

Madison Newman travels into a hostile world to warn against the powers of spiritual darkness. A girl with a unique gift, the runaway teen changes lives in a powerful way as she delivers a message of warning against the coming judgment.

SECOND ACTS - BOOK TWO: THE MESSAGE

By J. R. Pickens

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SECOND ACTS

BOOK TWO

The Message

J. R. PICKENS

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Print ISBN: 978-1-64719-960-9

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-64719-961-6

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2022

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Pickens, J. R.

SECOND ACTS - BOOK TWO: THE MESSAGE by J. R.
Pickens

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022902301

CHAPTER FIVE

On Saturday morning, Chuck and Madison talked some more about what Madison wanted to do, and if she still wanted to be on the road. Her answer was an emphatic yes. Once it was settled, they decided to go into town. Both of them needed to do some laundry, and Chuck wanted to lay in some supplies.

When Chuck fired up the truck, Janice came out of her RV to see her new friend.

“You guys aren’t leaving, are you?” she asked.

“No, we’re going into town for the day,” Madison explained. “Would you like to come along? There’s plenty of room for John and the kids.”

“I think we’re going to hang out with the kids today. Little John’s excited about going on a nature hike with us. We’re taking a picnic,” Janice said.

“How’s Izzy?” Madison asked.

“Maddie, that girl is energized. She’s started crawling around and fussing with her brother. I’ve never seen her like this. Thank you for praying for our baby!” Tears of joy spilled onto Janice’s cheeks as she hugged Madison.

“You’re welcome,” Madison said. “Is there anything we can get for you while we’re out?”

“No, thank you,” Janice replied. “Listen, you can’t possibly know how grateful we are for what you’ve

done. I'm not only talking about Izzy. I mean, for me and John, too. We were so focused on Izzy that we lost our focus on God. It's no wonder we lost our way."

Madison felt uncomfortable with the praise. "It wasn't me at all, Janice. You understand that, right?"

"Of course," Janice said, taking Madison's hand. "The thing is, John wants to hold a Sunday church service at the camp's amphitheater. We're going to sing some songs and pray. John wants you to say a few words."

"Me? I've never preached before," Madison protested.

Janice didn't pay attention to her objection. "Well, we prayed about it and decided we'd worship if you'd preach."

Madison felt overjoyed. "Not only do I get to share Jesus, but 'Janice and John' want to be my opening act? I'll be there!"

Chuck hopped out of the back of the camper and walked around to the front of the truck to see Janice and Madison talking.

"Ready to go, Maddie?" Chuck asked.

"You bet!" Madison exclaimed, already excited about Sunday.

"Good morning!" Janice greeted Chuck. She gave him a hug and said, "Be safe."

"I'll do my very best, and that's a promise," Chuck said as he climbed into the cab of the truck.

They rolled slowly through the campground. When they came to the main highway, Chuck signaled to turn left, but Madison objected.

“Let’s go north,” she decided.

“Are you sure? There’s a city a few miles south of here. They have everything we need,” Chuck explained.

“What happened to your sense of adventure?” Madison teased.

“North it is,” Chuck acquiesced, and pulled out onto the highway.

They’d looked at a map on Chuck’s tablet last night, and Madison explored the area. At the northern end of the lake was a nice little lakeside town. It was small enough to be quaint and touristy, but not big enough to be overwhelmed with people.

That’s what Madison wanted to avoid right now. It wouldn’t take more than twenty minutes to get there, and she was eager to see what it was like.

She turned on the truck’s radio and began scrolling through the stations. She heard static mostly, but she finally got a station that came in clear.

“...the unseasonably warm weather continues until next week. By next Thursday we should start seeing temps drop a good eight to twelve degrees. Until then, it looks like a perfect night for the Trick-or-Treat crowd. The county health agency reminds—”

“I can’t believe I forgot it was Halloween!” Madison said.

“You’ve kind of had a lot going on.”

“We’re going to have to get some candy,” Madison insisted.

“What for?” Chuck asked.

“In case some kids come trick or treating tonight,” Madison replied. “We can at least give some to John Junior and Izzy.”

Chuck was about to debate the wisdom of giving candy to an eight-month-old baby, when they stopped their conversation to listen to the radio once more.

“Still no word on missing teen, Madison Newman, last seen at her home this past Wednesday night. Local police were called in on a domestic disturbance call and, later, the parents discovered the girl was no longer in the home.

