
THE POWER OF FREEDOM

Choices Trilogy - Book Three

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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.

"Ultimately, we know deeply that the other side of every fear is freedom."

Marilyn Ferguson

Chapter 1

Elizabeth sat at Damon's bedside, talking to him, watching the monitors, and waiting for a sign that he would wake up from his coma and return to a normal life. Her life has shrunk to his hospital room, her art gallery, and staying healthy for her unborn child. She was struggling with her feelings of fear and hope. She wanted to believe that despite his initial reaction when he ended their arrangement, saying he did not want her unborn child, he was on his way to see her when he had the accident, and that he had changed his mind.

The city was covered in darkness. Lights from surrounding buildings shone in the distance through the window of the hospital room. A soft light bathed the room where machines and monitors were keeping the patient alive and blinking out vital signs. Elizabeth reflected that it had been more than two weeks since Damon's accident, when his car had rammed through the FDR's concrete barriers leaving him in a coma. His sister and only relative, Abbey, had flown from Los Angeles, waiting for a sign that will tell her what she must do. There had been no change in Damon's condition. Only Damon's lawyer knew his client's last wishes, and Elizabeth knew from Charles, Damon's head of security, that the lawyer had told Abbey that her brother

had a living will and did not want to survive if he could not lead a normal life.

Elizabeth lifted her head from Damon's chest, squeezed his hand, and kissed his forehead, saying, "I'm going, my love, and I will return in the morning. Abbey, Amanda, and Charles will be here tomorrow when your doctors give us an update. We're all waiting for you to come back to us, to give us a sign that you are finding your way back. Please fight to break through the vice that holds you." Elizabeth squeezed Damon's hand again and left with her bodyguard, Cal, following from his position outside the hospital room.

"Shane picked up your dinner from Mrs. O'Grady after he dropped us off, Miss Ashton," said Cal as they got into the elevator. "Is there anything else you need on the way to your apartment? Otherwise, we'll see you bright and early tomorrow morning."

"Thank you, Cal," Elizabeth said, rolling her neck and shoulders. "A good soak in a warm bath and a good night's sleep is what I need."

Elizabeth rested her head on the back of the tub, letting the warm water do its work and relax her body. There had been no change in Damon's condition since the accident. Elizabeth knew if there was no sign that he was moving into the next stage of recovery, the doctors might advise that there was less likelihood that he would fully recover, and Abbey would be forced to consider ending his life in accordance with his living will. *Please fight*, thought Elizabeth, *come back to us. I need you.*

The next morning, Elizabeth drank her tea and ate her breakfast of fruit, yogurt, and organic granola. She tried to maintain a healthy diet for her unborn child despite the stress and worry she felt over Damon. She grabbed her tea and swallowed the vitamins and other supplements Dr. Skadden had prescribed as she

went down the elevator to meet Cal and Shane for the short ride to the hospital. On the way, she texted Melody to let her know that they were meeting with Damon's doctors that morning and she would be in late. Her phone pinged back that she was not to worry and Melody would see her at the gallery whenever she got there.

When Elizabeth arrived at the hospital, Charles and Amanda were standing outside Damon's room. They told her that Abbey and her husband, Dr. Baxter, were on their way from Damon's residence, and they would meet Damon's doctors in the living room of his hospital suite. Elizabeth went inside the suite and pulled a chair into her usual position beside Damon's bed. She held his hand and spoke to him while she waited for the others to arrive.

"I hope you have now had a good rest, my love, and are fighting to be with us again. Your sister has asked to meet with your doctors this morning, and her husband has flown from California to be with her. Charles and Amanda will also be here to listen to what your doctors say. I hope and pray you can hear us talking."

The door to the suite opened and Abbey and her husband entered, asking the nurse to let the doctors know that everyone was there. Charles and Amanda followed, and the group took seats in the living area. In a short while, the doctors came in, and Elizabeth squeezed Damon's hand and went to join the others.

Elizabeth looked at the doctors' faces, willing them to say that there was still time for Damon to have a normal recovery. She knew from past discussions that the chances of them saying that now were slim. She listened as the senior physician recapped the observations and the medical data collected from the time Damon had been admitted after his accident.

