

Choices: Volume II of the Lincoln County Law Trilogy

by [Jerri Blair](#)

Chapter 1

The Days of Jihad

Dr. Joseph Caldwell stood by the front window of the clinic wishing he were somewhere else, any place in the world that was not a battleground where religious conviction jostled with personal choice in a perpetual war of the uterus. It wouldn't be so difficult for him to watch if it didn't so profoundly interfere with his ability to give a safe sojourn to women seeking refuge from the emotional turmoil that their physical condition brought them when faced with making such a choice. It mattered not if their condition was brought on by carelessness or the violent rejection of their right of refusal, most of them came to him in a state of emotional distress. It was his heartfelt desire to send them on their way as healthy and relieved of stress as he could.

Fridays and Saturdays were always a nightmare for him but he'd made a promise to himself one night long ago, and he was a man who kept his promises, even those he made to himself. He was bound and determined that he would provide a safe place for the women who came to his clinic seeking to terminate an unwanted or unhealthy pregnancy. Even though he hated spending two days a week of his precious time on Earth as the target of vicious animosity, there was no way he could abandon the needs of the women he served. It would violate his oath to himself and his memory of the first woman he'd ever loved.

That long ago night when he'd first promised himself that he'd find a way to serve the needs of women in the crisis of an unwanted pregnancy was one of those pivotal moments in time that had rippled out into his life, defining who he was and what he became. It was the driving force of his continuing presence in a part of the medical profession that was shunned by many and avoided by most. Back in December of 1972...that was when his fate was set...that was when he took the oath that charted the course of his life...back in 1972...

He was working late in the emergency room, almost sleepwalking as he headed toward the end of a thirty-six hour shift, something every intern was expected to do as a part of the medical profession's version of hazing. His only rest had been on a cot in an examination room, where he never really got a wink of peaceful sleep, just half-wakeful catnaps in the short intervals between the medical emergencies that presented themselves regularly at all hours of the day and night. He was so ready to leave behind the chaos of the ER for the comfort of his bed at home. He was standing behind the front desk, flirting with a pretty new student nurse who was manning the desk, trying her best to look professional as she smiled up at him. He was thinking about asking her to get some dinner with him the next night. He hadn't had a date in well over three months, and he was feeling a little lonely.

The woman he really wanted to see had disappeared from his life. He'd been hopeful the first few weeks after he'd last seen her, but he was beginning to believe she'd never be back, and all he really wanted was a little friendly tete a' tete with a pretty girl. The soon to be nurse fit the bill to a Tee.

"So how about dinner tomorrow night?"

She'd blushed just a little which pleased him greatly. Then she smiled and said, "I'd like that very much."

He heard the ambulance pull up outside, siren still wailing, lights flashing, technicians racing to bring in a patient. The sounds and sights were familiar, but always presaged the most difficult of challenges, especially to a resident with one foot halfway out the door.

He sighed and said, "I'd better catch this one before I leave." He walked toward the door as the gurney was being pushed through by technicians whose sense of urgency was palpable. He tried hard to hide the bone deep tiredness he felt, his face a study of neutral concern, as he approached the patient.

Then he saw who lay on the gurney, and adrenaline shot through his body like a drug rush, washing away the dregs of his long shift like a tidal wave. All thoughts of dinner with the pretty girl disappeared, vanished into nothingness. It was her. It was the only girl he wanted to go anywhere with for the rest of his life, the woman he wanted to marry. When he'd met her just three months before, he'd decided that she had to be the most beautiful girl in the world, certainly the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Now, in the harsh light of the ER waiting room, she looked like a warmed over corpse clinging to life by a thread. His heart swelled with love at the sight of her. Then the knife of pain stabbed his chest, making it hard catch his breath. Fear like none he'd ever known before, even in the jungles of Vietnam in the middle of a fire fight, rose like a ghostly presence that froze him in his tracks.

Three months before, she'd been the perfect elixir for the pain that overwhelmed him after losing his first patient to a staph infection that he'd just plain missed. He knew it happened to everybody, and everyone in his class had tried to cheer him up, but nothing could assuage the guilt. And then loneliness had overcome him when he'd realized that he didn't have anybody, that there was no one with whom he could share his grief, nobody to hold his hand and make it right, or as right as it could be. He'd headed for the closest bar to lose himself in a river of whiskey, to surround his savaged psyche with the inane chatter of a place where people went to find somebody to love for the night or at least an hour. He needed a woman to cure his self-imposed depression. Nothing else would do.