“Miracle Madison, as she’s been dubbed by the press, made international news one week ago today when she healed a boy who’d apparently perished in an amusement park ride accident.”

Madison turned the radio off.

“Are you sure you want to go into town?” Chuck asked.

“This doesn’t change anything,” Madison said. “It’s not like I’m hiding out.”

“Domestic disturbance call, huh? Did that have anything to do with...” Chuck ran a fingertip over his lower lip.

“It’s almost healed by now,” Madison said. She pulled down her passenger side visor and examined her lip in the mirror. Then she turned her head to the side. The bruise was barely visible.

The town was bigger than they’d expected, but as Madison said, they weren’t hiding out.

Their first stop was the grocery store. Among the few bags of mini chocolate bars remaining, Madison managed to find a couple of assortments that suited her.

“Let’s get some hot dogs! We can have a campfire and invite Janice and John, and we can pass out candy,” Madison suggested.

Chuck took a little longer to answer than Madison wanted.

“C’mon, it’ll be fun!” she said.

She snatched a bag of buns off the shelf and tossed them at Chuck.

“Incoming!” she shouted, just in time for Chuck to grab them out of the air.

“Okay! You win. Hot dogs for dinner, and candy for the kids.”

The next stop was the Laundromat. Chuck finished making the camper’s bed with freshly laundered sheets and pillow slips, while Madison hung her shirts and folded the rest of her laundry. There wasn’t a lot of room for storage in the camper, but they managed to get everything put away.

His phone buzzed and he took a quick look. Stillman again. Several times a day. He sent a quick reply.

Patience. Wait for my text.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry. Do you want to go get some lunch?” Chuck asked.

“Yeah. I’m pretty hungry, too,” she admitted. “Where are we going?”

Chuck started the truck and pulled out of the parking lot. “I don’t know yet.”

They drove down to the marina and walked around, admiring the sailboats and wandering in and out of the small shops. Madison decided she wanted to eat outside and watch the boats, so they sat at one of the patio tables overlooking the docks and enjoyed their lunch.

There were a lot of people out. It was like a little kiss of summer at seventy-two degrees on this Halloween day, and they wanted to take advantage of what was probably the last weekend of good weather until next spring. There were a lot of boats on the lake, and Madison watched several cutting gracefully through the water.

Chuck asked a passing couple to take their picture and they readily agreed. Chuck handed the girl his phone and she got a couple of good shots of them with sailboats on the lake as a background. Then he returned the favor as the couple took a turn posing against the idyllic backdrop.

There were many small shops along the docks, and on the exterior wall of one of them was mounted an old-fashioned, coin-operated telephone. Madison might not have noticed it at all, except for the young boy walking with his family who ran up to it and stuck his finger in the coin return slot, hoping for a little change. It gave her an idea.

“See that phone over there?” Madison pointed.

“That old pay phone?”

“Do you think it still works?” she asked.

“It looks like it might. Most of the ones I see are all beat up. That looks to be in pretty good condition,” Chuck replied.

Madison laid her change out on the table. She had eighty-seven cents.

“Do you have any change I can borrow? I need to make a call,” Madison said.

“Use my phone,” Chuck said, placing his phone on the table in front of her.

Madison shook her head. “I don’t want to take any chances on being found. I know it’s a long shot, but...” Madison shrugged.

Chuck dumped a fistful of quarters on the table in front of her. “Plenty of these left over from the laundry run. Go make your call. I’m going to run up to the hardware store. There was one across from where we parked. I’ll be back.”

“Thanks!” Madison smiled at his politeness. It was nice that he didn’t pry into her business or ask who she was calling.

She went over to the phone and picked up the handset. She listened and was rewarded with a dial tone. She didn’t dare call home. Or Trisha’s house. The police knew she was missing, and probably monitored the activity on those phones in case she called. There was only one person she could trust right now.

Madison tapped the number for directory assistance and at the voice prompt said, “Oracle, Illinois. Macy’s.”

The AI asked if she wanted to be connected. She responded in the affirmative and fed the machine the requested amount. Soon the call was ringing through and was answered by another automated system.

Madison navigated her way through the decision tree until she eventually said, “Bridal.”

It rang several times, but finally someone answered.

“Bridal,” the girl said.

“Jennifer?” Madison asked.

“I’m sorry. Jennifer’s not here right now. Is there anything I can help you with?”