The doctor asked if anyone had any questions, and hearing none, said, "While it is still possible for Mr. St. Claire to recover from his coma, we are at a point now, seeing no signs of improve-

ment, that we are forced to conclude there is significantly less likelihood that Mr. St. Claire will fully recover."

Elizabeth stood, sobbing, and her heart raced. "No, no, I will not believe it!" she exclaimed and rushed to Damon's side.

Elizabeth saw Doctor Baxter comforting Abbey, who was crying, and ushering her out of the room. Amanda followed in a daze, and the doctors began to file out of the room to wait for what the family would decide.

Charles Knight remained, stood at the end of his employer's bed, and growled in an angry voice, "So you're going to give up. Never thought I'd see the day Damon St. Claire would give up control and become vulnerable. Guess I've been wrong all these years about the man I worked for and respected!"

Damon's eyes shot open, levelling what looked like a piercing and angry stare at Charles.

Elizabeth gasped, and a pin could have been heard to drop in the room.

"That's more like it, sir," said Charles. "I've kept *all* your arrangements as they were before you took off like a bat out of hell and ended up here. And they'll stay that way until you're fit enough to tell me otherwise or angry enough to let me go for overstepping my authority."

Damon's eyes blinked, but he uttered no sound.

The doctors, hearing the commotion, re-entered the room and began leaning over the patient, shining lights in his eyes, running probes along his arms and chest and up the bottoms of his feet. Elizabeth reached for Abbey who was in the doorway staring in disbelief. They clung to each other watching the chaos that had erupted in the room.

Amanda walked over to Charles who had backed away from the bed and said, "We heard you shouting from outside. Whatever made you do that? You'll be lucky if the boss doesn't have your head when he comes out of this."

Charles smiled and said, "If making him angry is what it takes to get him to fight back, then I'm happy to oblige."

Later that week, Elizabeth finished going over her gallery's receipts and was talking with Melody about planning her next event. She was considering this focusing on Jackson, one of her original artists and whose art had interested Damon and brought them together.

"I think it would good," Elizabeth said to Melody, "to focus on an all-man show—Jackson representing the life and struggles of people in the Bronx, Ricardo's depiction of the gay life in South Beach, Miami, and Santiago's paintings showing Cuba's struggle in isolation and challenges transitioning to the future." Melody was about to respond, when the front door to the gallery jingled, and in came Babs, Syl, and Simone rushing forward with hugs and kisses.

"We thought it was time to take you out of work and the hospital room, and we are here to whisk you away," Babs said, Syl and Simone nodding in agreement.

Elizabeth smiled, not knowing what to say.

"Everything is being prepared in my co-op for us to have a relaxing evening," said Babs. "I'm sure your driver and Cal will be happy to take you to the hospital on your way home, but right now, you need to tell them you are ready to leave and need a larger car to get us to Central Park West."

"It sounds tempting," replied Elizabeth.

"Then get on your phone, woman, and let's get this show on the road," Syl chimed in.

Elizabeth reached for her phone and texted Shane and Cal to make the arrangements. In a short while, Damon's Rolls pulled up, and Cal stood by the door waiting. Elizabeth hugged Melody, saying they would talk more about the next event when she was in the next day.

As her friends got into the Rolls, Elizabeth asked Cal if requesting using the car had been a problem and that her friends

would find their way home at the end of the evening, but she would like to stop at the hospital on her way home.

"No problem, Miss Ashton," Cal said and smiled. "The Baxters weren't using the car, and Charles said we should accommodate your wishes."

The friends enjoyed their ride uptown, and Elizabeth offered them drinks from the bar as Damon had done once upon a time for her. Up in Babs' apartment overlooking Central Park West, the women nibbled on appetizers and healthy looking salads and entrees. Babs handed Elizabeth a drink, promising it contained only ginger ale and fruits. They talked about Babs' upcoming wedding in the fall, Simone's continuing success and expanding markets for her art. Syl, after sitting quietly, broke the ice.

"We're worried about you, Liz. We hardly see you as you exhaust yourself between work and the hospital. We love you and want to know what we can do to help. What is Damon's prognosis now? And are his staff and sister treating you well?"

