

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 Emma LaRue and Jack Saunders from "Saltwater Kisses" Book 1 in the Billionaire Love Story series by Krista Lakes.

Staging: present time, May (as of publication 2013), between the end of the story and the epilogue, Ankeny, Iowa

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I paced the small apartment with quick, restless strides, my hands clasped together at my waist. There hadn't been any paparazzi outside of my office, but I'd still made this last minute change-of-venue to my friend's home, just in case. I'd never had such high-end clients before, and I figured that one could never be too careful when it came to ensuring security and privacy for billionaire heartthrob, soon-to-be-CEO of DS Oil and Gas, Jack Saunders, and his new wife, Emma.

My throat tried to close, and I stopped pacing, forcing a breath. *You're a good therapist, I pep-talked myself. It doesn't matter that you practice in a small town in Iowa or that you're wearing discount clothing.*

My former school friend, who'd headed off to start her practice in New York, wouldn't have recommended me to a famous billionaire if I didn't know my stuff. Right?

A knock sounded at the door.

Right. I straightened my shoulders, swiped the sweat from my upper lip, and crossed to the front door. I opened it...and felt all of my resolve not to be a silly, star-struck groupie leave me in a rush. God almighty, newspapers and magazines did *not* do Jack Saunders justice. Clean-cut, sandy-colored hair, a face molded into a chiseled precision of masculine features, and a trim yet muscular physique—which the faultless tailoring of his expensive suit accentuated to perfection—had Jack Saunders leaving “dreamboat” status in the dust. I'd read that this man could stop an opponent in his tracks with one, freezing look, but now that I was getting an

personalized view of Jack Saunders' spectacular hazel eyes, I had no doubt that he could just as easily seduce a nun with a single glance. A giddy giggle bubbled up into my throat. This man was—

“Are you Regan Malloy?”

I turned to the speaker: a woman who had her arm threaded through Jack's, obviously Emma. “Yes,” I answered, returning to plaster my attention back on Jack...then I whipped my gaze back over to her. *Well, I'll be damned.* The tabloids had suggested that Jack Saunders had “gone slumming” when he'd picked up this girl, but on closer inspection, I saw that this was the furthest thing from the truth.

She was beautiful. Not glaring, in-your-face pretty, but with a homegrown loveliness that took, yes, a second look to really appreciate. Lush dark hair flowed around her shoulders, and she had the kind of hourglass figure that could only be described as “bombshell.” She was dressed casually in jeans and a blouse—expensive designer labels, of course—and she filled out her clothes in a way that would've brought a *wow* to anyone's lips, man or woman. Her most striking feature, as with Jack, were her eyes. They were the shade of appeseeds, and filled with intelligence and kindness and honesty...qualities so rarely seen altogether in one person. I imagined it would take all of five minutes in Emma's presence to understand how she'd captured Jack Saunders heart.

I smiled at her. “Come in, please.” I turned and strode inside myself. “I hope you don't mind this change to my friend's apartment.”

“Not...at all,” Jack said, the hitched pause in his sentence accompanied by a high lift of his eyebrows.

Yes, well... My friend was a throwback hippie, and her apartment reflected that to the Nth degree with beaded curtains, animal print furniture, bean bags, lava lamps—the predominant colors were red and purple and orange. It was like stepping inside somebody's 60's head trip.

I laughed. “We'll pretend we're in a hookah bar.”

“Do you mind if I use the bathroom first?” Jack asked.

“Not at all. It's just down the hall on the right.”

Emma sat down on a chair shaped like a hand, the palm the seat and the fingers the backing—just as Jack re-entered.

I blinked at him. He'd been gone all of two seconds. That was awfully—

“There’s a spider the size of a gorilla in the bathtub,” he informed me.

“Oh, I... Is there?” I faltered.

Emma pressed her lips together, only partially successful at hiding a smile. “Do you want me to go kill it?”

Jack held up a hand. “I wouldn’t do that to you. I can wait.” He headed over to a zebra print chair, which...looked normal enough. But as soon as he sat, the chair collapsed inward and tipped backward, like putting a person in a rocking chair inside a womb. His knees jacked up to his chin.