Madison thought for a moment. “No. I guess not.”

“Would you like to leave a message?” the voice asked.

“No thank you. I’ll try back another time. Do you know when she’ll be there?”

“Oh! Wait a second, okay? Let me put you on hold.”

Madison waited. She trusted Jennifer. It was Jennifer who had taken her to Saint Louis to await her parents when the police released her from custody. Jennifer said to call her at any time if she needed something. Anything.

Her patience was rewarded, and someone came to the phone. “This is Jennifer. What may I do for you today?”

“Jennifer? Can I leave a message for Uncle Morrie?”

“Madison?” Jennifer’s voice was low but registered sheer surprise.

“He’s my favorite uncle,” Madison said.

“Whew,” Jennifer said. “It IS you! Where are you? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Madison reassured her. “And I’m not too far away. I’d like to leave a message for my mom and dad.”

“Hold on,” Jennifer said. “I have a pen. Just need some paper.”

There was a sound of rustling. “Is there somewhere we can come and get you?” Jennifer asked.

“That’s not why I’m calling. I’m not going home, Jennifer. At least not now,” Madison explained.

“But why not? Everyone is frantic, wondering what happened to you,” Jennifer said.

“I know. I don’t want to upset anyone. I just heard them talking about me on the news. I’m really sorry for making everyone go through this.”

“Madison, we’re worried about you. I’m worried about you.”

“I appreciate that. Please pray for me. That’s all I need. God is with me,” Madison declared. “What about Mr. Abbott?”

“He talks about you a lot. He said we would hear about you soon,” Jennifer said.

“See? And here I am!”

“He didn’t say we’d hear *from* you. He said we’d hear *about* you. Like something would happen again,” Jennifer explained.

“Is Mr. Abbott worried?”

“No. Oddly enough, he’s not worried at all. He said God sent you into the world, and He would take care of you,” Jennifer replied.

“He’s exactly right. So, can I give you a message?” Madison asked.

“Fire away.”

“Tell everyone that I’m perfectly fine. No one’s being mean to me or hurting me. I have a warm place to sleep, and God is touching lives. Ask them to pray for me,” Madison concluded.

“Got it. Is that all?” Jennifer asked.

“Please tell my mom I love her and that I miss her more than she would believe. Tell her to trust me, and to trust God, and I’ll see her in a while.”

“Okay. Anything for your dad? He’s really taking this hard.”

Madison sighed. She was broken-hearted for her father. He would blame himself for all of this, but she knew he was blameless.

“Tell my dad I love him. Please tell him that I completely understand what happened Wednesday night. I know it wasn’t his fault. Make him understand that I had to leave, and it wasn’t because of him. I was going to leave anyway; I just didn’t know how to tell them.” Madison sniffed, fighting back tears.

Jennifer was fighting back tears of her own.

“Thanks for everything,” Madison said, intending to hang up.

“Whoa, whoa! Wait a second,” Jennifer pleaded. “How can I get hold of you?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t bring my phone. When are you at work?” Madison asked.

“I’m here almost every weekend. Ten to six on Saturday and Sunday,” Jennifer replied. “If you need anything at all, call me. Even if you don’t need

anything, call me. I want to be sure you're okay. Can I give you my mobile number?"

"Hang on a second," Madison said. She dug in her purse until she found an old envelope and a pen. "Okay. What is it?"

Jennifer gave her the number, and Madison dutifully wrote it down. "Please let my parents know I miss them. Thanks for everything."

Madison hung up the phone.

It wasn't that she didn't appreciate what Jennifer was doing for her, but it felt like a mistake to call. As much as she wanted to reassure her parents that she was okay, it made her miss home too much.

She felt her resolve slipping. It would be too easy to go back home and try to live a normal life. But Madison knew there was no going home. At least, not to the life she had before.

When Chuck returned, he found her on the dock looking out over the water. She'd been crying, but he didn't bring it up. He was curious to know who she called, and what caused her to cry, but he didn't want to pry. It wouldn't do for her to grow suspicious.

"I got you something," he said.

"Oh, yeah? What?"

He held out a cheap key ring with a newly made key. "A key for the camper."

"For my home away from home. Thanks, Chuck." Madison took the key and slipped it into her pocket.

Madison was silent for a long time, watching the sailboats glide across the water like graceful swans.

“You know, it’s remarkable how God puts certain people in your life.”

“How so?” Chuck asked.

