

Madison Newman is a girl with a secret. Struggling to understand her place in God's plan, Madison is allowed to bless others in a powerful way. When her secret is revealed, a startled world regards her with suspicion and fear.

SECOND ACTS - BOOK ONE: MADISON'S CALL

By J. R. Pickens

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SECOND ACTS

BOOK ONE

Madison's Call

J. R. PICKENS

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Following the close of the revival service, Russell Stillman sat in his luxury motor home with his key people late into the evening. They debriefed while the worker bees packed everything up for the trip to the next town.

Kevin Wells, Stillman's business manager and publicist, was winding up his report. "We did very well today. After we covered expenses, including our 'gift' to the police department, we ended up doing quite well indeed."

"What about the advance publicity for Missouri?" Stillman asked. "We didn't do well there last time."

Kevin smiled and said, "We've got all the bases covered. I think you're going to like this. A local reporter in town here is going to do a great piece on today's show. I met with him earlier this week and wined and dined him at the best place in town. We have some great shots of your healing prayers and he'll include one with his article."

"How does that help us in Missouri?" Stillman wanted to know.

"He's got a buddy on the paper in Fredericktown. He'll put the story on the AP and his buddy will pick it up. We have flyers out already, along with billboards and – get this – next Thursday morning you'll be interviewed by their local station to promote the event."

"That is sweet, Kevin. Good work. How did you manage to pull that off?"

“It turns out their morning show’s host has a daughter on the local soccer team. The very same team that Stillman Ministries, Inc., donated to for their equipment fund.”

“God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform,” Stillman quoted.

They all burst out laughing. Stillman upended his bottle and drained it. “Grab me another beer, will you?”

Stillman turned to his head of security. “Bill, you’re up next.”

“It was a good day. We had no fights. One lady sprained her ankle in the tent when she stepped wrong. The doc wrapped it up in a bandage and scolded her for wearing platform shoes. Plus, the lady had been drinking, so there’s little chance of liability there. Lastly, we had reports of two lost purses and one lost wallet. Our lost and found reported no items matching their description.”

“That is a pretty good day, except I don’t care about those things right now, Bill. I think you know what I want to hear. How did two of your guys let some random woman approach the stage? And in a wheelchair! That is *never* supposed to happen.”

“I’m sorry, Russ. I had two new guys up front. I already chewed them out.”

“You let them keep their jobs?” Stillman asked.

“This one’s on me, Russ. I put them in a position they’d never been in before, and I had them working together. They’re good, just inexperienced. I don’t want to lose them because of my error.”

“Rookie move, Bill. We hit Missouri in less than a week. Let’s tighten it up. I depend on you guys.”

Bill brightened up. “I have a peace offering.”

“Yeah? What is it?”

Bill reached into his jacket and pulled out an envelope. He handed it over to Stillman, who leafed through the photos.

“These are the folks from Oracle, eh? It’s quite a large crew to make the trip all this way.”

“Two vans full. Both of them registered to Valley Community Church. We have Francine Cady’s address, and...” Bill paused for dramatic effect, “we know where the girl lives.” Bill handed over an index card on which he’d written the addresses.

Russell Stillman smiled.

Bill then handed over his phone. “And a little something extra.”

The YouTube app was open on a video. The title read “Stillman Rally Healing.” The scene was of the revival meeting earlier in the day, and the camera panned over the crowd. The shot was shaky, and the lighting was off because they were in the tent. There was a babble of voices, and the band played in the background.

Then the screaming began. The camera panned over to the sound, and there stood the woman from the wheelchair. She was shouting and leaping for joy. She hugged her daughter. And there, just behind the woman’s wheelchair, was that girl.

Stillman looked at the index card. *Madison Newman.*

Then the woman and her daughter fell to their knees and the mother shouted, "Thank you, Jesus! I can see, Lord, you healed me. Praise God for His mercy."

The video stopped shortly after that.

Bill said, "You can't buy that kind of publicity." He turned to Kevin. "Send that to your reporter friend in Fredericktown. Maybe they'll run it during the interview."

Kevin agreed. "They'll eat this stuff up. Did we post that?"

"No. Apparently it was someone who was here today and caught it on their phone," Bill replied.