"Thanks everyone for dragging me away tonight and for caring so much," said Elizabeth, smiling. "I am tired some of the time, but I watch myself pretty closely, and Dr. Skadden says I'm doing well for a mother-to-be with a business and the father of her child in the hospital. Being careful has meant limiting my time with my closest friends. Please forgive me for doing that."

"There is nothing to forgive," Babs said. "We just want the best for you."

"Damon's staff have all been kind and helpful," said Elizabeth, "as you could see tonight. Cal is always at my side when I go out, and Shane is there to drive me, but both are probably bored at the limited scope of my activity. I am beginning to know Damon's sister, and I think she is beginning to see me as more than an arrangement her brother had kept from her and her family. "

"So that leaves Damon," said Simone. "What do the doctors say?"

"They are cautiously optimistic," Elizabeth said, laughing

"after Damon's head of security shouted at him, surprising all of us, and Damon responding with what seemed to be the piercing gaze he turns on all of us when he's angry."

"At least you haven't lost your ability to laugh," remarked Syl.

"No," replied Elizabeth. "As they say, you might as well laugh as cry. Damon stares, blinks, and occasionally will follow a person with his eyes as they move and speak. He appears to react to pain and that maneuver doctors do on the bottom of your foot. He doesn't speak, nor does he voluntarily move his body. So we are waiting to see if he passes into the next stage. That is what weighs so heavily on my mind and my heart, the waiting and not knowing if he will return to a normal life."

"And his businesses continue to operate?" asked Babs.

"Yes. All of you met Amanda, his PA, when I was planning the Frieze exhibition and the event at my gallery. She and Charles Knight, Damon's head of security, are keeping things together. Damon's mentor and business partner, Mr. Tong, is flying in from China next week to confer with Damon's lawyer, his sister, and doctors and see if he can be of assistance while we wait."

"And the baby?" asked Simone. "When is it expected, and have you made any preparations?"

"According to Dr. Skadden, my baby is due mid-January," said an excited Elizabeth. "That gives Damon lots of time to recover and take part in its birth. And speaking of Damon, I'm going to leave you to visit him before I go home."

After Elizabeth left, her friends hoped for her sake that Damon would fully recover, accept his child, and be there when it was born.

Elizabeth heard from Damon's sister that Mr. Tong had arrived from Hong Kong and was staying at Damon's residence. She no longer visited his residence, unless asked by Abbey to do so, or

on occasion to bring a present to Mrs. O'Grady to thank her for preparing her meals, which Cal delivered for her lunch and dinner. Today, she brought an orchid she thought Mrs. O'Grady might like and had made an appointment to see Amanda to ask if she could help with the gallery exhibition she was planning.

She was standing in the foyer waiting for the elevator and saying goodbye to Mrs. O'Grady when two children raced down the hallway toward the kitchen, stopping short at Mrs. O'Grady's skirts. Mrs. O'Grady leaned down, hugged the children, and said to Elizabeth, "Children, this is Miss Ashton, a friend of your uncle Damon, and Miss Ashton, this is Kayla and Egan, Mr. St. Claire's niece and nephew."

Elizabeth bent down and said, "Hi, I hope you're enjoying it here. Mrs. O'Grady is the best, and if you're good, I'll bet she has really good cookies for you."

The children stared at Elizabeth, and Kayla answered, "It's nice to meet you. We were on our way to see if we could have a treat before lunch. I'm in charge. I just turned eight and my brother is six. We're here while Mommy and Daddy take care of Uncle Damon until we have to go back when school starts. How do you know Uncle Damon?"

Elizabeth smiled at the children and said, "Your uncle and I met through a friend and we both enjoy the arts. I own an art gallery, and your uncle has helped me make it more successful."

"Come on, children," said Mrs. O'Grady. "Let's leave Miss Ashton to get on with her day. There's a fresh chocolate chip cookie waiting for each of you in my kitchen." The children ran off waving goodbye, and Mrs. O'Grady gave Elizabeth a hug as she got into the elevator.

Three floors down, the elevator opened and Amanda met Elizabeth as she entered the reception area of St. Claire Holdings. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with me," said Elizabeth.