“You, for instance,” Madison answered. She turned to look at him.

Chuck’s mouth dried, and his stomach filled with icy dread. “What about me?”

“You can stop pretending. You’ve got to know what a blessing you are to me. You protected me. Your choice to bring us here allowed me to meet Janice and John. Not just meet them, but I got to know them and ask Jesus to heal their daughter. Can you imagine how many people they’ll touch with their testimony? How many will their witness bring to know Jesus?”

It was a couple of moments before Chuck allowed himself to speak. “I guess I never thought of it like that. I feel blessed to be able to help you.”

“You’ve already been a big help to me. I’m grateful for what you’ve done, but I don’t want to take advantage of your kindness.”

“Are you firing me?” Chuck asked, trying to laugh it off, but suddenly worried. What if she decided to return home?

Madison chuckled. “No, but you don’t have to stick with me through this. It wouldn’t be fair to ask that of you. Who knows what you’d be getting yourself into?”

“I’m no saint,” Chuck said. “But as long as you need me, I’ll be by your side.”

“That’s very noble. I’ll pray you don’t live to regret it. Remember, you can bail whenever you need to,” Madison said.

They stood together against the railing for a while, taking in the view.

“I’m supposed to be in New York this weekend,” Madison revealed.

Chuck was surprised. “New York? What for?”

“Sharon Sterling was going to interview me. They were going to fly me and my family out to New York in the network jet and put us up in a five-star hotel. It was all very fancy.”

“Sharon Sterling was going to interview you?”

“Yep,” Madison answered.

“You figured running away was better than a fancy weekend in New York?”

“After seeing Izzy and her mom together? There’s no question about it.”

“I guess I can’t argue with that,” Chuck agreed.

CHAPTER TEN

Nestled in a small valley, Harmony Springs was home to over seventeen hundred souls. Many of them worked in the larger cities nearby, but some managed to make a living in the close-knit community. Hidden away as it was, it was overlooked by most travelers, and largely ignored by vacationers, but those who managed to stumble upon the old-world charm of this rustic village returned over and over again.

During the summer, the population of this remote paradise swelled as they opened the town to visitors eager to get away from the noise and rush of civilization. Driving into Harmony Springs was like returning to an earlier America. It was a village of honest people who valued good neighbors, hard work, and God's Word.

Alice Brennan ran a small bed and breakfast at the edge of town. At sixty-three, she'd been taking care of the business all by herself. The two-story house sat on a small hill that overlooked the river. The house was encircled by a wide wooden porch that was ideal for sitting during the summer as cool breezes gave blessed relief from the heat of the day.

Mrs. Brennan also ran a small campground of a dozen sites down by the river. The sites all had

electrical hookups, which was a surprising amenity given their remote location.

It was here that Chuck found work within a couple days of their arrival. Madison had told him they might be staying a while, so he'd asked around, and discovered Mrs. Brennan needed a handyman. She hired him immediately to do the upkeep of the grounds, and to do any maintenance around the property.

The work wasn't arduous, and Chuck realized that he enjoyed working with his hands. Harmony Springs was an ideal place to let the cares and woes of the world slide off your shoulders, and to enjoy the goodness of God's earth.

Mrs. Brennan was a no-nonsense woman. She wasn't given to idle chatter or frivolous activities. She was very specific about how she wanted things done and wasn't at all reticent to point out when tasks weren't completed to her satisfaction. She was short on praise, and she rarely smiled. For all of that, she paid a fair wage and had reasonable expectations.

This is why Madison found herself knocking on the door of the big house on Monday morning, roughly a week after their arrival.

There was no answer and she knocked again, this time more insistently.

"Hold your horses," came the reply from inside the house.

Mrs. Brennan opened the door and saw Madison standing patiently, hands clasped in front of her.

"Hello, Mrs. Brennan?" Madison began.

Alice Brennan didn't recognize the young lady standing in front of her. She'd lived here all her life and knew most everyone in Harmony Springs, and knew their children, too. But this one? She never met her before.

"Are you selling something?" she asked.

"No, Ma'am," Madison replied.

"Then what do you want?"

"Pastor Fleming said you might need someone to help with the rooms and stuff. You know, cleaning, and maybe doing some laundry."

Mrs. Brennan was silent for a long moment as she looked the girl up and down. Finally, she said, "C'mon in and have a seat."