"That's even better. No one can claim we were fishing for publicity, or that it was staged," Kevin turned to Stillman. "Great clip, don't you think, Russ?"

Stillman was watching the video again. Watching Madison.

"Boss?" Kevin said.

"Hmm? Oh, yes. Good clip. Definitely send it." Stillman passed the phone back to Bill.

The boss seemed distracted. "Is everything okay, Russ?" Kevin asked.

"Sure. Everything's fine. Listen, Bill, I'd like to know who that woman is. I want to know if she and that girl know each other, or if they're related."

Bill asked, "Do you think they were in it together? Maybe running some sort of con?"

Stillman thought about it for a moment before answering. "I don't think so. But I'd like to eliminate it as a possibility. Ask your guys. Find out if anyone saw them together."

“Will do,” Bill acknowledged.

“It was a good show today, guys. Let’s see if we can top it in Missouri.”

After the meeting, Stillman sat in his motor home thinking about this afternoon’s show. Every now and then he’d pick up his phone to watch the clip again.

What happened here today?

He didn’t believe the woman was faking. Her joy was far too convincing. He’d seen Madison with the woman and watched as she placed her palm on the woman’s head. What had she done? He’d prayed for the woman, but he would have laughed at the notion that it was his prayer that had healed her.

Stillman stepped outside in the cool of the night. The wind was a whisper, and here, on the outskirts of town, the night sky was brilliant with stars. He turned his eyes skyward, enjoying relief from the summer heat.

His footsteps crunched on the loose gravel as he made his way through the parking lot. Everything was packed up and ready to roll at first light. Most of his people had turned in for the night, but the one camper he sought still had lights on and he could hear the television as he knocked at the door.

“It’s not locked. C’mon in.”

Stillman opened the door and climbed up into the camper.

“Well, if it isn’t Reverend Stillman. What brings you to my humble door, Rev?”

“I have a job I’d like you to do for me, Chuck,” Stillman said.

Chuck Carson was twenty-seven years old, but with his boyish looks and mop of blond hair, he easily passed for a teenager. He was originally from Florida, and he’d been in and out of the system since the age of sixteen. His single mother had done the best she knew how, but she was no match for her delinquent son. He never finished school and made his living with a variety of petty thefts, residential burglaries, and picking pockets.

His numerous arrests finally caught up with him and, for once, he was facing some serious time. He’d done work for Stillman in the past and asked the reverend for a character reference.

Stillman did him one better and showed up at his sentencing. He explained to the judge that Chuck’s predilection for trouble was a result of a lack of direction and discipline during his formative years. If the court would permit the accused one last opportunity to turn himself around, Reverend Stillman promised to see that Mister Carson was gainfully employed.

The court agreed to the proposal on condition that Chuck complete the term of his probation with Stillman. Chuck readily accepted the court’s decision with the clear understanding that if he ran into any trouble while on probation, he’d be going to prison.

Chuck turned off the TV and hopped down off of his bunk. He and Stillman sat on opposite sides of the tiny dining table. “So, what’s up?”

“I need you to leave the show for a while, Chuck. I need you to go up to Oracle and check out a few people.” Stillman passed the photographs to Chuck.

He looked them over, and then raised his eyebrows. “Hey. It’s Madison and Trish.”

“You *know* them?” Stillman asked.

“They came in to check out the merch. We chatted for a bit.” Chuck passed the photos back with a smile.

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” Stillman sighed.

Stillman pulled a couple index cards out of his pocket and gave them to Chuck. “Here are addresses, names, everything you need. Most of all, I want to know about the girl.” He tapped on the photo of Madison.

Chuck quickly skimmed the cards. “What do you want to know? You know her name and where she lives. What more do you need?”

Stillman passed over an envelope, thick with bills. Chuck fanned through the cash and said, “Dude. This is a *lot* of money. What do you want me...” Chuck went wide-eyed and dropped the envelope. “No way, man. I want no part of—”

Stillman cut him off. “Don’t be an imbecile. This is for living expenses. I want you to go up there and settle in. I want you to be part of the landscape. Get a job, go shopping. I want to know what that girl does. I want to know who she sees. Dig deep. Find out if she has problems at home. Does she drink a lot? Does she sleep around?”

“Then what?” Chuck asked.

“I don’t know yet. It depends on what you have to tell me,” Stillman said.

