

Weary from her months on the road, Madison is desperate to return home to her parents and friends. But home is not to be her destination as the Holy Spirit leads her to serve God in ways she could never have anticipated.

Second Acts: Book Three - The Choice

By J. R. Pickens

Order the book from the publisher [BookLocker.com](https://www.booklocker.com)

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/12979.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

SECOND ACTS

BOOK THREE

The Choice

J. R. PICKENS

Copyright © 2023 J. R. Pickens

Print ISBN: 978-1-64719-987-6

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-64719-988-3

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

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

Printed on acid-free paper.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2023

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Pickens, J. R.

SECOND ACTS: BOOK THREE - THE CHOICE by J. R.

Pickens

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023910490

CHAPTER THREE

That Monday morning, Madison sat in a McDonald's eating breakfast and drinking a large coffee. She was reading a Sunday paper someone had left behind. Madison turned to the help wanted ads, but there were precious few jobs for which she qualified. She needed a way to make a living while she waited.

One ad said simply "Administrative Assistant" and gave a phone number. This, Madison concluded, was a job she could do. She used to volunteer in the office at school. She knew how to answer phones, take messages, and do some filing.

When she was finished eating, she asked the guy at the counter if they had a pay phone. He shook his head. "Sorry, but I'm pretty sure the gas station across the street used to have one."

Madison thanked him and walked across the quiet street. She was in luck. An old pay phone stood outside next to the bathrooms. Madison dug in her purse for a pen and something to write on. She slipped a quarter in the machine and dialed the number.

On the second ring, a woman answered, "Crossroads Bible Church, how may I help you?"

Madison was surprised. *A church? Thank you, Lord!* “I’m calling about the ad for the administrative assistant position. How do I apply?” Madison asked.

“You can go to our website where we have an online application. Or you can come in and fill out a paper application,” the cheerful voice explained.

Madison was embarrassed to admit she didn’t have computer access, so she said, “I think I’d like to come in to fill it out. When can I come in, and could you give me the address?”

“Sure.” She recited the address and Madison repeated it to make sure she had it right.

“Yes, that’s correct. Pastor Owens is interviewing a couple of candidates today, so you can probably talk to him if you come in. Anytime today would work. My name’s Karen.”

“I appreciate your help, Karen,” Madison said. “I’ll see you in a little while.”

She walked back to the McDonald’s and ordered another coffee. Madison dug through her backpack, hoping she had something presentable to wear to an interview. The best she could come up with was a denim skirt and a pale blue blouse. It would have to do.

Madison arrived at the church and couldn’t believe how big the main building was. She entered through the doors into a cavernous foyer. There was a man at the information desk.

“Hello,” he said. “Can I help you?”

“Yes,” Madison replied. “I’m here to see Karen.”

The man pointed to her left. “Walk over to that hallway and hang a right. She’s at the last door on the left. Pastor Owens’ office.”

“Thanks! This place is huge,” Madison commented.

“It is big,” he agreed. “Don’t worry, if you get lost we’ll send out a search team to look for you.”

Madison smiled. “Thanks. All my worries are over.”

She got to the door and her knock was answered by a soft, “Come in.”

Madison opened the door and met Karen, a woman who looked to be in her twenties and was visibly pregnant.

“Hi! I called earlier about coming in to apply for the administrative assistant position,” Madison said.

“Oh, right!” Karen stuck out her hand. “I’m Karen. Pleased to meet you. Let me get you that application.”

Madison looked around. The office was small, but very nicely appointed. It appeared recently remodeled, and she smelled new carpet. Behind Karen was a door upon which a brass plaque stated, Glenn Owens, Pastor.

Karen handed Madison a clipboard and a pen along with an application. “It’s actually my job you’re applying for,” the young woman said. “I’ll be leaving soon, and Pastor Owens needs a replacement.”

“When are you due?” Madison asked.

“Not for another couple of months. My husband recently passed the bar and got hired by a law office in Savannah. We’re moving.”