Madison thanked the woman and sat in the living room on a large, overstuffed sofa.

"What's your name?" Mrs. Brennan asked.

"Madison Newman," she replied.

"You ever work before?"

"No, Ma'am. At least, I've never had a job. But I did some babysitting and dog walking for my neighbors. I'm very reliable," Madison smiled.

"I don't have dogs or babies. What else can you do?"

Madison enthusiastically listed her skills. "I can clean, vacuum, and make up the rooms, do dishes and laundry. I can even cook. A little. Breakfast mostly, but mom says—"

Mrs. Brennan cut her off with a wave of her hand. "All right, all right."

Madison sat patiently while Mrs. Brennan considered her.

Mrs. Brennan finally broke the silence. “You come into town with that Mr. Carson fella?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Madison answered.

“You’re not married.” It wasn’t a question.

“Oh, no. We’re traveling together, that’s all,” Madison explained.

“Are you two having relations?” she asked bluntly.

Madison was shocked. No one had ever asked her such a question. Not even her mother. She fought back her tears and answered, “No, Ma’am. I’ve never even had a boyfriend.”

Mrs. Brennan saw from Madison’s expression that she was telling the truth. She offered no apology for the question.

“I can use the help. It’s too much for me to handle on my own. Follow me.”

The huge house could have been a museum of days long past. Mrs. Brennan began the climb up the wide staircase and Madison followed. The carpet had once been lush, a deep burgundy with a tropical floral design. Now long faded, it was worn and threadbare in places, yet it remained clean and well cared for.

“I have six bedrooms upstairs,” Mrs. Brennan said. “They share two bathrooms. There are no guests staying now, but with Thanksgiving just weeks away, and Christmas following right on its heels, we always end up with a few families looking to enjoy an old-fashioned-style holiday.”

“I think that’s wonderful,” Madison said honestly.

“You can start in these two rooms.” Mrs. Brennan pointed to the rooms on the left. “Strip the beds and launder the linens. You’ll want to vacuum and dust, and then make the beds. There’s a vacuum in the linen closet. I got tired of dragging the old Hoover up those stairs and bought another.”

Without further discussion, Mrs. Brennan turned and left, leaving Madison to her chores.

Hours later, Madison stood silent as Mrs. Brennan thoroughly inspected her work. She said a silent prayer of thanks for a mother who taught her how to be self-sufficient. Madison had finished cleaning four of the six rooms and had begun on the first bathroom by the time Mrs. Brennan had returned to check on her.

Mrs. Brennan nodded and turned. “Follow me.”

Downstairs, she escorted Madison to the back of the house and opened the door to a small room. It had a bed and a small dresser, and a door that opened to a tiny bathroom with a shower.

“This is your room. You can come and go as you please, but curfew is ten o’clock.”

Madison felt grateful. “Thank you so much, but I have a place in the camper and I—”

“How old are you?” Mrs. Brennan interrupted.

Madison looked down at the carpet and answered in a small voice, “Sixteen.”

“A girl of sixteen has no business staying in a man’s camper. Friend or not, it isn’t proper. Am I clear?”

Madison nodded. Despite Mrs. Brennan’s gruff manner, Madison knew the woman was concerned for her well-being, and it touched her heart.

“Perfectly clear, Mrs. Brennan. Thank you.”

Thus began Madison’s career at the Harmony Springs Bed and Breakfast.

While Chuck’s responsibilities required that he work during daylight hours, Madison enjoyed a great deal more flexibility. She’d get up early in the morning to make her bed and get ready for the day. Once her chores were done, she was free for a few hours to do as she pleased.

Although she was an early riser, she never managed to wake up before Mrs. Brennan. Often, but not always, Mrs. Brennan had breakfast ready for her. There was always hot coffee, and sometimes pancakes, or sometimes oatmeal and toast. On rare occasions, she had bacon and eggs.

She didn’t forget Chuck, either. Before Madison sat down to eat, Mrs. Brennan would ask her to take a covered tray down to the campsite for Chuck.

One morning, during Madison’s second week in the house, Mrs. Brennan gave her a tray for Chuck, and she went to deliver it. When Madison returned, her own breakfast was already on the dining room table. She unwrapped the napkin but discovered she didn’t have a fork.

Madison went into the kitchen to grab a fork. She entered just in time to observe Mrs. Brennan exit through the door on the opposite side of the kitchen, carrying a tray of food along with a glass of orange juice.

