

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 Benjamin Johnson and Emily Hughes from "Mail Order Mama" Book 2 in the Brides of Beckham series by Kirsten Osbourne.

Staging: June, 1884, Live Oak, Minnesota, between the end of the story and the epilogue.

* * *

I smoothed the rolling pin over the pastry dough, creating a neat circle with steady pressure. "What is your husband's favorite pie, Mrs. Johnson?" I glanced at the woman positioned across from me at the work table, my gaze inevitably drifting down to the reason she couldn't stand flush against it.

Her belly was rounded mightily with child.

A longing ache speared through me. I glanced aside, forcing my pain away. I would be here for a number of weeks. Best I get used to Mrs. Johnson's condition, and find joy in it, as was befitting.

"Oh. It's blueberry, but..." Mrs. Johnson's eyelashes fluttered. "Only I make that for him, if you don't mind."

"Certainly." I inclined my head, acknowledging that I understood fully. I could scarce blame the woman for acting a bit proprietary about Mr. Johnson's needs. I'd feel the same way if a strange woman was in my kitchen, fixing to feed my husband and children. To care for them. "I make a grand peach pie, if that suits you?"

Mrs. Johnson smiled. "I love peach," she gushed. "And, please, call me Emily. I know that Harriet would love for us to become friends."

I nodded. Harriet was the woman who ran a mail order bride service in Massachusetts, from whence both Mrs. John—Emily and I hailed. Harriet had sent me out west here as much to help Emily in the last weeks before the onset of her labor as to observe Emily's life...and thus determine if I had a notion to become a mail order bride myself.

In my twenty-sixth year now, I'd been widowed for nearly eight of the last of those. I started out my young womanhood as a school marm, with the plan to stop teaching once I'd started a family of my own. But...I glanced at Emily's belly again, my heart clenching, despite my best efforts to stop it.

Those children had never come.

I'd continued on as a teacher into my marriage and past my husband's death, learning the wisdom of life all the while as I dealt with the town's families. I most likely would've continued along the same route on through to my own death if I hadn't happened upon a woman who claimed to be my husband's first wife: a woman who I'd never known existed.

She'd never borne a child to him, either.

By turns angry and relieved—my husband had been the barren one, not I!—I'd decided to give family life another try, and at age twenty-six, I had no time to waste on courting.

I carefully lifted the circle of dough into a pie dish. "Harriet said that you wouldn't mind sharing some aspects of your life with me."

Emily's smile broadened. She was a pretty little thing, with long brunette hair caught in a simple braid down her back, a few wispy tendrils escaping her plait to brush the slender grace of her throat, dainty features, and a petite form—save for the current state of her belly. Her blue eyes were filled with gentleness and charity. "You want to know about being a mail order bride." She said it as a statement rather than a question; Harriet had made the reasons for my presence clear enough to her.

"Yes." I started to roll out another circle of pastry, making the top of the pie crust. "What was it like?" I asked, "Marrying a strange man?"

"Awkward," Emily admitted. "But I doubt it would be such for you, Mrs. Malloy. You've had a husband before, so..." Emily's face flushed a bright pink.

I carefully set aside the rolling pin. I hadn't meant to ask about what it was like in the marital bedroom, but now that Emily had subtly broached the subject. It *was* difficult to imagine intimacy with a... I felt my own blush rising. "He'll still be wholly unfamiliar to me," I said quietly.

Emily poured two cups of flour into a bowl. "Don't fret. Harriet has a nose for finding good men. I have every confidence you'll acquire a husband as patient and kind as my Benjamin." She added wet ingredients to the flour. The biscuits for supper had already been

made, but she was setting up a batch for tomorrow. “My own awkwardness was in large part due to me knowing nothing at all about men.” She stirred the ingredients together. “I was too shy ever to have a beau, and I didn’t grow up with a father.”

“You didn’t? I’m sorry to hear that. About your father, I mean.” Beaus were overvalued. A moral, hardworking husband, that’s what a woman needed, not a partner for the local barn dance.

Emily slowed her stirring. “My father was killed in the war.” Then she stopped stirring altogether. “In Hendersonville, North Carolina...that’s all I know about him.” Her eyes clouded. “The subject was painful for my mother to discuss.”

“I imagine it was.” Sympathy filled my chest and made it heavy. “It must have been a trial for her.”

