

COMPLICATED CHOICES

RISA NYMAN



IMMORTAL WORKS
SALT LAKE CITY

CHAPTER 1

This wasn't the summer I was supposed to have. Dealing with streams of baby barf and explosive poop can't compete with the adventures all my friends got to have before our last year of high school. This is a heavy price to pay for a mistake that's not my fault.

I push Harry's stroller into Cold Spring Park on this final outing before the end of summer break and before he becomes the responsibility of day care. My sentence in baby prison is almost over, and I'm about to inhale the sweet smell of freedom. I follow our usual route, which winds behind a cluster of oaks and maples and is far enough away from the main path to limit the chances people will bother us.

Once Harry scarfs down his bottle and conks out, I resume watching the movie *Titanic* on my phone for the hundredth time. I'm at the scene where the ship goes vertical and knifes into the water. This shatters me because I hope that one time the ending will change, and Jack will survive his night in the frozen ocean; but that never happens.

A staccato tapping next to my bench interrupts the part where Rose swims in the frigid water to grab the whistle and signal the rescue boat. I readjust my Red Sox cap to shield my eyes from the sun and see a lady with crinkled skin and an oversized floppy hat, using her cane to provide the beat that draws my attention.

She peers under the hood of the stroller with a sense of entitlement, as if it's her God-given right to stick her face into Harry's. And if she remains true to type, she will soon offer some unsolicited advice about what I'm doing wrong with the kid.

Bingo! She breaks a record. It only takes her a second before she

removes the baby's blanket and tosses it on the bench beside me. "He's way too covered for such a hot day."

Some beach balls she has! I chew the inside of my cheek to activate my long-suffering, inner editor who prevents me from spouting off and risking the possibility this old hag finds a reason to report me to some agency for baby neglect. We don't need people snooping in our business.

Probably annoyed at not having his blanket, the poor little dude wakes up from his milk coma. With her face inches from the baby, she makes an irritating noise at him like a cricket on drugs. "Chichi. Chichi." At almost four months old, Harry demonstrates he has no standards and smiles at her weird sound because he's an attention hound.

"My, my, the baby is the spitting image of you," the lady announces with the pride of an ancient explorer discovering a new continent.

What I want to reply is: *Lady, if there's any spitting to be done, I'll be doing it, and it won't be directed at any image.* But again, my inner editor warns me against an over-the-top response.

After Mom and Dad divorced when I was in ninth grade, I put my editor on hiatus, because Dad took his teasing and vast array of nicknames for me with him to Wisconsin. Then baby Harry arrived, and I had to bring my inner editor out of hibernation to deal with all the people who assume they know me and my life.

This lady is no different. She doesn't take my silence as a hint to move the hell on and continues talking. "You're so blessed to have such a beautiful baby boy."

My lips clamp shut as my editor starts to engage, but this time I'm determined not to let the comment slide, and I start to reply, "He isn't—"

The dried-up person hovering in front of me cuts me off, unable to restrain herself from expressing her judgments about me. "Must be difficult at your age. I wish you well, dearie."

Then she scampers off as fast as those old legs will go, which is

pretty slow, probably eager to share her juicy story with her gossip group. I can guess her opening line: “I met a troubled teenager and her baby in the park...”

School can’t begin soon enough. I check the time, and we leave the park for our appointment at Sunny Acres, which is a name more suited for an old-age home than a day care. But the place is close to home and school, and I suspect it will be my job to get the kid there and back.

Harry and I arrive right on time. I press the intercom and survey their yard full of brightly colored plastic cars waiting for some kids to take them for a test-drive. It winds me up that Harry might have his own set of wheels before me.

A voice from the speaker by the entrance asks for my name. Once offered and accepted, a long loud buzz unlocks the door, and I push Harry’s stroller inside. As I unbuckle the baby, I give him one last warning. “You’d better make a good impression. I’m going back to school tomorrow. I’m done with the constant babysitting.”

Harry replies with his standard gummy grin, his go-to expression for anyone who notices him.

A grandmother-type opens the door. “Welcome. I’ve been expecting you. I’m Mrs. Sample.” Her lips curve into a broad smile, and her eyes dance with delight at seeing us. Her body has no sharp lines.

