
AWAKENING

Choices Trilogy Book One

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

To Pj, who will know why.

*"Maybe she needed someone to show her how to live
And he needed someone to show him how to love."*

—N.R. Hart

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Chapter 1

As she juggled her purse and coffee, Liz unlocked the steel grates over the door to her gallery. It was a brilliant June morning, bright and clear. Already, at just after 9:00 a.m., the stores around her—the dry cleaner to her left and the vintage clothing store to her right, Rihanna thumping from its speakers—had their doors flung wide to the shady Chelsea street. Liz went inside and paused in the quiet coolness. It had been two years since she had opened the gallery, and she never grew tired of this moment when she shed the bustle of a New York morning and came inside the whitewashed space, daylight pouring in from the tall windows, and looked at the pieces, letting them remind her of why she persisted, why what she was doing mattered.

She bent down to the rough pine floor and scooped up the pile of mail beneath the slot. When she saw the bills in her hand amid the flyers and menus, her enthusiasm for the new day sank in her chest. She'd built this space mostly with love and desire, barely keeping the electricity up to code, and sacrificing what so many around her considered "must haves" to focus on the artists whose work she represented. She didn't have the talent to be an artist, herself, but she was one in spirit, and she wanted to make their work known.

As she trudged up the floating stairs along the crumbling brick wall, she scolded herself again. Her lease was coming up for renewal. She wasn't new to the neighborhood; she knew her rent would go up, and by a lot, and idealism wouldn't help with that. She'd have to go back to working for an auction house or a big-name gallery and forget about her dream of being the underdog who brought to light what might have otherwise been overlooked talent. Nor did she want to skulk back to Vermont to do God knows what; although, with her parents gone, no other family, and most of her friends moved away, there wasn't anything for her there anymore, either.

Upstairs in her office, Liz powered up her laptop and was answering emails when the bell jingled downstairs. She glanced down through the glass. "Morning, Melody."

Her assistant, looking doe-eyed and untroubled as always, waved up merrily. "Morning, Liz."

Liz had hired Melody the year before so she could attend more events, network, update her website, grow her mailing list, and spend time with collectors and new artists, all good things she knew she needed to do to grow her business, and which, ultimately, would yield more profit and make the expense of having an assistant worth it. But so far, Melody had proven valuable only in theory. Liz knew she needed to give it more time, but still.

Liz shook her head, knowing that feeling bogged down so early in the day was not going to lead anywhere positive, and opened her calendar to see if anything interesting was happening that she'd forgotten about. When she saw her evening, she smiled. Her close friend and former colleague from Sotheby's, "Babs" Walker, had invited her for what she'd called "a small dinner party" that evening at her Central Park West co-op. Liz chuckled; small for Babs was a catered dinner for twenty. Born to parents of old money and deep connections, Babs took the job at Sotheby's, "to tide her over until she got married", said her mother's friend who'd gotten her in, and also which, Babs liked to joke, at this rate might take her through to the

gold watch at retirement. They were an unlikely pair, but Liz adored Babs. Liz helped her friend when she was faced with a collector looking for in-depth research and knowledge about certain pieces, and Babs delighted in easing Liz's way into the world of ultra-rich art collectors and training Liz in the art of becoming a big city woman. Liz always enjoyed herself at Babs' parties, as Babs kept a lively crowd of interesting people. Liz always hoped she'd meet possible collectors who cared about contemporary art from emerging artists and could talk up some of the work she was selling. Tonight, she thought, frowning as she glanced at her unopened mail, she'd have to be extra charming.

That evening, Liz walked to 23rd and 8th, jumped on the subway, and got off at the 72nd Street stop. In Babs' Upper West Side Art Deco lobby, she exchanged her sneakers for heels, fluffed her hair, and re-did her lipstick in the mirrored wall before going up to the 15th floor.

The elevator let out inside Babs' two-story apartment, and willowy, ash-blonde, old money Babs, in her Louboutin stilettos, cloud of Hermès perfume, and her signature warm smile, was right there to greet Liz with kisses. "Nearly everyone's here," she whispered into Liz's ear, "but I wanted to talk to you before you came in."