Three months before, that's when he met the woman who now lay on the gurney, blood seeping out of her body even after the technicians tried to stop its flow. Three months before...

He'd felt the tendrils of real love wrapping around his heart the moment he saw her walk through the door. She'd worn a tasteful black chiffon dress that swirled around her legs like a hovering cloud with a string of cultured pearls gleaming around her swan-like neck. She was tall, heads above everyone around her, with wavy brunette hair that curled around her heart-shaped face. She was ethereal, so out of place in that cathedral of the one night stand.

She'd hesitated after she entered, looking as if she weren't sure she'd stay, as if she knew instinctively that this was not a part of the natural habitat of a woman like her. The indecision on her face seemed to speak to him inside of his heart, and he wanted nothing more than to make sure she understood just how beautiful and desirable she really was. Her eyes had been filled with a need for warmth and camaraderie that matched his need to hide from the grief of the day.

He'd somehow had managed to meet her amidst the riotous drunken noise of the bar. He'd almost sprinted across the bar and tapped her shoulder. When she turned, he pointed at the dance floor and she'd nodded after only a brief hesitation. Once they made it out onto the floor, everything changed. The world was spinning around them and they had eyes only for each other. He knew from that moment that fate had touched his life. He'd met the woman he wanted to marry. No matter how silly it might sound, it was a reality, an absolute truth.

They danced until they were breathless, and then sat drinking champagne, high on the bubbles and the dry taste of the fine wine, laughing and talking about things he'd never shared with anyone. He'd felt as if he'd known her for his entire life and they'd just rediscovered each other. He didn't think it could get any better, but then it did. She went home with him.

They sat on the couch listening to jazz, both of them enraptured with the sounds of the saxophone, both of them filled with thoughts of how it would be to kiss. She smiled at him from the other end of the couch which seemed about a million miles away and said wistfully, "Do you have Rhapsody in Blue...or anything by Gershwin? I wouldn't ask...I know most people wouldn't, but you seem like a man who might have something like that."

He jumped up and fumbled through his record collection as quickly as he could. "Aha!" He placed the Gershwin album on the turn table and turned back to her. He chose a spot to sit that was a little closer on the couch, but not so close that she'd be uncomfortable if she didn't want things to go any further.

He played it slow and easy, sensing that this wasn't something she did on a regular basis, almost scared that if he made a move, she'd disappear. But it was hard because he was cognizant that there was a short window of time when he would have the opportunity to make a move or the moment would be gone. He was on pins

and needles trying his best to behave as normally as he could, unsure that she shared his instant reaction.

Finally, she made the move. She slid closer to him and closed her eyes, her lips parted as if waiting for a kiss. He almost shouted with joy, but instead leaned into her and closed the deal, his lips tingling with anticipation, his body hot with desire. Slowly, they'd started the dance of love, touching each other softly, enjoying each caress carefully and fully with the delicate delight of opening a present on Christmas morning. When he'd finally made his way inside of her, their pace changed and they rocked together like they were made for each other, each holding the key to the other's soul, an experience far beyond anything he'd ever felt before. Afterward, he'd held her close, like the priceless treasure she'd become to him in the space of a few hours, and said, "Please don't ever go away. Now that I've found you, I can't bear to think of life without you in it."

She closed her eyes and started crying. "As improbable as it might seem, I think...I've quite...fallen in love with you..."

His heart soared with joyous love and he pulled her closer. "I feel the..." "Stop! Don't say it. You'll be sorry you did. I shouldn't have said that...I shouldn't be here. This can't be happening."

He felt anxiety rising inside. "Why not? We both feel the same thing. This has to be right."

"My darling, I'm already missing you...but we'll never be able to see each other again."

He could tell she was serious. Her beautiful eyes very clearly conveyed that when she left him that night, it would be the end.

"That's not...possible. I have to see you."

"We can't...be."

"Tell me what will prevent me from seeing you because I can't imagine anything that could keep us apart."

"I'm married..."

"No. I can't believe a woman like you would do...the things we've done tonight if she were married...or if there wasn't something really wrong with any marriage she might be stuck in."

"But it's true. I'm a married woman and I'm unwilling to forget my vows."
"You could have fooled me!"