Sample is an odd name. I stifle the urge to ask if her first name is Free. This day care costs a fortune. The sight of the humongous check Mom gave me this morning payable to Sunny Acres stunned me. You could go to college with that kind of dough.

When I first saw the amount, I asked Mom, “How much exactly are you paying for day care?” I was sure she wrote that check while in one of her head fogs and added a few too many zeros after the two.

“If you pay the year in advance,” she explained, “you save \$5,000, and we could use the extra money.”

“You can’t save the \$5,000 unless you actually have that cash

stashed somewhere. Do you?” She hasn’t worked since Harry was born, and I have no idea how we’re living.

“It’s fine. I have a special account,” she said and scrunched the edge of her blanket under her chin before she turned toward the wall. Clearly a brush-off, preventing any more talk of money. Since the pregnancy and birth, this has been her typical reaction to difficult subjects. She retreats into whatever turmoil consumes her mind, caused by this unplanned pregnancy.

Her unplanned pregnancy, not mine.

I couldn’t resist taking a selfie with that check because I’ll never see a number that large with a dollar sign in front of it again, but this photo will not go on Insta. My friends might think we became instant millionaires.

“Let me show you around,” Mrs. Sample says. “You will see what a caring and idyllic place this is.” She pats Harry’s head, eyeballing her prospective student. Are they called students in day care? I’m a work-in-progress learning about babies, and I still resent even having to know all this stuff. My future plans don’t include anything to do with babies for years.

“You two look so much alike. I bet everyone tells you that.” And you’ve won the grand prize, Mrs. Sample! Everyone does tell me that. All summer I’ve been assaulted by innuendos, side-eye glances, and tsk-tsks wherever Harry and I go. I rage when I imagine how much energy they give to constructing their stupid assumptions.

Mrs. Sample takes me through a few rooms filled with babies, cribs, and an impressive pile of diapers. In one room, a guy with a massive untrimmed beard that accentuates his pointy nose is playing guitar and singing for a group of babies older than Harry. Two women supply some kids in highchairs with handfuls of Cheerios. This place is pretty cushy. Nothing but the best for this baby sponge.

“Would you like to leave him here while we go to my office? I want to review the forms to make sure we have all the information we need and that your mother signed everything,” Mrs. Sample says.

It’s probably a good idea to get him used to this place, so I hand

Harry to one of the teachers, or aides, or whatever these people are called, and follow Mrs. Sample's plushy rear-end into her office.

She sits in front of her computer and reviews each of the papers I brought, occasionally asking me something about Harry. Of course, I have all the answers about the kid because I do everything for him. She must be blown away by such a well-informed sib, but this is one exam I'm not proud to ace.

Being saddled with this brother, I mean half-brother, at seventeen was a shock. I had stopped pestering my parents for a sibling by the time I was eight and figured out I was better off with the status of being the only and supreme. A baby would've crowded me out of my lofty position. And now I'm convinced that theory was correct.

I'll have nothing in common with Harry except our mother. He won't relate to my songs or TV shows. Hell, Googling will probably be history, and we'll all be wearing our AI by the time he's in middle school.

Mrs. Sample finishes entering information into her computer and studies the check, but unlike me, she doesn't flinch at all those zeros. I could be tooling around Newton in a cute white VW with that money if Harry didn't show up.

"All the paperwork is fine. It was nice to meet your mother, even if it had to be on Zoom. I hope she's feeling better. We'll see Harry tomorrow." Boy, did I do a lot of prep to get Mom ready for that call and make sure she didn't have a meltdown in front of Mrs. Sample. Mom came through that time.

I retrieve Harry from the backroom. No tear-stained cheeks, no gag-worthy odor, and still in dry clothes. Without me for the first time, and he toughed it out.

Mrs. Sample shows us to the door. Her round face exudes friendliness and warmth, which must come from cooing to babies all day long.

"So, bro," I ask, as I settle him into his stroller, "meet any cute girls today?" He seems to nod his head and smile. My mind is playing tricks, but Sunny Acres is pretty zen. Harry's one lucky, dopey dude.