Sadness dampened Emily’s eyes. “Yes. Besides missing my father, my mother never had much rest after his death. By necessity, she had to work six days a week to support us, and on the seventh, we did household chores.” Emily sprinkled some flour on the work table. “She and I were close in the sense that we became everything to one another—I’m an only child—but, ironically, I also missed her terribly.”

I nodded. “Coming here must have been a nice change for you.” I stole another glance around the kitchen. It was a cheery, homey place. I’d also seen her husband’s mercantile, which took up the entire first floor of this building. Benjamin was definitely a successful businessman who could provide a comfortable life for his family.

Emily’s smile reappeared. “I instantly fell in love with the daughters I became mama to.” *Abbie and Georgie*. Two charming girls of six and four, one shy, the other rambunctious. I smiled, too.

“Benjamin is a good man.” Emily turned the biscuit dough onto the floured surface. “But we had our own trials to contend with in the beginning.”

I felt a breath escape my lips. Here was the part I was afraid of in acquiring a stranger for a husband. “What were they, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“I think the most trying was that Benjamin’s mother acted a certain way toward me in the beginning, but when I told Benjamin about it, he didn’t believe me.” Emily looked at me and tried to smile again, but the expression was a weak imitation of her usual smiles. “I didn’t care for being thought of as a liar.”

I grabbed a can of peaches. “Of course you didn’t.”

Emily began to knead the dough with deft, expert movements. “It was a difficult time for me. More so than you might think because I very much wanted my husband’s respect.” She exhaled softly. “Lord, you should’ve seen how hard I sewed to create a new wardrobe for myself when I first arrived here, determined to make myself look like a proper businessman’s wife for Benjamin.”

My head came up. “Did Mr. Johnson criticize you for that?” I was starting to remember some of the more unappealing traits a husband could have.

“I don’t think he meant to be critical, but he had a valid point to make. I *am* a businessman’s wife.” Her expression brightened. “He also compliments me. He loves my cooking.” Emily’s fingers stilled, caked white with flour, half-buried in the dough. “Honestly, I probably made the situation about my shabby clothing worse in my mind by imagining that his first wife, Anna, had a perfect wardrobe.”

First wife...? Heat flushed up the back of my neck. Must all men have *first* wives?

“Anna was a tall, blonde, outspoken Norwegian woman.” Emily’s lips twisted. “Everything I’m not. She’d only been passed away for about two months when Benjamin contacted Harriet for a bride.” Emily scooped up the biscuit dough and put it back in the bowl. “He was still in love with her when I arrived. Well... Benjamin still *does* love Anna. He even goes to her grave and talks to her.”

“Even now?” I gasped the words before I could check myself.

Emily freed a soft sigh. “I can’t blame him for it. Lately, in particular...” Emily smoothed her hands over the mound of her belly. “I haven’t really been myself. Especially in certain...” another blush rode up her cheeks, “*areas* of the house.”

“You’re tired,” I staunchly defended her, my hands coming to my hips. “In fact, you should go lie down.”

“I probably should.” Emily gently laid a cloth over the top of the dough bowl, hesitated, then looked at me with big eyes. “I don’t want to lose him.”

I straightened my shoulders. “You won’t.” If Mr. Johnson abandoned this woman in her time of need, there was no telling what I might do with this here rolling pin.

“It’s just that...” Emily’s brow crinkled. “We don’t seem to be as close as we once were.”

“A baby’s coming,” I insisted. “You and your husband need to give each other some latitude during this time of change. Your marriage and life will be different after the arrival of your little one.” Something I’d observed, rather than experienced. “But that doesn’t mean it will be worse.”

Emily nodded, but still looked a little unconvinced.

“Now then. There’s no sense in me being here if you won’t take advantage of my help.” I put some extra starch into my spine as I repeated the order, “Go rest.”

“I will.” Emily jammed a palm into her lower back like a washerwoman at the end of the day. “The girls and Benjamin will be in directly for dinner.”

“I’ll manage. You skedaddle now.”

Mr. Johnson was late for supper. I finished making the peach pie while Abbie and Georgie ate, but it wasn’t until after the girls had run off to play that he made his way up the back stairs from the mercantile.

He stood in the kitchen doorjamb, his brows lowered slightly as he noted that I was the only one there. “Mrs. Malloy,” he greeted me.