Madison got her fork and went back to the dining room and thought nothing more of it until Mrs. Brennan returned and joined Madison. Instead of the glass of orange juice she saw on the tray, Mrs. Brennan had a mug of coffee. Then Madison realized that Mrs. Brennan wasn't carrying a tray but had come in carrying only a plate.

Was there a guest in one of the downstairs bedrooms? Mrs. Brennan hadn't mentioned having anyone in the house, and she hadn't seen any unfamiliar vehicles out back. Madison reasoned if there was something she needed to know, then Mrs. Brennan would surely have told her. She wasn't one to be forgetful or careless.

Madison quickly fell into a routine. When her morning chores were done, she'd bundle up against the cold and walk into town to spend time at Pastor Fleming's church. There she'd spend an hour or so in prayer, then leave to attend to whatever errands Mrs. Brennan had for her. Then she went back to the house to complete her other duties.

When Madison first started, Mrs. Brennan spent some time outlining her responsibilities and checking up on her. Now, satisfied that all was in good hands, she began to spend more time in the back bedroom. Madison supposed that she might have an office back there. It was tough work, and it must be difficult to run her business and do all the physical work, too.

Once, when she needed to ask Mrs. Brennan about something, she'd gone to the back room of the old house and was about to knock when she heard Mrs.

Brennan praying. At least, it sounded like a prayer. It also sounded like Mrs. Brennan was crying.

Madison backed quietly from the door. She didn't want to intrude on Mrs. Brennan's private time. From that moment on, Madison remembered her gruff employer in prayer several times a day.

On Sundays, Madison attended Harmony Springs Bible Church and immediately felt at home. Pastor Bob Fleming didn't preach his opinion or pick a single verse from the Bible to expound upon. He took his parishioners through the Bible book by book, verse by verse. He didn't skip through difficult passages or apologize for uncomfortable truths. Rather, he preached the whole Word of God without apology, and invited his congregation to go along with him on a journey of spirit and truth.

During her midday excursions, Madison often explored the town. She loved meeting people. Sometimes she'd grab a bite to eat at one of the local places and discover something delicious, or find a bakery and take something back to share with Chuck and Mrs. Brennan.

She learned that Harmony Springs had been founded in 1833 and quickly became a Christian enclave. For generations, families had grown up here, and they stood firm on a Biblical foundation of a resurrected Christ. They took the commandment to "love thy neighbor," seriously. It wasn't an option; it was a directive from God.

Harmony Springs believed in sin, judgment, and the wrath of an almighty God. But they also believed in

atonement, in God's grace, and in the blood of Christ to cleanse them of all unrighteousness.

Madison felt the presence of the Holy Spirit with her as she walked through the town, and it revealed the hearts of the people she met.

The woman in the used bookstore with the four-year-old girl who had the most beautiful green eyes? Her doctor wanted her to come in for a series of tests. Something had come up during a routine exam. While Madison knew the woman would be fine, the woman didn't. Yet, she turned her worry into prayer, and found reassurance in Jesus.

The man who practically bowled her over as he raced out of the office had been distracted. There was a job opening at a tech firm in Roanoke, and he was very excited to be invited for a third interview. He was going to be surprised when he didn't get the job, and a little hurt, but he was praying for God's will, and he would be fine.

The woman painting a scene of pilgrims and a turkey on the cafe window absolutely adored her father. She was going to lose him to cancer three days before Thanksgiving. He was a lifelong believer. When he finally passed, she was going to grieve, but she would thank God that her father was rejoicing in his new home and was no longer in pain.

Madison met a lot of people at church, and she greeted them as they met during her excursions into town. Of course, they recognized her as the new girl. Madison figured that anyone who was new in this town would stick out and be easily recognized. They were all

friendly, and they seemed to be genuinely glad to see her.

Why had she been shown these things? God brought her here, but for what purpose? Madison knew the answer would come through prayer and waiting on God.

At the conclusion of Sunday's church service, Pastor Fleming asked for volunteers to help serve Thanksgiving dinner during their annual holiday event.

The church had a tradition of serving a Thanksgiving meal on the Sunday prior to Thanksgiving, and they invited the whole town. The event had grown over the decades, and this year they expected to serve over five hundred meals.

Madison was among the first to raise her hand.

Madison nudged Chuck in the ribs.

"Oof. What was that for?" Chuck asked in a whisper.