“How exciting!” Madison said. “It’s like you’re starting a whole new life.”

“It really is!” Karen agreed. “I’ve never even been to Savannah before. A new place to live, a new house, a new baby, and a new career for my husband.”

“At least you’re keeping the same husband,” Madison joked.

Karen chuckled. “I’ve grown fond of him. Before you start the application, do you have any questions?”

“What exactly are your responsibilities?” Madison asked.

“None of it’s very hard. I answer phones and take messages. I keep track of the pastor’s appointments and meetings, and I keep our social media updated. If Pastor Owens and the board have an afternoon meeting, I’ll arrange for it to be catered. Mostly I keep up with all the little things so the pastor doesn’t have to be bothered. There are some reports I do for the pastor and the board. Do you know Excel?” Karen asked.

“Yes,” Madison replied, thankful for her office experience.

“Then you shouldn’t have any problem, really,” Karen reassured her. “Go ahead and fill out the application. There’s not a lot going on today. We haven’t gotten many applications, so the pastor might end up interviewing you today.”

Madison sat in the corner and filled out the application from memory. As she had no real work experience, it wasn't going to take long.

While she was completing her application, the door to the pastor's office opened. A girl a few years her senior came out, followed closely by a man who looked to be middle age.

"You go on and wait in the car," the man told the girl.

Then he turned back to the office and said, "Thanks for the opportunity, Glenn. She'll be perfect for the job." The man checked his watch. "Gotta run. Thanks again."

As he departed, another man entered the office and stepped right to the open door. "Hey, Glenn. You got a minute?"

Madison heard the pastor's voice say, "Sure. C'mon in."

The man disappeared into the office and closed the door behind him.

Madison returned to the application. They wanted three references. She put down her mom, and, in a sudden inspiration, she listed Jennifer. Jennifer was Morris Abbott's assistant, and had been there to help out following the incident at the Harvest Fair. Two references would have to be enough.

As she finished the application, Madison said a prayer. She was about to turn it in when Karen stood up.

“Listen, I’m sorry to ask,” Karen said. “I’ve got to get to the ladies room. Can I bother you to hold down the fort for a few minutes? Mister Collins is in with Pastor Owens, and I’d hate for the phone to ring and not get answered.”

Madison smiled. “No problem,” she said.

As Karen rushed off to the restroom, Madison looked over the application to see if there was anything she missed. She made a couple of minor corrections, but concluded that she’d tried her best.

She walked over to Karen’s desk to leave her application when a woman stepped into the office with two young girls in tow. One looked about five, the other two or three.

The older one promptly announced, “You’re not Karen!”

Madison nodded her head, “That’s true. She’ll be back soon.”

“Who are you?” the child insisted on knowing.

“Sophie! Don’t be rude,” her mother admonished.

Madison said, “It’s okay, Ma’am.”

“Is Glenn busy?” the woman asked.

“He’s in with Mister Collins,” Madison reported. She didn’t know who the man was, but she didn’t see any harm in mentioning who the pastor was talking to.

“Oh. Well, I’ll come back in a little bit,” she said. “I’m going over to the fellowship hall. Is it okay if I leave the girls with you for a few minutes?”

“Yes, Ma’am. I’ll be happy to watch them,” Madison said. “If their meeting is over before you come back, may I tell the pastor who came to talk to him?”

The woman apologized. “I’m sorry. I should have introduced myself. I’m Marjorie. Glenn is my husband.”

Madison felt her face flush. “Oh! I didn’t know. I’m pleased to meet you.”

“Are you Glenn’s new assistant?” Marjorie asked.

“No. I mean, I hope so. I came in to apply, but I haven’t met the pastor yet,” Madison answered. “Karen will be right back.”

“Well, good luck. I won’t be long,” Marjorie said. She turned to her girls. “I want you two on your best behavior. Understand?”

The older girl nodded solemnly and the other one said, “Yes, Mommy.”