“Are you looking to blackmail her? What did she do?”

“Blackmail her? No. I want to recruit her.”

Chucked laughed. “What’s so special about her?”

Stillman stood and headed for the door. “That’s what I want you to find out.”

CHAPTER TEN

The Traveling Revival Road Show was setting up just outside Waterston, Mississippi. Russell Stillman was enjoying the morning's first cup of hot coffee. This mid-October dawn was colder than usual, and he wrapped his hands around the ceramic mug to warm them.

Stillman watched as his crew set up the main tent. They were on a large parcel of land a few miles south of Interstate Fifty-Five, thirty acres of natural meadow among the trees. This weekend was the last show of the season. After this, they'd pack it up for the rest of the year and spend the winter in Florida. When spring rolled around again, they'd start all over, bringing salvation to the lost, and healing to the sick. Or a reasonable facsimile thereof.

He watched as the eastern sky grew brighter. Soon the sun would peek through the line of trees and the day would officially begin. It was his favorite time of day. Brand-new and unspoiled, a new day providing endless opportunities.

Stillman's phone buzzed in his coat pocket. He pulled it out, glanced at the screen, and sighed. Sometimes, along with opportunities, a new day also brings challenges.

"Good morning, Mr. Carson. Quite the early bird, aren't we?"

"The early bird catches the worm, Rev."

“Yes, but the second mouse gets the cheese. What’s up? Have there been any developments?”

Chuck got right to the point. “If you wanted to get rid of me, why didn’t you just fire me? It’s like I’m in exile out here.”

“My friend,” Stillman soothed, “I need you too much to get rid of you.”

“Then why aren’t you answering my texts?”

“Send me something interesting and I’ll even call you, Chuck. But what do I care if she had a birthday? Was anyone arrested?”

“No,” Chuck replied.

“Exactly. Nothing interesting.” Stillman recognized the need to keep the machine oiled and running smooth. He took a deep breath and a big swallow of coffee and said, “I’m sorry, Chuck. I don’t mean to keep you in the dark. I have a lot going on out here and there’s always some problem to take care of.”

In fact, Stillman was, at that very moment, watching his next problem do a slow cruise down Peyton Road. The patrolman’s brake lights flashed, but he didn’t stop, and the car continued its crawl down the rural road.

He’d be back.

Chuck said, “I get it. I’m not on the top of your list, but it’s exactly what you said, there’s nothing interesting going on. It’s been almost two months. What do you say I cut out of here and meet you in Mississippi?”

Stillman drained his cup. Maybe it was time to bring him back. Whatever it was he expected to

discover, he was obviously mistaken. Still, he’d seen what he’d seen. He just wasn’t certain what that had been.

“Give it another couple of weeks, Chuck. Keep a special eye on her at Halloween. If nothing happens, head out on November first. We’ll be at the Florida compound.”

“Home sweet home. Will do, Boss. Over and out.” Chuck ended the call before Stillman could change his mind.

Stillman pocketed the phone and was not the least bit surprised to see the patrolman pull off the road and head his direction. The heavy cruiser bounced and rocked along the uneven dirt road and came to a stop behind Stillman’s motor home.

A young deputy exited the passenger side of the car and waited. The sheriff got out of the driver’s side and nodded to his deputy.

Stillman and the older man shared a glance as the young deputy approached.

“Welcome to Tate County, Sir,” he said, touching the brim of his hat. “My name is Deputy Harris. This is Sheriff Bradshaw. May I ask your name and the nature of your business?”

“Certainly, Deputy. I am Reverend Stillman, and this is our Road to Redemption Traveling Road Show,” Stillman replied.

“Do you have permission to be on this land, Sir?”

Stillman smiled. He’d been around this block before. “Mr. Abraham Crenshaw owns this land, and it was he who provided the permission, Deputy. If you

like, I have a signed release in my office.” Stillman gestured at his luxury coach.

The deputy was quick to dismiss the necessity of documentation. “That’s quite all right, Reverend. I didn’t mean to imply that you were being less than honest with me.”

“No offense taken. Say, Deputy Harris, why don’t you and your wife come out this Saturday? Do you get Saturdays off?”