"Raise your hand," Madison whispered back.

"What for?"

"To volunteer."

"I don't want..." Chuck saw her face and raised his hand.

The exchange did not pass unnoticed. Pastor Fleming smiled and said, "Thank you for your service, Mr. Carson. God bless and good luck."

Chuck acknowledged Pastor Fleming with a nod.

"Thank you," Madison said to Chuck after the service. "I'm glad you'll be there."

“Why are we volunteering? Can’t we just come and eat? I mean, it’s not like we’re going to settle down and live here. I thought we were passing through,” Chuck said.

“It’s a social event. It’ll be fun,” Madison urged.

“It sounds like work to me,” grouched Chuck.

“Oh, it’ll be work. I bet they’ll need a strong man around with muscles, but we’ll have fun, too. Wait and see.”

Madison didn’t want Chuck to feel as though he was obligated to tag along, or to offer to help because she was going to be there. He’d agreed to come only because she asked him. She forced him really, if she was going to be honest with herself, and he agreed to please her, not because he had a desire to serve.

Madison had her own reasons for wanting to be involved during the dinner, and those reasons didn’t include him. It wasn’t a date, and she didn’t need him around to keep her company.

She’d asked him because he had expressed a desire to know more about God, and she wanted to show him. What better way than to spend time with God’s people? Some imagined Christians weren’t like others, but he’d soon learn they were flawed and imperfect like everyone else. The difference was they’d committed themselves to a flawless and perfect Savior.

As for Chuck, he was genuinely thankful for the Bible she’d given him. He had taken her advice and began with the gospel of John. But when he was finished, he admitted there were many things he didn’t understand, so they began a Bible study.

When they finished each day's work and Madison had put away the last dish from supper, they began their study of the book of John. Mrs. Brennan was duly impressed to see young people studying God's Word. One evening she surprised them by showing up in the living room with her Bible, asking if she could join them.

This unlikely trio turned their Bible study into a regular event. Madison was pleased Mrs. Brennan joined them, and even more pleased that she began to relax her formidable demeanor. She was still a stern and somewhat forbidding figure, but she enthusiastically participated in the discussions, and even provided examples from her own life regarding the application of scripture.

In spite of his initial reservations, Chuck enjoyed participating in the church's Thanksgiving dinner. As Madison predicted, his strength and stamina proved to be a real asset with the other volunteers. He helped set up the tables and chairs in the dining hall, and he carried the big turkeys out of the oven in their roasting pans to the carving station.

There, a couple of the church regulars expertly sliced the birds, while others prepared the plates with all the trimmings. It was a coordinated effort, and they all worked well together to help make the dinner a success.

The daylong event kept the volunteers busy as a steady stream of guests and parishioners filed in for the

feast. No sooner was a table emptied than another group arrived to take their place.

Madison was assigned with the other teens to act as “gofers” throughout the day’s event. They’d clear the tables for the next guests, refill pitchers with water or iced tea, clean up the inevitable spills, and provide a smile and a kind word. No one went away hungry.

Madison was too busy to notice the furtive glances or the brief, whispered conversations.

The television station out of Roanoke sent a crew to cover the annual dinner. It was a well-known event, and it was their “feel good” story for the holiday. It was a pleasant counterpoint to the madness going on in the world. They interviewed Pastor Fleming while the volunteers worked in the background, greeting guests and serving up plates of delicious food.

When the last guest left, all the volunteers sat down to rest. Pastor Fleming and the church leadership served dinner to the volunteers. Cleanup was swift, and they all took satisfaction in a successful Thanksgiving event.

One of the senior ladies of the church gave Madison a big brown paper shopping bag full of food. “Please give this to Alice, won’t you? Let her know we missed her this year, and we’re praying for her.”

“Of course. Thank you, Mrs. Lundquist.” Madison’s curiosity was piqued. Had Mrs. Brennan helped in years past? If so, what had caused the change this year?

Madison and Chuck walked back to Mrs. Brennan's after the church's Thanksgiving banquet.

"I wish I'd thought to layer up, or at least brought some gloves." Madison pulled her collar up against her neck, shivering underneath her jacket while her teeth chattered.

Chuck didn't reply. He was busy trying to ignore the chill seeping into his bones. Shifting the grocery bag in his arms, he desperately wanted to stick his hands in his pockets to warm them.

A car pulled up alongside them and the driver lowered the window. It was Pastor Fleming.