WHEN I ROUND the corner onto Ivanhoe Street, I spot Mads sitting on the bottom step of our walkway, so I give the stroller the gas, so to speak, the rest of the way.

“I’m back!” Mads shouts, jumping to her feet as her sun-streaked blonde ponytail bounces behind her. We hug, and immediately I notice the intense contrast in the color of our arms. I’m paper-white next to her rocking tan. I bet she lived in her bikini all summer.

“Aww, let me see the baby,” she says. “When I left, he was the size of a bean, a long string bean with a big head on top. He is def cute.”

“Aren’t all babies cute?”

“This one sure is. With those wisps of brown hair, he’s even more like you. Do I detect the beginning of a dimple right there, like yours?” She points to his left cheek.

“No, those lines are baby wrinkles.” But I know she’s right. Everyone is right. He resembles me more than Mom. I imagine someone in the vast universe is having a good laugh, making me constantly explain he isn’t my baby.

“I never heard about baby wrinkles, but what the hell do I know? I do know it’s shopping time, Claire Bear!” Mads exclaims.

“Finally! The summer seemed endless, and I thought this day would never come. But I don’t want to have to bring Harry with me.”

“Isn’t your mom any better? Can’t she take care of him?”

Mads knows all the gruesome details of Mom’s slippery slide into despair since she got pregnant by some rando. Mom never dated or cruised dating websites after the divorce. She worked, went out with friends, and the two of us filled the empty space that Dad left. She said she didn’t need a man in her life, which was fine with me, because I hella didn’t need a stepfather. But the pregnancy announcement hit me with the force of an asteroid.

“A little better.” I lie to Mads because I don’t want to drag myself down today.

Inside the house, Mom's stretched out on the living room recliner, her second favorite place after her bed. She's probably zoned out after thrashing over everything that has gone wrong in her life.

With a light touch, I poke at her shoulder. She opens the two cavernous holes that hold her eyes. I'm sure Mads will notice how thin she is, nothing like her former self. Before she got pregnant, her hair was in place, she wore perfect makeup and didn't spend every day in sweatpants. This is an impostor who's refusing to release my real mother.

"Hi, Mrs. Jackson," Mads says.

"Nice to see you, Madison. Did you like being a camp counselor?"

A perfectly normal question, but it tears at my guts. Mads's summer was supposed to be my summer too. Last year, when we were juniors, we made plans to be camp counselors together, but then there was Harry. I swear that baby was born with a tiny dagger in his fat little hand aimed at my life.

"Yes, it was so fun," Mads replies to Mom.

"Mom," I say and plunk Harry down on her lap, without checking if she's ready for him. Why should I have to ask that? She should want him, but one never knows where her head is at. "Mads and I want to go to the mall to shop for new outfits for the first day of school."

"Of course," Mom says.

"And I don't want to bring Harry."

Her lips strain to form an uneasy smile, which is the best she can muster these days. "Leave him here with me."

That's the right answer, and I wish I could trust that, but experience makes my gut uneasy as if I ate a plateful of bad sushi. This wouldn't be the first time she assured me she could handle him, and it turned out to be an epic failure.

"If you're too tired, you should tell me." I give her another chance to back out. I wish Mads didn't have to witness this awkward dance Mom and I have to do as I weigh her state of mind.

“I’m sure,” Mom says. “You deserve a day off. Take my credit card.”

“Okay.” I asked twice. That’s enough. I grab Mads’s hand, stop by Mom’s purse for her credit card, and as we hurry out the door, I call back, “Bye.”

Mads drives and once we’re off, I ask, “So, did you finally lock down a boyfriend on the last day of camp?” Scoring boyfriends was one of our summer goals along with starting our college bank accounts for spending money.

“I wish,” she says. “And if I don’t get a drink of some tall handsome dude soon, I might die from dehydration. And what about you, Claire Bear? How’s your love life? Whenever we FaceTimed, you dodged the subject, so I began to suspect you were hiding someone from me.”