"Of course," said Amanda, pushing her librarian glasses up on her nose and tucking her iPad under her arm. "Why don't we

go into Mr. St. Claire's library, and you can tell me how I can be of assistance?"

Elizabeth and Amanda settled into the two chairs in front of the fireplace. Elizabeth stared at the painting over the fireplace, turned to look at Amanda and said, "I remember when I came to help Damon decide where to place Jackson's painting. That was almost a year ago, but it seems like several lifetimes. My business has continued to prosper, and that has been due in part to the support of my friends. As you know, Damon was a big part of that in financing my gallery's renovations before my first event, which showcased Simone's work, and making it possible for me to attend international art fairs and a trip to find new artists to represent. Your help, Amanda, was invaluable in making those things come together successfully. It's time for me to produce another exhibition, and I am wondering whether I can count on you for your support?"

Elizabeth could tell Amanda was thinking and weighing her decision as she watched her forehead crease and her eyes span the room and come to rest on Jackson's work.

"I will be happy to assist you, Miss Ashton. For now, as you know, the decision is to keep all support in place, including all arrangements that Mr. St. Claire had before his accident. In some ways, I am busier since the accident, and less so in others. Why don't you begin by telling me what you have in mind? I'll make notes and then put a plan together that we can review."

Elizabeth exhaled. She had not been certain whether Amanda would agree to help. "Thank you, Amanda," she said. "It means a lot to me that you will help me. I have been thinking of staging an all-male exhibition featuring Jackson, who was not in the one last year, and including the same two artists from South Beach, Miami and Cuba who were with Simone last year. Simone has gained a good following from that exhibition and the one at NY Frieze. It should be relatively easy to decide on works from the three artists, and I would like to give Jackson's work a focus."

Amanda's fingers flew over her iPad as Elizabeth continued.

"I was thinking an early fall exhibition might do well with people back in the city and the many annual events scheduled later around Christmas. It would also be easier for me to manage before the last weeks of my pregnancy."

Amanda looked up from her iPad, her face revealing none her thoughts. "Why don't I check all the charity events scheduled for fall against who attended your last exhibition and give you some dates that I think would work best? Had you thought about attending any of the events Mr. St. Claire attends and are on his annual donation list?"

"Amanda, it's easy to see why Damon values you so highly," said Elizabeth. "I hadn't thought about attending any events, assuming that would be out of the question until Damon is well and can attend."

"I don't see why it would be a problem if we screen the events carefully. It would be good for your business and the exhibition you are planning, and minimal extra work from this end. How do you plan to deal with questions regarding your pregnancy which are certain to be asked?" questioned Amanda.

"I really hadn't thought about that," replied Elizabeth "as I hadn't thought to attend any events and would wear a gown at my exhibition that would hide the fact."

"All right, then, once we agree on a date, the rest should fall into place quite easily. I assume you will want to use Glorious Foods for the catering and the same people you used for invitations and the art catalogue? I have Ricardo's and Santiago's information unless it's changed, but you will need to send me Jackson's," said Amanda, rattling off in rapid fire her to do list.

"I will wait to hear from you then," said Elizabeth, standing and holding out her hand. The women walked back to reception where Cal waited to escort Elizabeth to her gallery.

Elizabeth walked into her gallery with a smile, saying, "Melody, I have good news. Amanda has agreed to help with the exhibition and is looking at the best dates that don't conflict with events in the fall that might keep our wealthy buyers away."

Melody got up from her small desk and ran to give her boss a hug. "I've saved all the information from the last year's exhibition before Christmas. Where would you like me to start?"

"Send Amanda Jackson's information," said Elizabeth, "and then let's contact Ricardo and Santiago to let them know what I'm planning, and get photos of any current work. I expect we'll have the date nailed down soon with Amanda helping, and then we can put the rest of the process in motion. I'm going to catch up in my office, then if there are no appointments, I'll take off to see how Damon is doing."

Elizabeth was early for her usual visit to Damon, and when she walked into his suite, she saw an older Asian man standing beside his bed, talking in a lowered voice. She wondered if this was Mr. Tong, who had been Damon's mentor and father figure, and whom she knew had come from Hong Kong to check on his partner and friend. Hearing her enter, the man turned. He was of medium build and height and held himself straight with his hands folded one over the other. He was wearing a tailored blue suit with a Hermes tie at the neck of his crisp white shirt. There wasn't a hair on his head or a wrinkle on his face. She saw his eyes twinkle as he observed her.

