jack’s first choice of career—perhaps his dream career—been different? The creak of Jack’s chair brought my attention back to him.

He’d leaned forward, his forearms braced on his desktop. “In life, you can count on friends betraying you, women leaving, horses dying, and children getting sick. I prefer to be practical about the truth.”

Ah, yes. I offered him a nod of comprehension. “I understand: if you don’t feel too deeply, you can’t hurt too deeply. It’s a clever tactic for avoiding doom on your part, I must admit. Unfortunately”—I shoved my pad back into my bag—“I must conclude that Miss Taylor is the wrong woman for you.”

Jack stared mutely at me.

Off to the side, I could feel Pippa’s eyes boring into the side of my face.

I spread my hands. “At least she’s wrong if you insist on this rigid and orderly existence you’ve locked yourself into. See, Miss Taylor is the carnival ride, Mr. Carmichael. Life with her

will be filled with a bevy of emotions, unexpected turns and twists, even chaos at times, I fear. That won't do a'tall, will it?"

Jack's jaw flexed. "Are you trying to make some kind of climatic point? Live every day as if it's your last, and all that rot?"

"Good God, no, that sounds exhausting." I offered up a short laugh. "I'm actually trying to agree with you." I bent forward in my chair. "Life does put everyone in a scrum on occasion, sir. There's absolutely no way to avoid it. Question is, when you don't quite make the goal, but get tackled to the turf, who do you want at your side to help face down that adversity?" Sitting back, I raised an interrogative brow. "A person who's your exact opposite? As in, a person whose strengths can counteract your weaknesses, and vice versa? Or does going it alone sound preferable?" I tossed my pencil into my bag. "This is the *gift* side of being opposites I'm talking about, not the curse. Why not embrace it, because from where I sit, you and Pippa complement each other beautifully. At least that could be the case, Mr. Carmichael, if you'd stop trying to manage every aspect of your life, which keeps Pippa at a safe distance, not overly far, but *safe*—something she's clearly having nothing of, by the way. Dive into the inevitable carnival ride, sir, then I have every confidence you'll be able to work out this secretary question with Pippa—and others like it—without a whole lot of ruck. Am I making sense?"

Jack stared at me from beneath his dark brows for an extended moment, then his eyes closed in an extra-long blink. Oxygen left his lungs in a slow stream. Sprawling back in his chair, he snorted, an amused gust of air, and gradually the hard lines melted from his face.

Lord, and I thought he'd been handsome before.

He started to chuckle, and my lips parted. I couldn't have been more startled than if he'd hopped onto his desk and broken into a falsetto rendition of God Save the Queen.

Jack's indigo eyes lightened to bright blue, and his chuckle expanded into a full-throated laugh.

I pressed a hand to my cheek. *Oh, my.*

Peals of laughter spilled out of Pippa, too. "We're a couple of headcases, Jack, we really are." She jumped up from her chair and dashed over to him.

Jack grabbed her up, enfolding her into his arms, and tucked his face intimately against her throat.

Ridiculously pleased with myself, my face warmed. I scooped up my bag and made discreetly for the door. "I'll let myself out," I murmured. "Cheers." Back in reception, I glanced at my watch. We might've gone a mite longer than ten minutes for—

I stumbled to a halt.

Finn O'Donaghue was leaning against the reception counter, unintentionally showing off the brawny muscles in his forearms. He smiled at me with even white teeth. "How passed the interview?"

Interview...? *Oh, that's right, he thinks I work for a racing magazine.* "Everything went well," I said, happily speaking the truth. I crossed through the front door, and Finn slipped up to my side and took me by the upper arm.

"I'm after thinking you might need help braving that sea of gravel again."

"O-oh, yes," I stammered. "Thank you." What was it about this man's touch that spun my head and made me daft?

By the time Finn and I reached my car, my insides felt like melted fudge.

He let me go and stepped back, his eyes dancing. "Could stick you right in my pocket, I could."

I flushed, biting my lip. A giddy, schoolgirl rush of feeling poured through my belly. It really was high time that I acquired some more life experience. "Mr. O'Donaghue...uh, Finn, I was wondering if, well..." I cleared my throat. "While I was driving in, I spotted a lovely-looking pub called *The Golden Miller*. Now that my work is completed, I was hoping you might consider joining me there."

Finn leaned against the side of my car, arms folded over his chest and legs crossed at the ankles. His mouth spread into a lazy smile.



Hannah Hooton is the bestselling author of the Aspen Valley Series, novels where romance flourishes within the exciting world of racehorses. A UK native, Hannah worked in racehorse stables for years throughout Australia. Her hands-on experience deeply enriches her stories, making her racing sequences as thrilling as her love scenes.

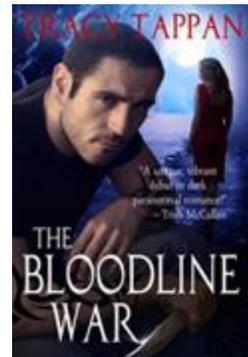
The second book in her series GIVING CHASE is available now at Amazon: <http://amzn.to/1dLbn1N> and the third, SHARE AND SHARE ALIKE, will be released in June of this year.



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www.hannahhootonbooks.blogspot.com



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