Stillman charged ahead without waiting for an answer. “Come up to the main box office and give them your name. You will have four front-row seats waiting for you. And thanks for watching out for us.” Stillman shook the deputy’s hand.

Deputy Harris looked over to his partner for guidance.

Sheriff Bradshaw told the young man, “Harris, why don’t you take a look around and make sure everything’s on the up and up. We don’t want any illegal stills in this county. And check that nobody’s running any card games.”

“Make sure you stop by the mess tent and grab yourself some breakfast and coffee,” Stillman added.

Harris cut another look over to his partner and saw him give a brief nod, then took off in search of the mess tent.

“Dear heaven, they’re making them young these days.” The sheriff shook his head as he watched his young partner walk away.

“What was that all about?” Stillman asked.

“New recruit. Got him Monday. I’m showing him the ropes.”

Stillman laughed aloud. “Geez, Bradshaw, the kid looks barely out of high school. What did you do to pull him as a partner?”

“I wanted him to survive,” replied Sheriff Bradshaw. “They were going to cut him loose on his own, right out of the academy with no real experience. The world would eat that boy alive.”

The sheriff changed the subject. “How’s business, Russ?”

“Not so good these days, I’m afraid,” Stillman replied.

“How’d that happen? Are you running out of sinners?” Bradshaw laughed at his own joke.

“It’s getting harder to draw a crowd,” Stillman explained. “In the wake of 2020, folks were clamoring to hear God’s Word. They were crying about their ‘rights.’ Now that we’ve had a couple of good years, they’ve grown complacent. They no longer make time for God in their lives.”

The men stopped to watch as workmen began to hoist the main tent.

Bradshaw commented, “I was wondering what happened to you folks. You usually stop by in the early spring and then again before Labor Day. I was beginning to think you’d forgotten all about us.”

“I’d never forget my brothers and sisters in Mississippi. We had to adjust our schedule in order to keep the ship afloat. I hope you and the missus can join us Saturday for services,” Stillman encouraged.

“We might be able to make it out this weekend. That is, if there’s going to be a service.”

“What do you mean, Sheriff?” Stillman asked. He was beginning to feel a little tug at his wallet.

“Do you have a current public use permit?” Bradshaw asked.

Russell Stillman nodded his understanding. It was like this in most of the places they stopped. Some officers were more blatant about it. Some were very discreet. Whatever they called it, Public Use Permit, Environmental Recovery Fee, etc., it was understood by both parties to be the cost of doing business.

“You know, Sheriff, I have a number of things demanding my attention this morning, but as soon as I’m done, I’ll get right down to the Hall of Records and get that permit,” Stillman assured him.

“No need to go to all that trouble, Reverend. I’ll be going down to city hall later. My cousin works in licensing. I’ll give her the application fee and have her issue the permit.”

Stillman’s suspicions now confirmed, he asked, “How much is the application fee, Sheriff?”

Bradshaw didn’t even blush. “That’ll be two hundred dollars, Reverend.”

Stillman whistled, but he had his wallet open and was counting out the fee in twenty dollar bills. “This is more than it was last summer, if I remember correctly.”

“Darned politicians. They voted for a fee increase across the board.” Bradshaw counted the money and said, “Can’t trust a one of ‘em.”

Sheriff Bradshaw tucked the bills into his pants pocket. Their business concluded, Bradshaw said, “You have a great weekend, Russ. Hope you have a good show.”

The two men shook hands and Stillman watched as the sheriff made his way to the mess tent to retrieve his deputy and have a little breakfast.

Ordinarily, he might have joined the officers for breakfast. It never hurt to foster a good relationship with the law enforcement wherever you happened to do business, but he had a lot on his mind.

By late afternoon, the tents had been erected, the parking areas established, and the vending booths lined up along the approach to the big tent. It was amazing how, at the end of the season, it took half the time to set up as it did at the beginning.

By this time, his crew was experienced. He’d start the next season with a green crew. Sure, some of the men came back from the previous year, and they’d be the ones to train the new guys. It took a new crew a good month or two to learn the ropes. By the time they were done for the season, his men could practically set up camp in their sleep. He strongly suspected some of them did.

Most of his people had gone into town. A couple of them went to post flyers for the weekend show. Some of them wanted to check out the local entertainment. Others wanted to enjoy a meal that wasn’t from the mess tent. Whatever their reason, Stillman understood

the urge. Sometimes it was therapeutic to do something different.