"Hello, my name is Elizabeth Ashton. I'm a friend of Damon's. Are you by any chance Mr. Tong?"

Mr. Tong bowed slightly and extended his hand. "I am Mr. Tong, and I am happy to meet you, Miss Ashton. I believe my staff had the privilege of serving you when you were in Hong Kong."

"Yes, and I am happy to be able to thank you in person, even

though Damon said he would extend my thanks to you. My visit would not have been as productive had it not been for your staff's assistance. Are you here on business, Mr. Tong, or did you come to see how our friend was doing?"

Mr. Tong gestured to the sitting area in Damon's suite and, after they were seated, said, "I am here firstly to check on our friend's progress and, as I am one of Damon's partners, to confer with his staff and attorney regarding the operation of his businesses. I had hoped to meet you when you were in Hong Kong, and am sorry that this is the circumstance that brings us together."

Elizabeth glanced at Damon, and a tear fell from her eye. "I don't know how I will cope, Mr. Tong, if Damon doesn't survive. It breaks my heart to see him lying there. He was on his way to see me when it happened. I visit him every day and pray for his recovery."

Tong looked at the woman his friend had talked about when he was last in Hong Kong. "I am staying at Mr. St. Claire's residence while I am here, and perhaps we will have an opportunity to see each other again. I will say goodbye to my friend now and leave you with him."

"So that is your partner, whom you would not let me personally thank when we were in Hong Kong," said Elizabeth to Damon after the man left. His eyes opened and followed her as she walked around his bed. "He seems like a very nice man and one I would have enjoyed meeting. I have also met your sister and her husband, Damon, and your niece and nephew when I went to thank Mrs. O'Grady for her kindness. You seem to have a wonderful family and friends who care very much about you. I am going to go now. It's been a long day. I met with Amanda, who has agreed to help with my next exhibition and began the planning process with Melody before coming here. You always said for me to trust you to be open and enjoy what your life had to offer. I love you, Damon. Please come back and allow yourself to accept the love others have for you." Elizabeth leaned in and

kissed Damon on his forehead and ran her fingers softly across his lips. "Good night, my love, I'll see you before I go to my gallery in the morning."

Elizabeth walked slowly out the door, her shoulders bent with fatigue, and down the corridor, Cal by her side.

When Elizabeth returned the next morning, she found Abbey and her husband conferring with Damon's doctors. Abbey motioned her to join them. Elizabeth was surprised and excited to hear that after she left the previous evening, Damon had become agitated and uttered unintelligible sounds.

"What does that mean?" asked Elizabeth as she joined the group.

"It's a good sign. Mr. St. Claire may have tried to react to something you said," replied Damon's head physician. "Do you remember what you were saying before you left?"

"I usually tell Damon about my day," said Elizabeth, trying to remember what she had said. "He reacts to my voice and opens his eyes if they had been closed. He blinks, but I can't tell if it's in response to anything in particular that I say. Mr. Tong was in the room when I arrived but left shortly thereafter. I told Damon that I'd had a busy day planning a new exhibition at my gallery, and that I had met with Amanda who had agreed to help as she had done in the past. Oh, yes, I said that I had gone by his residence to take Mrs. O'Grady a small gift for her help, and while there, had met his niece and nephew on their way to the kitchen."

"That doesn't sound like anything that would cause the patient any frustration or distress," responded the doctor.

"Perhaps not," said Elizabeth, reflecting. "But Mr. St. Claire has kept me from knowing his family or his business partner, Mr. Tong, when we were in Hong Kong. I told him that we all cared about him and loved him. I reminded him that he always told me to trust him and enjoy what his life had to offer. Then I said I

hoped he would come back to us, allowing himself to accept the love we have for him."

Damon's doctor made some notes and addressed the group. "It may be possible that Mr. St. Claire was attempting to respond to Miss Ashton. I suggest you continue to attempt to engage Mr. St. Claire in conversations and talk about being together and see if he responds."