I grinned hugely. *Cured!* In that position, Jack looked so “normal guy” that suddenly I realized, he was *just a man*. A rich, gorgeous one, sure, but odds were he passed gas and scratched his itches just like the rest of us. And apparently he was funny about spiders.

Chuckling openly, Emma pointed to the jungle chair made out of bamboo that was next to Jack. “Maybe you should take that one,” she suggested. “It looks more sturdy.”

Jack handled the situation with aplomb, vaulting himself out of the chair with impressive athleticism. Smoothing down his tie, he shot me a crooked smile that had me momentarily reconsidering his newfound normal guy classification. *But, no*. I couldn’t do my job effectively if I kept getting sheep-eyed over a client, no matter how drop-dead sexy his smile was.

I sat on the lion couch trimmed in fuzzy “mane” while Jack planted himself on the jungle chair with an ominous *creak* of bamboo.

We all hesitated a moment, waiting to see if poor Jack would end up with his feet in the air, but the chair held.

I opened a notebook on my lap. “Well, now that we’ve all made it through the Fun House challenges, how can I help you two today?”

Jack glanced at Emma, then started. “I have to head back to New York right away. My company is in the middle of a major transition that I must oversee. I’ve already been gone two days, which is, unfortunately, two days too long. But Emma is dragging her feet about it, and I absolutely will not go back without her. I asked her if she’s rethinking us, and she says, no, but...I can’t help having my doubts.” He glanced at Emma again, his eyebrows edging together. “You’ll probably think it sounds absurd to say that Emma is giving up a lot to be with a billionaire, but it’s true. She’s abandoning her dream of becoming a vet to be with me, and...I wouldn’t blame her if she was reconsidering things.”

“I’m not,” Emma assured him without hesitation. “I don’t particularly care for living in New York, that’s true. I’m not a shopper,” she added in an aside to me, “and so there’s not much for me to do. But, really, I’d live on the moon if it meant being with you, Jack.”

“What about the part about not becoming a vet?” I asked. “Mr. Saunders made that sound like a pretty big sacrifice.”

“It is, but I’ll find a way to get my needs met in that regard, eventually. I mean, sure...” Emma shrugged. “I guess it would’ve been nice to show my family that I *could* measure up in vet school.”

I tilted my head to one side. “They doubted that?”

“They’re very supportive,” Emma immediately defended them. She paused, sighed, then continued. “But, yes. I’m the youngest, so my parents somehow came to the conclusion that they couldn’t expect much out of me. They put all of their hopes and dreams on the shoulders of my older sister, who just so happens to be fulfilling those dreams completely by being a slender, ER physician’s assistant.” Emma smiled weakly. “You see, my dad’s a dentist and my mother is model-thin, so...my sister’s qualities check both of their boxes.”

“Ah.” I twisted my lips. “No boxes checked for you?”

Emma spread her arms. “Well, look at me.”

Jack made a rough, disapproving noise in his throat. “I hate it when she does that. Damn it, Emma, why can’t you see how beautiful you are?”

Soft color crept into Emma’s cheeks. “To return to the question of why I’m dragging my feet...these last two days in Iowa I’ve been able to enjoy *vacation* Jack, the relaxed and charming man I met and fell in love with in the Caribbean. Once we go back to New York, then I’m stuck with *business* Jack, who I barely get to see for an hour a day, and even that time isn’t uninterrupted.”

Jack shoved his fingers through his hair. “I don’t like not seeing you, either, Emma, but I can’t help it. This transition is insane, as you know. If you could just put up with it for a little while longer, then after I’m through it, my schedule will lighten up.”

Emma snorted softly. “We both know that’s not true—or only marginally so.” She shook her head, a breath stuttering out of her. “The worst part is, you don’t even want this. When we were in the Caribbean, you confessed that you’re tired of living in your father’s shadow, that you want to be successful in your own right.” She leaned forward in her seat. “Well, here’s your

chance. I don't need money, Jack—I know perfectly well how to be poor—so let's walk away and start from scratch.”