For Russell Stillman, something different meant getting away and being alone. When he was alone there were no decisions to make, no questions to answer, and no one making demands on his time.

Stillman changed into jeans and hiking boots, and went off to explore the lightly wooded hills to the northwest of the camp. After walking for about a half hour, he chanced upon a narrow dirt road leading up into the hills.

He followed the abandoned road for a while, shedding cares with every step. The only sounds he heard were the chirping of birds, the soft whisper of the breeze through the trees, and the rhythmic crunch of his steps on the dirt. He was only dimly aware of the fact that he'd begun to smile.

Stillman was pulled out of his reverie when he heard the hum of a vehicle approaching from behind. When it rounded the corner, he saw it was one of the electric carts his security team used to patrol the parking lots during their shows. Behind the wheel, he recognized his business manager and friend, Kevin Wells.

"Will wonders never cease?" Wells exclaimed. "Imagine running into you out here."

"Yes," Stillman commented wryly. "It's a remarkable coincidence."

Wells replied, "I thought there were no coincidences in God's kingdom."

“I don’t want you to take this the wrong way,” Stillman began, “but I was looking forward to spending a little time alone. You know, in quiet reflection.”

Wells answered, “Great! Me, too. Get into the cart and we can spend time alone together.”

Stillman asked, “Did you listen to what you just said?”

Wells laughed. “C’mon. Jump in. I want to show you something.”

Stillman took one last breath of the relative quiet before surrendering, then hopped into the cart.

The narrow dirt road ended at a clearing at the top. It wasn’t much of a hill, but it afforded a fine view of the small valley. Below, towards the southeast, lay their camp.

“Isn’t this a great view?” Wells enthused. They stood at the edge of an embankment, looking down at the tents and vendor kiosks. “I’ll get a guy up here with a camera. We’ll get some shots of the crowd, a few at night with the tents lit up from within. Maybe I should get a time-lapse shot of the parking lot filling up.”

Stillman nodded absentmindedly. He didn’t really need to see all this. He had just wanted a few minutes to himself.

“We have a ‘Best Of’ Blu Ray in the works from this year’s shows, and a live CD from the band,” Wells continued. “They’ll be available on the website by November with discount offers emailed to members. It’s the perfect Christmas gift for that special friend or family member.”

“You’re always just a couple steps ahead, aren’t you?” Stillman asked.

“Oh, yeah. That’s why I’m making the big money,” Wells snorted.

“Seriously, Kevin. You take excellent care of the business side of things. It isn’t a skill you can learn. You have a real talent. Every year, at the end of the season, I worry you’re going to tell me you’re not coming back.”

“Remember that when it’s time to renegotiate my contract.” Wells grabbed a cooler from the back of the cart and sat at the edge of the embankment to take in the view. Handing Stillman a cold beer, he beckoned Russ to join him. “Really, Russ, where am I going to go? Running around the country with you already cost me a marriage.”

Stillman twisted the top off and raised the bottle in salute, “To marriage! A man is incomplete until he’s married. Then he’s finished.”

The both drank until their bottles were empty, and then opened another.

Wells wasted no time in making his pitch. “Listen, Russ, I’ve got some great ideas for next year’s season, and a couple of ways I think we can boost attendance significantly.”

Stillman shook his head. “Not now, Kevin. Please. I came up here to forget about the show for a few hours. I’m tired.”

“Tired?” Wells asked. “Or distracted?”

“What do you mean?”

“My friend, when it comes to putting on a show and working a crowd, you are second to none. Do you know I’ve seen over two hundred of your revival meetings? I swear there are times I’m still excited to hear you speak.”

“Gee. Thanks, Kevin.” Stillman said.

“It wasn’t a compliment, Russ. These last few shows weren’t up to standard. You didn’t generate any excitement. The people who come to your revivals are looking for excitement. Sizzle. Pizzazz! What’s happening? It’s like you lost interest after we left Illinois.”

Stillman was quiet for a long minute. He swallowed the last of his beer. “Got another in there?”

“You sure?” Wells wanted to know.

“I’m not driving,” Stillman shrugged.

Wells passed a bottle over to his boss.