I nodded to him, almost sketching a bow with my head. I had the oddest inclination to drop into a full curtsy. Most likely because he looked a bit like a Norse king, blond of hair and blue of eye, his form tall and muscular, his face handsome nearly to the point of beautiful. He was saved from outright beauty by a nose that was a mite too large for his face...yet that bold nose somehow also added to the image of him as a mighty jarl at the helm of a Viking longboat. *Fanciful poppycock*... “Good evening, Mr. Johnson,” I responded, keeping my voice level. I’d calmed myself while I’d made the pie, for I wanted to make Mr. Johnson’s acquaintance with a mind free of prejudice—as best I could. Everyone deserved a chance to express his own view. “I have stew and biscuits ready for you.”

His eyebrows inched down a little lower. “Where’s Emily?”

“Napping.”

“The girls?”

“They already had their supper.”

Mr. Johnson released a long-winded sigh. "I'm tardy, excuse me, Mrs. Malloy. My brother, Samuel, and cousin, Thomas, came into the store and proceeded to jaw my ear off. Join me?"

I startled. "Pardon?"

Benjamin strode toward the kitchen table, where I'd laid out a bowl and spoon. "I don't like to eat dinner alone." He pulled out his chair, then paused. "Have you dined, yet?"

"I haven't." I'd been too busy tending to the girls and tidying.

"Good, then." He sat down and chose a biscuit out of the basket. "You'll be curious about what it's like to marry through a bride service, won't you?"

I stilled. I didn't think...I could...ask...him. *Everyone deserves a chance to express his own view.* I wiped my hands on the front of my apron. "You wouldn't mind discussing such a matter?"

"Not at all." He gave me a disarming smile.

With my throat a little tight, I served Mr. Johnson stew, and the same for myself, although a much smaller portion. I sat down across from him.

"So what did Emily say about being a mail order bride?" Mr. Johnson asked me as he ripped his biscuit in two.

I paused, gathered my courage, then said forthrightly, "That it was awkward at first...in your everyday dealings," I added hastily. Heaven help me if he should attach that comment to unmentionable activities, as Emily had.

Mr. Johnson chuckled around a bite of biscuit. "That sounds about right. She was such a small, timid creature upon first arrival. I feared I'd break her with a gusty breath." He picked up his spoon. "I suppose at first I didn't help with her awkwardness as well as I should have. Truthfully, I didn't understand how to deal with her. My first wife and Emily are complete opposites, not only in appearance, but personality. Anna was always so easy to talk to, but with Emily, it was...difficult."

I set my spine and held my spoon in a tight fist. *Benjamin still does love Anna. He even goes to her grave and talks to her.* "Sir, open your eyes! You have a perfectly doting wife right here at home!" I didn't say it, but—*oh!*

"Sometimes I couldn't even hear the sound of Emily's voice," Mr. Johnson said with a smile. "She spoke so softly. I'm also the youngest of twelve children, so I'm used to—"

“Twelve!” I quickly dabbed the corners of my mouth with my napkin as my cheeks warmed. “Excuse me for blurting that out. It was poor manners.”

He laughed. “It’s quite all right. I *do* come from a large, tight-knit Norwegian family. There was never any shortage of talking, and between that and Anna’s gregariousness, I never learned how to lure conversation out of a woman.”

“How did Anna fit into your family?” I suspected I knew how she’d settled into a tight-knit Norwegian family. *Anna was a tall, blonde, outspoken Norwegian woman.*

“Perfectly.”

“Your mother readily accepted her?”

“*Mor* loved her.”

“*Mor*?”

“That’s Norwegian for ‘mother.’”

“I see. And Emily?” *Benjamin’s mother acted a certain way toward me in the beginning.*

Benjamin spooned a bite of stew into his mouth and took a long moment to chew it. “The subject is a difficult one.”

“I’m sorry.” I waited.

“*Mor* didn’t like Emily,” Benjamin admitted.

“Impossible,” I defended. A soul wouldn’t be able to find one unlikeable aspect in Emily Johnson.

“*Mor* wanted a Norwegian wife for me. I was aware of that, however...” Benjamin grimaced. “I failed to notice just how mean-spirited *Mor* could be about it.” He gave his head a self-deprecating shake. “Apparently, I’m the only one of all my brothers and sisters who was blinded to *Mor*’s headstrong ways.” He ate another bite. “When Emily tried to tell me about it, I wouldn’t credit the truth of her words. That was...shameful of me. Emily had already proved herself to be a wonderful wife and mother. She’d sensed Abbie’s nervousness about starting school when I missed it, and has persuaded both girls to do chores, which I never managed.” He gestured with his spoon. “Those are only a couple examples of many.”

I silently agreed. In a short period of time, I was already an admirer of Emily’s, too. “I take it you finally came to believe Mrs. Johnson about your, uh, *Mor*?”