Jack went stock-still on his jungle chair, his lips parting, a look of utter stupefaction on his face. Something passed through his eyes. I wasn't sure what emotion it was, but it was gone as quickly as it came, locked away, hidden behind a stern mask.

“That is a commendable offer.” The sudden baritone of Jack's voice resonated through the apartment. “But—”

“No,” Emma cut in, her eyes moistening. “Please don't use your businessman's voice with me. Not about this.”

Jack glanced down, his jaw working. “I'm sorry. Your offer has sideswiped me. I can't imagine any woman on this planet ever saying something like that to me.” He looked up, the brown color in his eyes more prominent than the green. “But there is *no possible way* I can walk away right now, Emma. My father is dying of cancer. Can you imagine me telling him I'm not going to take over his business while he's practically on his deathbed? And then there's my mother. She doesn't show it, but my father's illness is breaking her heart, and if I left DS Oil and Gas—a company which is like one of her children—it just might be her last straw.”

I shifted on the couch; the cushions kind of smelled like a dead lion, too. “How do you think your mother would feel if she knew you were sacrificing your own happiness for her and your father?” I asked Jack.

Jack glanced sharply at me. “I doubt they've ever considered that. I'm the oldest son; this is my duty. End of story. I was never even given another option.” He turned his attention back to Emma. “But I'm hoping it doesn't come to sacrificing my happiness. You are *the one person* that gives me joy in life, Emma. I know it's asking a lot for you to put up with my long hours, but I need you to do that for me. For now.”

Emma's expression softened. “Of course, Jack. I didn't mean to be... Maybe this is the control freak in me coming out, wanting to plan your life.”

“It's not.” One corner of Jack's mouth crooked upward. “You just want me to be happy. And thank you for that. You'll never know how much your offer means to me. But I can't walk away from DS Oil and Gas. I just can't.”

“Okay.” Emma exhaled a sigh. “I know.”

They smiled at each other, then they both turned to look at me, expectantly, as if any second I'd say, *Alrighty, then, I guess that's a wrap.*

The words hovered near my lips, but...this just felt too easy. Soft warning bells chimed in my head about a deeper issue at stake. I sat back. "You two have an interesting commonality."

There was a heartbeat of a pause, then Emma shifted her expression to observe me curiously. Jack looked impatient.

"You're both the black sheep of your families, aren't you?" I gestured at Emma. "I think we already established that with you, the daughter who isn't a model-thin medical professional."

Emma bit her bottom lip and nodded. "Yes."

"And you," I gestured at Jack, "had the gall to harbor fantasies about not wanting to take over the family business, something your parents surely sensed in you. Or why else force you into the position by removing your other options?"

Jack gave me a flat stare.

"Are either of you close to anyone in your family? I mean, your families love you, I get that. But...?" I regarded Emma.

"Um...my sister, Kaylee, and I talk regularly. We're completely different, so, uh..." Emma trailed off.

I looked at Jack. "Do you have siblings?"

"A younger brother."

"Are you close?"

"No."

And your mother and father...? *My mother doesn't show it, but my father's illness is breaking her heart.* Right. I'd bet his mother was Grand Poobah of the Ice Queens. "I'm getting the impression that you both operate on the fringes of your family." I looked between them. "I bring this up because when a couple hasn't learned how to connect on a deep level in their family of origin that can bleed over into their marital relationship. It's something to be aware of—this might be a struggle for you."

"What?" Emma asked, her brow knitting. "Do you mean connecting?"

"Yes."

Emma's frown deepened. "Oh, I think Jack and I are very connected. We feel more comfortable around each other than we ever had with anyone else. We sleep like the dead with

each other; I can tell he unwinds around me; we share secrets.” She slanted a playful look at him. “We’re even considering getting a tiger-striped dog.”

Some of the cement melted from Jack’s jaw and his eyes warmed a little.

“You’re off to a good start,” I agreed. “But *staying* connected is the challenge. A marriage like the one you two are entering into—riddled with the challenges of just finding enough time for each other—is going to take a lot of attention and awareness to make work. Otherwise, how easily would it be to drift apart, especially for two people who are subconsciously more comfortable being loners?”