Fresh tears appeared in her eyes and he wiped them away. "I'm sorry...but how can this be?"

"Let me tell you..."

"I'm all ears but I can't imagine anything that would cancel the one chance for happiness I'll ever have."

"I met my husband when I was nineteen years old, at the end of my sophomore year of college. We got married later that year. We were the college dream couple that everyone wanted to be. I have to admit...I loved the picture we made for the world, even though I knew in my heart that the picture wasn't really as perfect as everyone thought it was. Our ideas about what was important in life were very different, and I wasn't sure we'd be able to hold together in the long run. He was all about money and prestige, all of the finer things in life, and I wanted to dedicate my life to making the world a better place."

"That doesn't surprise me."

"At first, I thought we could easily compromise so that we could both live our ideals, but...I soon learned that compromise was almost impossible with him." "So leave him...you need to be with someone who appreciates your soul." "It's not that easy. I knew that someday, I'd have to make a choice about where I would go in life, alone to realize my own dreams..."

"It doesn't have to be alone..."

"Let me finish. You'll understand. I knew if I stayed with him, I would have a life of leisure...that I'd be part of the elite dream couple that everyone else thought we were."

"Is that what you really want?" He couldn't believe this woman would give up her dreams for an easy life. It was disappointing to think that was even a possibility. She shook her head and said, "The dream...I should say his dream ended abruptly when my husband was injured in a car wreck during his second year of law school. The other driver walked away without a scratch, but my husband..." He waited expectantly.

"He...almost died. His horrible injuries left him a quadriplegic with severe brain trauma that changed everything about him. The doctors didn't expect him to live more than a few months, but he's survived for four years so far." She put her head in her hands as if she were in pain. "He's so...bitter, so angry at the world. The last four years he's been completely miserable... living in pain and despair with no joy left in his life."

"I know that would be hard for anyone...but he has you."

"I guess I realized a long time ago that I was more of an accessory to him than anything else. My only purpose had been to make him look good. But his injury I thought...now I have a purpose. Now I can give him something he needs...so I vowed that I'd stay by his side no matter what happened."

He took a deep breath and said, "I...don't want to admit it...but it was noble...and I guess it's what I would have to do if I were in your shoes."

"I have done it... but it's gotten tougher as time passed by. He doesn't...try. All he does is drink straight vodka through a straw and take pills to ease his pain. He's drunk all day and passed out every night..."

His heart slipped even further down. He didn't like to think of her having to live in that kind of situation even if it was the right thing to do. "The worst part is...nights. You can imagine...to a man like him, life has lost all meaning. And he'd always had a sort of angry way of managing his business affairs...he was always tough. In law school, people called him the shark and he loved it. Now I'm his only target. Where before he had the competition with his classmates and the career he wanted as the focus of his energy, now I'm all he has. And he does what he does because he's afraid of losing me. I know that...but it's still hard to take sometimes."

"What does he do to you?" He was beginning to have a bad feeling about where the story was going. He didn't care how right it might seem, it wasn't right if the man hurt her.

She was suddenly reluctant. She'd never talked about their private life to anyone. "Don't...it's mainly words. He's a master of cruel words...especially when he wants something. I feel terrible...responsible for most of the problems because I give him the whiskey and pills. I'm...an enabler I think they call it."

"Why do you give them to him?"

"He's in so much pain... he's always mocking me...making me feel so small...and If I refuse to bring him the liquor and pills, he cries and complains to others that I'm cruel while he recruits them to bring him what he wants."

"So...you go out dancing to...forget this nightmare you have at home?" She laughed derisively at herself. "Good god no, I've never done this before...or that...go dancing I mean. I've always just...taken it."

"Why was tonight different?"

"Tonight was especially hard. Before the accident, when we were still in love...I..." She laid her head on his shoulder. "I'm sorry...I don't think I can talk about this."

"You will tell me...at least I'm asking you to tell me...I have fallen in love with you...nothing you say will change that."

She nodded and said, "Back then, I felt like we should share our most intimate secrets...everything. When we were first married, I revealed everything about myself to my husband...all of my hopes...my dreams. Then after the accident, he lost some of his memory, but his memories of the things I told him, the secret things...things I found interesting or funny....things about...sex...all of that information remained intact. He knew all of my deepest secrets and fears. Sometimes it seems like he magnifies them so that they fill his thoughts and mind almost all of the time. He constantly brings up the most embarrassing things...sometimes in front of visitors. Tonight, he went on for hours using the things I'd told him so long ago to beat me down."