Benjamin grabbed a second biscuit. “Irrefutable evidence was put before me when I overheard my *mor* talking rudely to Emily.”

“Oh.” I spooned up some stew. “What did you do?”

“I disowned *Mor*.”

I gaped at Mr. Johnson, stew slipping off my spoon. “My goodness.” I hadn’t expected to hear that.

“I like peace in my life, Mrs. Malloy, and my *mor* disturbed that with her lies about Emily.” He slapped butter on his biscuit. “I won’t have my wife disrespected, either. Not by anyone.”

I traced the tight ridge of Benjamin’s jaw with my eyes and felt myself warm all over...toward him. This man had defended his wife in a manner most husbands—most people!—never would have.

Benjamin finished off the biscuit. “But no need to upset yourself over it, Mrs. Malloy. *Mor* apologized and the entire family has reconciled. I just wish I’d seen what was occurring sooner and saved Emily some hurt.” Footsteps sounded on the floor above, and Benjamin turned his eyes to the ceiling. “Emily has risen.” He set his napkin on the table. “Thank you for dinner.”

“May I ask you one more thing?”

“Yes.”

“Do you regret obtaining a wife through a service?”

“Not at all.”

“So you’re...pleased with Mrs. Johnson?”

“Without question.”

We don’t seem to be as close as we once were. “Even now that she’s large with child?”

He looked taken aback by that. “More so than ever now. I worry about her, naturally—much can go awry when a woman is bringing a baby into the world, and she’s so close to her time. Perhaps I’m more careful with her, but I’m far from displeased.” He stood up and smiled down at me. “Neither will your new husband be dissatisfied with you, Mrs. Malloy. Trust me on that score.”

I blushed, and he left to go find his wife.

I cleaned the kitchen while Mr. and Mrs. Johnson gathered together in the parlor that evening, Emily sewing and Benjamin reading the newspaper. The repetitive act of washing dishes, along with the slick slide of soap suds over my palms, freed my mind to wander, and I

mused about them. Something tickled at my mind...a problem that should be tended...or fixed or...By the time I was done, I knew what needed saying.

I hustled into the parlor, trying to muster some boldness to quell the rapid flutter of my heart. It wasn't my business to speak bluntly about affairs private to this couple, but...I already liked these two.

Benjamin and Emily glanced up at the same moment, both looking a little surprised by my unexpected appearance.

"I wonder if I might beg a moment of your time to discuss a matter of a personal nature."

Mr. Johnson folded his newspaper. "Of course."

I tangled my fingers together at my waist. "The matter isn't personal to me, but rather...you two." I hesitated, giving them another chance to deny me.

A frown began to tug at Benjamin's mouth.

Emily encouraged me on. "Please speak, Mrs. Malloy." She smiled. "I already know you to be a woman of wisdom."

I felt a sickly smile try to form on my mouth. Emily was so lovely. Was I about to stir up a hornet's nest for her? "I hope I'm not giving up a confidence, Mrs. Johnson, but I feel this must be confessed." I looked directly at Mr. Johnson. "Your wife feels like you and she are no longer as close as you once were."

Mr. Johnson's blond eyebrows rose.

"You're a fine and decent man, Mr. Johnson," I quickly went on. "You found a mama for your girls in order to take care of your family when you weren't altogether ready to have a wife in your life. So please don't mistake this as an insult when I agree with you that you don't entirely understand how to deal with your wife—but in a way that you're probably not cognizant of."

Benjamin set aside his newspaper with exaggerated care.

My nerves jumped; it was obvious that his patience with me over this would be limited. "I've spent half of my life as a teacher, managing all sorts of children and their siblings; I've seen how families function. You two, I can readily ascertain, come from very different worlds." I tucked the dish towel into the waist of my apron. "Emily, you're an only child. Not only were you deprived of the company of other siblings growing up, but your mother had to work a great deal, resulting in her not being available to care for you to the degree that you most likely

required. I would guess that you were a lonely child and, as a consequence, have developed a sensitivity to any amount of closeness that you perceive becomes lost. I believe this sensitivity, along with your desire to earn Mr. Johnson's high regard, can sometimes color your perceptions. In this case—after talking to Mr. Johnson over supper—I've come to the conclusion that he is wholly dedicated to you. He's just being more careful with you now is all."

Emily blinked rapidly a couple of times. "Oh."