"Have you two lost your minds? It's freezing out there. Get in." They didn't need to be told twice.

Chuck got in the back with the sack of food, and Madison hopped in the front.

"I had no idea you were hoofing it, or I would have offered you a ride," Fleming said.

"We really appreciate this. I hope we're not putting you out." Madison held her hands in front of the heater vent.

"No problem at all. As you've probably noticed, a person can drive anywhere in Harmony Springs in five minutes. It's not taking me out of my way. In fact, I'm going to see Mrs. Brennan right now," he explained.

Chuck said, "Thanks, Pastor Bob. By the way, tonight's dinner was great. I'd never have believed we'd feed so many people."

"You're very welcome. We've been doing it for years now, since before I was pastor. Oh, and you two

were terrific. I really appreciate the help. It's a massive undertaking."

True to his word, they were at Mrs. Brennan's in no time at all. Chuck said his good-byes in the driveway and walked down to his camper. Madison took the grocery bag to the kitchen and put the food in the fridge.

Madison heard Pastor Fleming and Mrs. Brennan talking in the living room, but she couldn't hear what they were talking about, and she didn't want to eavesdrop. When she finished putting the food away, she said good night and thanked Pastor Fleming again for the ride home.

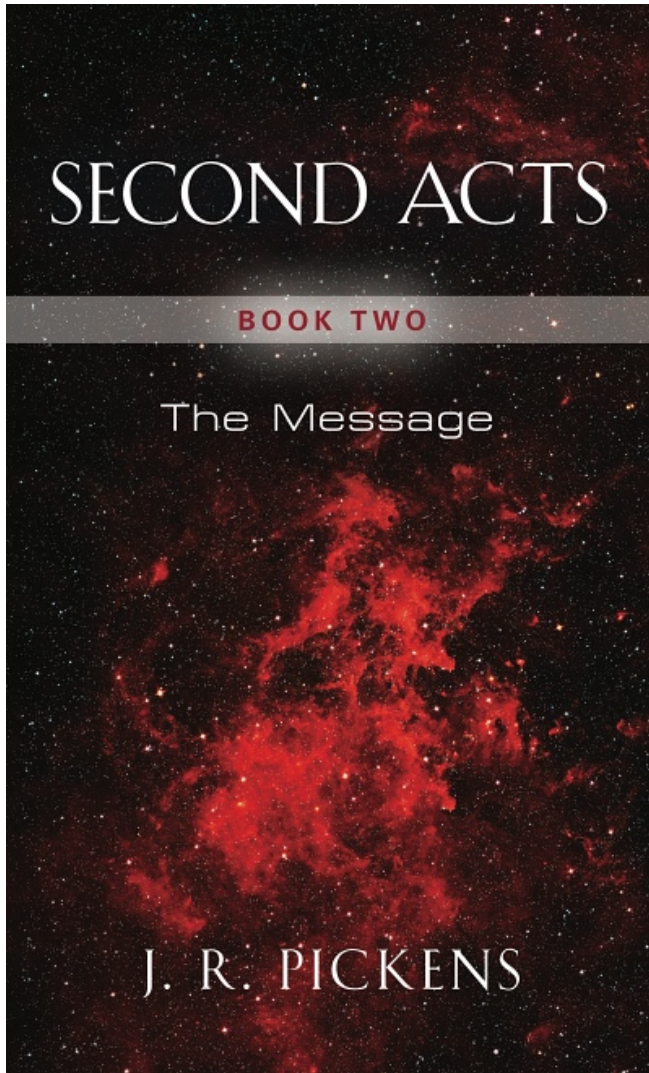
After a quick shower, Madison got into bed. She wondered again why Mrs. Brennan hadn't come to the church dinner tonight. She apparently attended regularly, at least up until recently. Pastor Fleming knew her well enough to come and visit. And why was Mrs. Lundquist praying for her?

Madison thought about the dinner and reflected that Chuck had really come through. Once they were at the church, he threw himself whole-heartedly into whatever job they asked of him. He charmed the older ladies with his banter, and he seemed to establish an easy rapport with the guys in the church.

As always, her thoughts turned to home, and to her mom and dad. She had always enjoyed Thanksgiving dinner at home, but it looked like this year things would be very different.

She also missed her friends, and she'd love to spend a couple hours talking to Trisha. But it was her mom

and dad she cried for at night, and she prayed until her heart was comforted.



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