Emma blinked. She looked vaguely startled by what I’d just said.

I kept my attention on her. “I’m not surprised to hear you define yourself as a ‘control freak.’ When a person is less-than-satisfied with the relationships in her life, it’s not uncommon for her to grab ahold of her environment and make it exactly how she wants it to be...to gain satisfaction from *that*.” I flicked my gaze briefly over to Jack. “Or to hide in his work.” I folded my hands over my notebook. “These aren’t very emotional states to be in, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I suppose not,” Emma granted.

“You can’t expect to achieve and maintain your intimacy if you allow yourselves to slip back into your old ways of being, operating on the fringes of your relationship, getting too caught up in the day-to-day—”

“This is about me.” Jack leveled a stare at me. “About me being ‘business Jack’ and not making time for Emma.”

I shifted my notebook around on my lap, then set it aside. “My dad was in the Navy, forced to deploy six months at a time, sometimes a year. My parents made it through two of these deployments, and then got divorced. Frankly, I don’t know how hard they tried to stay in touch, and Dad was...gone so much of the time. Maybe it just became too difficult. I guess you could say that I’ve seen firsthand what happens to a marriage that isn’t attended to.” I heaved a breath. “Here’s the thing, no matter how much you love someone, if a relationship isn’t nurtured, it’s going to fail. It just is. So, yes, Mr. Saunders, if you only have an hour to give to Emma right now, then turn off your dangd phone and *really* give her that time. Hide out on the roof of your building, if you have to, but for those sixty minutes, be ‘vacation Jack.’”

Emma ducked her head and smiled.

Jack's eyes narrowed slightly, but not angrily. He seemed to be debating whether or not to accept what I was saying.

"You know, Mr. Saunders, you're lucky; most men have to try and figure out what their wives want. Emma is telling you." I turned to Emma. "For your part, don't accept anything less than what Jack agrees to give you."

Emma grimaced. "Yes. I suppose I haven't wanted to push him. I know he's doing the best he can. His work *is* very demanding."

"He's the CEO of a Fortune 500 company," I said on a laugh. "I bet you his best is pretty darned good. You know what, Emma, you didn't demand that your family see you in another light, so change it up now. Stand up and say, 'Give me sixty undisturbed minutes of your attention, Jack. I'm worth it'. He won't leave you if you push him a bit." I looked at Jack, my brows hiked. "Will you?"

Jack's lips twisted. "Of course not." Then he slanted a look at Emma. "You're on board with this plan?"

She glanced at him, her bottom lip caught between her teeth. "I do love my *vacation Jack*."

He chuckled, the sound deep and throaty. "And I love my vacation Emma." He reached out and traced his thumb down the curve of Emma's cheek. "Come back to New York with me and I'll promise to keep my Emma-time sacrosanct. And if I slip up, do what Miss Malloy says; *make me*."

The color of Emma's eyes darkened with affection. "I can live with that."

Jack gave Emma a tender smile, then looked at me. "What you say sounds so obvious, but I think you're right. It would be too easy to just let life plow over us, if we didn't keep our relationship front and center in our minds."

"No more being loners." Emma took Jack's hand. "We have each other now."

"Don't expect it to be a smooth road," I warned. "You'll slip up from time to time. But now that you know what to look for, you can fight it."

Emma squeezed Jack's hand. "Absolutely."

"Got it," Jack said.

I smiled and nodded. "Alrighty, then," I said, coming to my feet. "That's a wrap."

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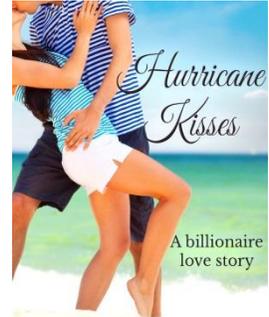
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Tracy is the award-winning author of gritty romance, her books spanning genres across paranormal (The Community series), military suspense (The Wings of Gold series), and Historical (The Baron's War trilogy). Tracy holds a master's degree in Marriage, 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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