“I started thinking about the show,” Stillman said. “I mean *seriously* thinking about the show. I’ve been doing the same thing for years!”

“And it works,” Wells reminded him.

“Yes, it works. But...stay with me here. Imagine that you live in the same house for a long time. After a few years the place gets a little shabby. You might need to do some painting. Probably have to get a plumber in there. Maybe you’ll put in some carpet, buy a new sofa, or upgrade the appliances in the kitchen. It still works as a house. The roof isn’t leaking, it’s structurally sound, but it isn’t what it *could* be.”

“So, the show is a house?” Kevin guessed.

“It feels like I saw the show for what it really is, and...I dunno. It needs an overhaul,” Stillman concluded.

Wells eyed his boss thoughtfully. “Of course, this sudden introspection has nothing to do with the girl.”

“Huh? Oh, no,” Stillman lied. “This has been in the works for a while now. It has nothing to do with her.”

“Where’s Carson been these last couple of months?” Wells challenged.

Stillman tried to sidestep the question. “Mr. Carson assists me with special projects from time to time. For instance—”

Wells held up his hand, “Don’t say another word. I don’t want to know what he does for you. You have him up in Illinois following that girl, don’t you? Did you ever stop to think about how that might look? How something like that would play out on the evening news?”

Stillman downplayed Kevin’s concerns. “No one’s going to find out. Besides, I’ve already told Chuck to abandon the engagement and meet us in Florida. It turned out to be nothing after all.”

“What did you think it was going to be, Russ? What surprising revelation did you expect your private investigator was going to uncover about a teenage girl?”

Stillman didn’t answer right away. He’d always been able to brush Wells off when he brought up the subject of Madison Newman.

He finished his beer and sat the empty bottle between them. Maybe it was time to shoot straight with

Kevin. “I prayed for that woman in the wheelchair. When I was done, her daughter rolled her out toward the exit. End of story. Then this girl, Madison, runs up and starts talking to them. The next thing I know, she’s putting her hand on this woman who starts screaming that she’s healed. Don’t you think that’s a little unusual?”

“Not as unusual as sending a convicted felon to stalk a minor.”

Stillman frowned. “Nice. Can we focus here for a minute?”

“Fine. I’ll focus,” Wells said. “No. I don’t think it’s at all unusual for a woman to shout about being healed at a *faith healing event*.”

Exasperated, Stillman said, “No, Kevin. It’s about the girl. She saw me watching and tried to run. She knew I’d seen her do something.”

“Do what?” Wells asked.

Stillman shrugged. “I wish I knew. When we locked eyeballs, she looked guilty as sin. So, either she was either running a con, or...”

“Or what?” Wells wanted to know.

“Or she really healed that woman. Either way, I want to know. Is she a con artist, or is she the real deal?”

Wells had no doubt. “Con artist. Kids these days are cold-blooded.”

“That’s what I would have said. It turns out I’d be wrong. Chuck spent weeks watching her routine, where she goes, who she sees, what she does. It turns out the girl does nothing unless it involves school or church.”

“Which leaves the second option of her being the real deal?” Wells asked.

“Yes! But that’s absurd,” Stillman insisted.

“Is it? If I remember correctly, your job is selling miracles.”

“C’mon, Kevin. She’s a sixteen-year-old girl. Are you going to be the one to convince me she restored that woman’s sight? It’s easier to believe she’s a criminal mastermind.”

Wells clapped Stillman on the back. “I’m glad you realize that, Russ. Who knows what happened that day? It may have seemed odd at the time, but I’m glad to learn it was nothing, and that you called your boy home.”

“Yeah.” Stillman nodded in the affirmative, but he wasn’t at peace.

“What’s going on, Russ? Really.”

Stillman began tentatively. He’d been holding it inside long enough. He needed to tell someone. “The thing is, I was up on the stage, and I wasn’t thinking of that woman at all. Then – and I kid you not – a voice said, *Look*. It was as close to me as you are now. *Look*. I turned to see who had snuck up on stage, but no one was there.”

“You never mentioned this before,” Wells said.

“No. I haven’t.”

“Did this voice tell you what to look for?”

Stillman replied, “There was only that one word, but I knew. My eyes were drawn to the girl, and to the woman in the wheelchair.”

“God wanted you to see the woman get healed?” Wells asked.