"Did he hit you?"

"No, but maybe it was even worse...I felt like he destroyed my sense of who I am. He crushed me and then mocked my tears when I started crying. And for the first time...I broke down and argued back. I couldn't believe myself, couldn't believe that I'd argue with a crippled man over irrelevant things that mattered to no one except me."

"Don't beat yourself up. It sounds like anybody could fall to that man's tongue."

"Before he finally passed out, his mood shifted. He went from anger and hatred to a sort of morose sadness and regret that he'd once again hurt me. He begged my forgiveness as he cried and sobbed and moaned. It was almost harder to listen to that than the angry things. He screamed that his anger was really at himself. He said he knew I needed a man and he couldn't do anything to satisfy me. He was always very proud of...our sex life..."

"You don't have to say..."

"It was never like what happened tonight...with us...I've never felt that way."

"I haven't either."

"He was the only man I'd ever been with..."

He smiled. "That doesn't surprise me."

She blushed and turned her head away. "I don't know if I can tell you..."

"You can tell me anything."

"Well...I tried to comfort him, and... he insisted...that I..."

"It might help to talk about it."

She nodded. "He wanted me to...masturbate in his presence...and then climb on top of him." She shuddered. "It was a sort of grotesque masquerade of an act of love. I tried to do what he wanted me to do...hoping it would calm him down, but it only made his anger worse. I jumped out of his bed and he went into a frenzy of name-calling that left me feeling so...dirty. He said that he didn't care what I did. He called me a whore and said I could gangbang the world and all he'd do was laugh. It was horrible."

He cradled her in his arms and kissed her forehead. "You didn't deserve that..." "I don't know. He made me doubt myself so much that I began to believe him." She sighed and continued, "So there I was, in the bed where we'd been so happy at one time, listening to his screams from his hospital bed across the room, wondering if my presence was beginning to hurt him more than it could possibly help." "You know those things aren't true."

"He can make you believe him. He's still got that ability."

"So that's why you came out tonight?"

"After he passed out, I decided to do something for myself, for my sanity. I just wanted to go somewhere I could stop crying, where I could dance and forget everything I faced at home. I just wanted to feel pretty and laugh at silly things. I never expected to do more than drink a glass of wine and maybe get asked to dance. I thought maybe I could cleanse my thoughts of the questions I had, of the deep sorrow that weighed so heavily upon my mind. All I wanted to do was dance." She gently touched his face and smiled. "I never expected to meet you."

He smiled back at her. "Happily for me, you did."

"After I met you, it wasn't enough to just...dance the night away. I got lost in the magic of the feeling that grew inside of me from the moment we met."

He pulled her closer and kissed her.

She smiled sadly and shook her head decisively. "I let things go too far, but it can't happen again." She'd clearly made up her mind that she'd never open the door again to risk a reoccurrence of what had happened that night, never again as long as her husband was alive.

When she finished her story, he'd understood that he couldn't, and maybe shouldn't, try to change her mind. "I understand...but this is not over. I'll still be here waiting for you if things change, or if you change your mind."

She'd left with no promises that he'd ever see her again.

He'd harbored a tiny bubble of hope that one day she'd show up on his doorstep, that her nightmare would be over, and he could make her the happiest woman in the world. He'd known that he was actually wishing for another man's death, but he'd been sure that the other man was wishing for his own death as well. It brought to his mind one of the questions that most troubled every physician he knew, when was it right to stop extending life. Quality of life had to be a factor that was considered when deciding the answer to that question, and this man had no quality left in his life. So he justified his thoughts and continued to wish. For three months, he'd carried that bubble of hope in the recesses of his heart, secure in the feeling that she would be back, sure that there was a future that held them as a happy couple, together for the rest of their lives. It was fate, kismet that had brought them together in the first place, so she was destined to return to his life, to bring him merciful relief from the pain of loss that any feeling person carries when they fight on death's battleground as he did in the emergency room every day. Three months later she was wheeled in on a gurney...