Liz laughed. "Sounds exciting. Or scary. Which one?"

"It's actually..." Babs sighed and paused. "So, okay. I invited a few new people to mix things up, and wouldn't you know it, my colleague decided to bring a guest. Said guest is now pontificating rather obnoxiously at someone I hope to get closer to in a professional and possibly personal way." She raised one eyebrow, a flicker of annoyance and apology crossing over her ice blue eyes. "It's Phil."

Liz groaned. "Of course it is."

Babs looped her arm through Liz's and began to lead her in, popping a chili-flecked olive from a bowl into her mouth along the way. "Since I can't just drag Phil into the kitchen and gag

him, if there's anything you can do to help, I'll owe you big time."

Liz took a deep breath. It wasn't that she couldn't handle her ex-boyfriend, if she could even call him that, but she at least hoped her call of duty wouldn't also extend to dinner and she could sit as far away from him as possible.

A waiter holding a tray of champagne flutes approached Liz, and she gratefully grabbed one. Walking into the living room, Liz heard Phil before she spotted him. He was still as handsome, and judging from how he was talking, still of the belief he was more interesting than he was. He was leaning into his fellow conversationalist's space, his finger pointing toward him and his mouth moving rapidly. The initial shiver at seeing him evaporated at her catching the look on the man's face. All the other guests seemed to be enjoying their conversations or were staring out at the view of Central Park West.

Liz approached the two men. "Phil, I didn't realize Babs had invited you this evening, it's been a while. How are things at Sotheby's?" She turned to the other man and offered her hand. "I'm Liz Ashton, Babs' friend and ex-colleague of both her and Phil. How do you know Babs?"

Relief spread over the man's face. "Hello, Douglas Smith-Wilkins," he said, offering his hand. "Call me Doug. I met Babs at a recent auction. She was kind enough to invite me tonight. Said I would meet some interesting people." He turned to face Liz with his whole body, clearly delighted to shift his attention. "Where do you work now, Miss Ashton?"

"Liz, please. I have a small art gallery in Chelsea and represent contemporary emerging artists."

"How very interesting, Liz, as Phil and I were just—"

Phil put up his hand and ducked his head a bit. "I think I see an old college friend. Excuse me," he said and walked away.

Liz smiled. Phil hated to lose a conversation. She turned back to Doug. *Handsome*, she thought. *Nice and tall, which would suit Babs well. Salt and pepper hair, cut close, dark eyes, sexy square*

glasses. She smiled. "Are you interested in contemporary art, Doug?"

"Actually, to be honest, Liz, I don't know that much about art. I usually follow the advice of my family's curator, who drags me to auctions." He smiled, showing off his bright teeth. "I'm just teasing; I love going. But I am very much interested in your friend Babs and decidedly not interested in your ex-colleague. What a bore." He laughed and Liz smiled trying to appear neutral even though she was laughing inside.

Liz noticed a man standing a few feet from them. He was holding a glass of scotch and looking at her with an amused expression. Liz couldn't help but stare back. He was incredibly striking, tall with violet-blue eyes and dark hair that fell just below his ears. Definitely not an artist, he looked too curated, too expensive.

"Phil can be a piece of work," she said, lowering her voice. "Happy to rescue you."

The handsome man turned and went to the other side of the room. Liz felt her enthusiasm sink and was glad for Babs calling everyone in to dinner.

The guests shuffled into the grand wood-paneled dining room, the man with the violet eyes toward the front of the group, chatting with an older woman wearing a sparkling gown and sensible loafers. Liz looked away and tried to focus on the people beside her. On one side, was a client of Babs, a collector who seemed more interested in the economics of the market for American art than the art itself, and on the other side, Doug. She loved that her friend trusted her enough to prime Doug for her and not steal him away. Phil was thankfully at the other end of the table on the opposite side, and the good-looking man was up toward the head of the table sandwiched between two older women, whose husbands sat on their other sides. Liz noted how nice it was, and how rare, to see long-married couples remain together. *Perhaps there was still love in the world*, Liz thought with a smile.