Elizabeth got up and went to stand by Damon's bedside with Abbey and her husband following close behind. She bent to kiss Damon's forehead, and his eyes opened and looked at her. "Hello, my love. Your sister and I are here to wish you a good day and tell you what we have planned for the weekend," said Elizabeth, hoping that Abbey would join in and play along with the story she was attempting to weave.

As Abbey leaned over and squeezed her brother's hand, Elizabeth continued, saying, "We were thinking that since it is supposed to be nice weather, the children might enjoy a picnic in Central Park and a visit to its zoo and then see the dinosaurs at the Natural History Museum?"

"The children would love that, Elizabeth," replied Abbey. "And I'm certain Mrs. O'Grady will pack a fabulous picnic lunch for all of us."

Damon's eyes darted from Elizabeth to his sister and back again. A low growl erupted from his throat, and he seemed to moan, "No." His hand twitched as if in an effort to communicate, and then his eyes closed and he fell silent.

Elizabeth and the Baxters stepped into the hallway. "I have no plans for the weekend," said Elizabeth, "except to continue working on my exhibition and to visit Damon. If your children haven't been to Central Park and its zoo or to see the dinosaurs at the museum, I'm sure Mrs. O'Grady will be happy to fix a picnic, and I think the children would enjoy the activities."

"That sounds like a good idea," replied Abbey. "We've been so worried about Damon, we've hardly left the penthouse, other than to come here. Amanda sent toys to amuse the children, but

they have been running up and down the hallways, out on the terrace, and into Mrs. O'Grady's kitchen, no doubt driving her crazy. Other than the swimming pool, there doesn't seem to be a games room or playroom, but I guess that makes sense knowing my brother."

Elizabeth couldn't help but smile at Abbey's reference to a playroom and answered, "Why don't we plan Sunday then? I don't go into the gallery unless I have a specific appointment on the weekends. Will you ask Mrs. O'Grady about the picnic lunch, or shall I?"

"Leave that to me, Elizabeth," replied Abbey. "Shall we meet at the penthouse and leave from there?"

"Okay," said Elizabeth. "Tell Damon's driver, Anthony, that you will need him on Sunday for the excursion, and I'll meet you at the penthouse at, say, eleven."

On the ride to her gallery, Elizabeth wondered about Damon's reaction but decided that she wanted to know his family better and for her unborn child to know its cousins as it grew up.

On Sunday, Elizabeth showed the Baxters around the Central Park Zoo, and then they found a quiet place and enjoyed the sumptuous picnic Mrs. O'Grady had provided. The children were running around close by, under the watchful eye of their father, as Elizabeth and Abbey enjoyed iced mint tea and lemonade. Cal stood off to the side watching both Elizabeth and the children.

"Did all of my brother's arrangements have bodyguards and drivers?" asked Abbey, staring at Cal.

"No, they didn't," said Elizabeth. "Damon told me that because I had been photographed with him at events he attended, and as gallery became more successful, he wanted to protect me and would not allow me to walk around and take subways and taxis. At first, I tried to persuade him that it wasn't

necessary, but a couple of times, it became apparent that he knew best. Cal risked his job by driving me to Vermont when Damon ended our arrangement, and although Charles has kept all of my support in place prior to Damon's accident, Cal won't know his fate until Damon comes out of the coma and lets us know his wishes."

"So even though my brother was going to see you when he had his accident, you just assume he was going to bring you back and agree to a relationship that included his child?" questioned Abbey.

Elizabeth looked at Abbey's children, then back at Abbey, and said, "Yes, I suppose you are right. Regardless, Abbey, I would like our child to know his family. I hope you will become comfortable with that."

Silence stretched, and Abbey answered, letting out a big sigh, "I believe my brother's life would be fuller if he were to accept your child and open his heart. What he'll do, I can't say. I've watched you with him over the past weeks and believe you do love him with all your heart, and in your position, I would have made the same choice. The children, Bryan, and I will always be happy to see you and have you with us. You can count us in for all the birthdays and celebrations." She reached for Elizabeth's hand. "And now," Abbey said, "let's get these kids to the dinosaurs, and if we're not too late, maybe a surprise stop at FAO Schwarz."