Stillman shook his head. “No. Not her. You know how when you throw a stone into a pond and all the ripples radiate out from the center? The Holy Spirit moved outward from those two like that. As it moved, it touched a woman and she smiled. A young father was touched, and he lifted his hands to praise God. I saw it touch a young man, and when it did, he started crying. Then he dropped to his knees to pray.”

“And you saw all of this from the stage?” Wells asked.

“Yes,” Stillman admitted. “But that’s not all. I *felt* it. As it moved through the crowd, it touched the hearts of saints and sinners alike. It was this that the voice wanted me to see. Then it brushed past me, and I saw the tent, my work, the show, with...” Stillman moved a hand through the air, as if trying to grasp the right word, “...with new eyes, and everything I’d done looked shabby, worn, and worthless.”

There was a prolonged silence between the two men. Shadows had grown long, but the cart would get them back to camp quickly.

Wells finally spoke up. “This is the last show of the season. After this, you can take a few months off. As for me, when we pack it in on Monday I’m headed to Charleston. I intend to spend the Thanksgiving holiday with my daughter and her family.”

Stillman shot him a look with eyebrow raised.

“Afterwards, I’ll head down to Florida.”

“You had me a little worried,” admitted Stillman.

“You have *me* worried, Russ. What’s wrong with you, anyway? You’ve done a lot of good for a lot of people. Let your detractors say what they will, but you’re the one traveling the roads throughout this great land, bringing the message of salvation to town after town.”

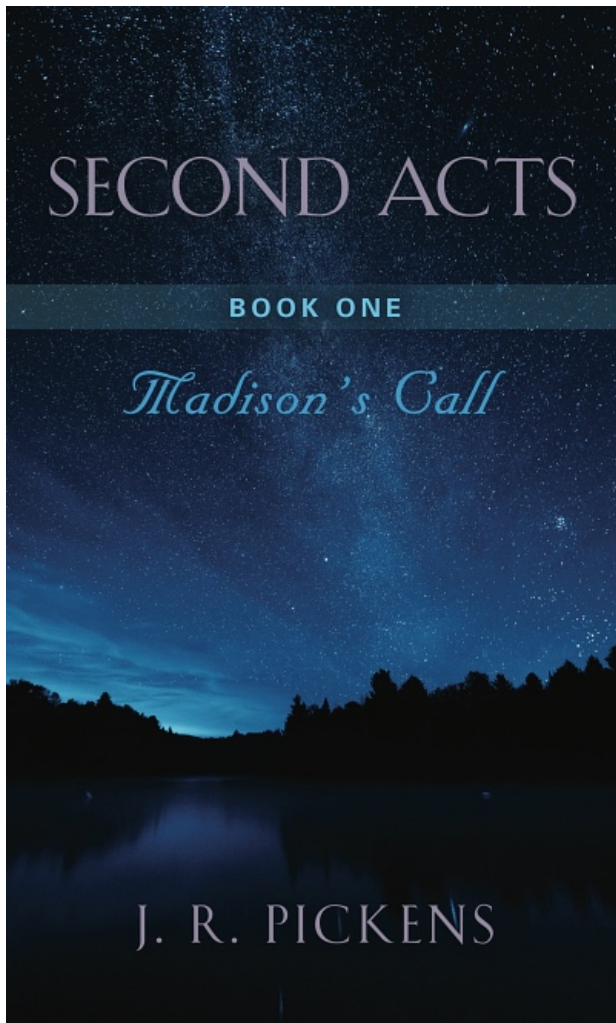
Wells groaned as he stood up. “I need you to do something for me.”

“What’s that?” Stillman asked.

“Get yourself down to Florida and go fishing. Relax. Take some time off and clear your head. Can you do that?”

Wells’ concern for his friend was obvious, and Stillman was grateful for his advice. “I’ll take some time off, I promise.”

“That’s the spirit! When I get down to Florida, I will blow your mind with some ideas I’ve got brewing for the road show. You’re going to love it.”



Madison Newman is a girl with a secret. Struggling to understand her place in God's plan, Madison is allowed to bless others in a powerful way. When her secret is revealed, a startled world regards her with suspicion and fear.

SECOND ACTS - BOOK ONE: MADISON'S CALL

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