“Yeah, like that could happen in my situation. Any guy who isn’t unconscious would run from me as if I’m spreading the plague. Every boy’s dream is to date a girl pushing a baby stroller. No boyfriends until college. I can’t handle a relationship now. My plate overflow-eth.”

“College men can be tasty.” Mads smacks her lips, and a spot of drool emerges. My instinct after spending hours with the king of drool is to wipe her mouth, but I resist and laugh at myself about how crazy I’m getting.

“So, are you now officially bonded with the baby?” she says.

“If you call simultaneous barfing a form of bonding, the answer is yes.”

“Ew...that’s foul.”

“Yup, he hurled, and it triggered me. And one day he had the worst diarrhea, and I—”

“La, la, la,” Mads says, covering her ear closest to me. “Don’t need the deets. You know, your mom wouldn’t be the only unmarried woman to get pregnant by mistake. If she doesn’t get help, you may become a high school dropout to work as a full-time babysitter.”

“That’s lunacy. I’m the least likely dropout candidate in the

world.” Mads knows my record is stellar—APs, National Honor Society, first prize in the science fair in tenth grade, and a power player in student government. My motivation is on steroids, and I have plans, big plans: Ivy League, law school, and public office where a person can make real change.

“Stop procrastinating and get her to an actual doctor who will fix her head.”

“I’m going to try.”

“Trying is a weasel word. Just make her do it.”

Yeah, right. As if it’s so simple. Pushing too hard might cause Mom to spiral further, because she can’t cope with her new normal that she named Harry. I’d be the one left to pick up the pieces and re-assemble my mother.

Mads parks. We hook arms and head for Taylor Imports, our starting point. We haven’t deviated from this routine for finding the perfect first-day-of-school outfits since seventh grade.

Mads gets to business right away, riffling through the racks, and I do the same but at a slower speed, unsure of myself in the fashion arena. In a short time, we each have armfuls of items and head for the dressing room. As usual, we model the clothes to get a thumbs up or down or sometimes only a good laugh. Mads’s opinion about fashion is way superior to mine, so her approval is more valuable.

When Mads pulls back the dressing room curtain and walks out in a teal crop top, I’m immediately drawn to a shining object on her belly. “I can’t believe you pierced your belly button, and you didn’t tell me when we talked.”

“Oh, that. I was saving it to surprise you. I got it right after my birthday to celebrate being eighteen. A bunch of us had a day off and went into town to do some piercing. One kid got a tattoo and dared the rest of us to do it too, but I settled for the belly jewelry instead. It’s so cool.”

“Did you show it to your mom?” Her mother is so conservative, which I think is part of the job requirement to be Newton North

High School's vice principal. Mrs. Sunday excels in tamping down all the new ways students find to "express" themselves.

"Not yet. Keeping it out of sight for now. You should get your belly button pierced. It's great with crop tops and bikinis. Oh, wait, I forgot you're not eighteen yet. You'd need permission."

"If I had your bod, I might do it. Every part of you is perfect. I'm too skinny like a piece of spaghetti, remember?"

"That's so old. Your dad can't call you spaghetti anymore since your boobs came in. You're definitely more tortellini."

I smile and redden. "But mine are humble around your magnificence, Maddikins."

I expect a sharp reply, but instead she scolds me. "You cannot buy that top. That orange makes you look like a bowl of mac 'n' cheese."

After almost an hour, we neaten up our cyclone-strewn dressing rooms and exit with a new outfit for the first day of senior year. Mads buys light-washed jeans with knee holes and an ombré pink top with a V-neck low enough to challenge the dress code. I opt for some black leggings and a fuzzy blue tunic.

When I put the credit card in the machine, the offensive word "Declined" flashes back at me. It can't be right, but I bet that's everyone's reaction in this circumstance.

"I must have put the card in wrong," I say as the heat rushes to my face. I rub on the magnetic strip, blow on the chip, and try again.

"Hmmm...don't know what the prob is," I say, talking to Mads, but she's busy trying on hair clips and not paying attention to me, or maybe she moved away to leave me with my embarrassment.

This makes no sense. Mom can find twenty grand for Harry's posh day care, but \$53 for my outfit is a budget-buster.