When he looked down at that blood-covered gurney and saw the face that had haunted his dreams through all of those months, he'd realized that the hand destiny had played him was cruel and without any mercy whatsoever. The love that had blossomed in the soil of their mutual pain had been a short-lived bloom of exquisite tortuous beauty. Fate had indeed brought the woman he loved back to him, but she was covered in blood, her face was blanched and drawn, her breathing shallow and labored. Someone had found her lying on the ground in an alley, unconscious and moaning with pain. When he began his examination, he was quickly able to discern what had happened. She'd been butchered by a back-street abortionist, all that was available at the time. Abortion was illegal so there was no safe place a woman could go when faced with a pregnancy that she thought needed to be terminated for any reason.

When he'd completed his examination and realized the cause of her injury, it was like a knife had been buried in his heart leaving a wound that would never heal. He'd known it was his baby that had been aborted, that it was the night with him that had sent her to her death.

When the truth swept over him, he'd known in his heart that she'd believed she was doing the right thing. She couldn't bring herself to leave a crippled man she'd pledged to love for the rest of her life, but couldn't crush whatever was left of that man by letting him know she'd been unfaithful. He'd wished she would've at least talked to him and let him try to help her. But he was just as sure that she hadn't because she was thinking about his feelings too. She didn't want him to have to share the grief making the choice to have an abortion would bring. She took all the weight herself, and tried to leave those she loved unscathed by her choices. She'd been admitted and he'd done everything he could to save her, but her life was lost long before she'd arrived at the hospital. She'd been bleeding out in the alleyway before she was found, and had lost so much blood that she was beyond repair. He'd stayed by her side until she'd died at dawn, and he'd made a promise to

her and himself that he'd fight to make changes that would assure women a clean, safe place to go when in need of help terminating an unwanted pregnancy. The change he promised, the haven he would provide, would at least give some meaning to the loss of the life of the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. So when he finished his residency, he'd started a women's clinic. His clinic provided all sorts of gynecological services including abortion procedures, which had become legal by then after the United States Supreme Court issued its opinion in *Roe v. Wade*, just one year after the death of the woman he loved. It wasn't what he'd expected to be doing when he'd started out in medical school, but he was sure it was a service that bettered the lives of the many women who came to him in dire straits, each one of them a testament to the woman whose love had so changed his life. He'd built his clinic out in the sticks in Lincoln County hoping to avoid the protests that assembled so frequently outside most women's clinics. He thought the protesters might leave him alone because he was out in the country, but he was wrong. His hopes for a calm and peaceful atmosphere hadn't worked out. The anti-abortion activists had found him and were there every Friday and Saturday. The crowds weren't huge, but they were always there, always vocal, always in the face of the women coming to him for help.

He always felt sorry for the people who had to walk through the throng of protesters to get to the front door. Some of them were there for routine check-ups or services other than abortion. It was bad enough for them, but even worse for those who actually came for an abortion. Most of them were young girls who'd made stupid mistakes, but he had his share of rape victims and women whose health would suffer if they went through a pregnancy. He knew there were others who used abortion as a method of everyday birth control, and he tried to get all of them on a safe birth control regimen before they left his care. He didn't want repeat customers in his surgery. He knew that all of them, even the most callous of them, suffered once they were laid back with their feet in the stirrups. It hurt their bodies when the vacuum began to pull, but there was also a different kind of hurt in their eyes. It was a very hard choice for anyone to make. He never let any of them drag him into the decision-making. It was a choice only they could make, but he was determined they would have a clean, safe place to make it. None of the women who came to him would end their lives on a gurney bleeding out because they didn't have a place to legally exercise their choice. Every one of them reminded him of her in some way. Each time one of them walked out of his clinic, he wished again she'd been able to go to a safe place.

And he was reminded of his promise every week since it was made those many years ago.

He sighed and turned away from the scene outside the window. The crowd outside was going to be bigger than usual that week-end. The Lambs of Jehovah would be there on Saturday for a special demonstration, bringing with them some of the national leaders of the anti-abortion movement. They were out there testing their speakers, getting ready for the speeches that would come later in the day on Friday

and the next day when the crowds were swollen to their largest. He moved away from the window, not really wanting them to catch sight of him at all. They made him nervous sometimes with their judgmental fervor. It was almost like they thought they were in a religious war, like a Moslem jihad. Sometimes he wished the government would just put birth control in the water. It would solve a lot of problems and make his life a lot easier.