I turned to look at Benjamin. "Mr. Johnson you come from a completely different upbringing, as I said. You were raised in a large, tight-knit family, and, therefore, readily recognize what it feels like to be close. Please understand that the same doesn't apply to Emily, and so she'll need your assurances, in action and words, that all is well between you when she is troubled by misgivings, whether those doubts are real or imagined."

A slight smile touched Mr. Johnson's lips. "I'm willing to do that, certainly."

"It fills my heart to hear that, sir, but I must dare to add that you face your own challenge in your ability to be aware of when this need arises."

Mr. Johnson's smile faded. "Do I?"

I tugged the dish towel out of my apron and ran it through my hands. "You said that you like peace in your life. One can hardly fault you for that—it is an universal desire—but I would argue that this need sometimes shades your vision of the plights that sit right before you. Your daughter's nervousness about school, for example, and your mother's ill-bred behavior. Life's disagreeable side cannot be avoided, Mr. Johnson, just because a soul wants to maintain a pleasant picture of the world."

"I assure you, Mrs. Malloy," Benjamin responded, a slight edge entering his tone. "I'm quite aware of life's unpleasant side, having lost a wife in the last year."

I bit my lower lip. "Yes, sir. I'm sorry for your loss. I understand how such sorrow can linger, and I...honestly, I originally thought the trouble between you and Mrs. Johnson concerned Anna. But then I came to see how much you truly love Emily."

Some of the tautness left Benjamin's face, although his eyes remained intent on me.

"I would wager," I continued, "that Emily appreciates and accepts that you will always hold a special place in your heart for Anna. But, with all due respect, that doesn't mean you should be visiting your dead wife's grave."

“That doesn’t indicate anything,” Benjamin protested, sweeping the air with his hand. “I’m merely talking out loud to myself about mundane matters. I’m not really even conversing with Anna, anymore, like I used to.”

Emily sat forward. “You can talk to me about your day, Benjamin, no matter how mundane. I want you to.”

Benjamin glanced at her. “I do. Some matters are just...boring.”

“If you genuinely are just talking out loud to yourself,” I said to Mr. Johnson, “then might I suggest use of the barn for that?”

Emily’s eyes shot over to me, then she pressed two fingers to her lips to hide a sudden smile.

Benjamin turned on me again. I caught the twitch at the corner of his mouth, and released a secret breath.

“You’re a blunt-speaking woman, Mrs. Malloy,” Benjamin remarked.

“It’s a failing, sir, I realize—”

“No,” Benjamin interjected. “Your observations have been helpful.”

“Enlightening,” Emily added, her eyes warm.

“I thank you for them,” Benjamin said. “I’m sure we will take them to heart.” He reclaimed his newspaper, a clear gesture that this discussion was concluded. His eyes never wavered from mine, though, and I saw honest appreciation there.

Thank the Lord. I had begun to fear I’d be purchasing a train ticket back to Massachusetts tomorrow. “I’ll leave you to discuss the matter further privately amongst yourselves.” I gathered up my skirts and headed for the stairs that led up to the bedrooms. “I saw a hem on Georgie’s dress that needed mending.” I climbed the steps, some of the tension easing from my shoulders when I heard Benjamin’s soft chuckle and Emily’s answering laugh.

These two would fare well throughout the years. Yet, as my mind turned to my own future, my thoughts muddled. Being a mail order bride had obviously been a boon for Emily, but I couldn’t be sure about the choice for myself—or even marriage itself.

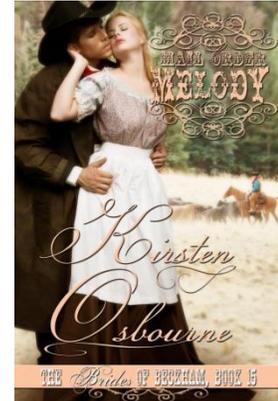
Men were such hard work!



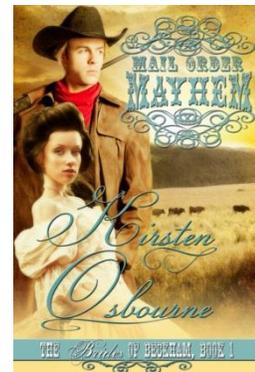
Kirsten Osbourne is the USA Today Bestselling author of two historical romance series, The Brides of Beckham and Suitsors of Seattle, plus the contemporary romance series, Dallas Billionaires. She also writes paranormal romance under the name Morganna Mayfair. Kirsten has been delighting readers with her Mail Order Brides for now fifteen books—MAIL ORDER MELODY is out!

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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.



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