As soon as her mother was out of the room, Sophie grabbed a children’s book out of the bookcase and turned to Madison. “I’m Sophie and this is Sarah. Will you read us a story?”

“Uh, sure,” Madison replied. She looked toward the door, hoping Karen wasn’t going to take too long.

Madison sat in Karen’s chair with Sophie to her right. Sarah climbed up onto Madison’s lap and made herself comfortable. Madison began to read a colorful Bible picture book, starting in the beginning.

The girls were attentive, but Madison didn’t get past the third page before the telephone started ringing.

Madison reached to answer it as the door behind her opened.

“Crossroads Bible Church,” Madison said. “How may I help you?”

Simultaneously, the girls began to shout, “Daddy!” They abandoned Madison and ran to their father.

Mister Collins stepped into the room and turned back to the pastor. “I didn’t know you’d already hired another girl, Glenn.”

“Neither did I,” Pastor Owens replied.

Karen had just walked back into the office. “I can explain.”

Madison tried to tune out the conversation going on around her to listen to the caller. She grabbed a pen and began writing. A moment later, she said, “Thank you, Ms. Copeland. I’ll make sure Pastor Owens gets the message. Yes, Ma’am. Good-bye.”

“It looks like you have your hands full here, Glenn,” Mister Collins said. “I hope you’ll consider what I said.”

“You bet, Dave,” Pastor Owens replied. “Thanks for dropping by.”

“Who was that on the phone?” Pastor Owens asked Madison.

Madison handed him an index card on which she’d written the important details. “That was Patty Copeland. She wanted you to know that Lynn Stevens confirmed she will be speaking at this year’s women’s

conference. Also, there will not be a seafood option for the luncheon this year.”

“Good to know, thanks. So, you’re my new admin?” He looked over at Karen.

“I guess you’re the one to decide that, Sir.” Madison picked her application off of Karen’s desk and handed it to the young-looking pastor.

Pastor Owens looked it over and asked Karen, “Has anyone else come in to fill out an application?”

“No. No one else. I had one other person call, but when they heard it was a church, they hung up,” Karen explained.

“Well, Miss Newman, you’re hired,” Pastor Owens declared.

“Really?” Karen and Madison replied in unison.

“Spend the rest of the day with Karen learning the ropes,” he told Madison. “For now, you can work Karen’s schedule. We can always revisit that if necessary. I don’t expect you to learn everything all at once, so don’t sweat it if you aren’t perfect by the end of the week. Karen will tell you stories about what a mean boss I am. Don’t believe a word of it.”

Madison was near tears at how quickly everything had fallen together. “Thank you so much for the opportunity. You won’t be disappointed. I promise.”

“You’re welcome. I’m confident you’ll be fine.” Then he told Karen, “Have her fill out the paperwork and get her up to speed. I know you want to get going

and join your husband, but don't work the poor girl to death. I'll see you two later."

Then he told his daughters, "C'mon girls. Let's go find your mommy."

Pastor Glenn Owens and Marjorie sat up on the bed, watching television. The dinner dishes were done, the girls had their baths and were tucked away in their beds. Now was the time to unwind and let the stress of the day dissipate.

"What were you and Dave Collins talking about today?" Marjorie asked.

Glenn managed to make his sigh sound like a groan. "He asked me to hire his daughter for Karen's position."

"Really? Are you going to hire her?"

He shook his head. "I haven't even talked to the girl. At least Phil Thompson's niece came in with him when he made his pitch."

"Phil, too? What are you going to do?"

"Remember that girl in Karen's office today?" Glenn asked.

"I do. The girls were really taken with her. She was all they could talk about on the way home today," Marjorie said. "Seems she read with different voices in her story. The girls loved that."

"I hired her."

“You did? Glenn, she’s so young. I mean, babysitting is one thing, but do you think she can do Karen’s job?”

“I believe she can,” Glenn answered. “Karen spent the day with her and said she is a fast learner. We’ll know for sure by the end of the week. She showed real initiative today. I need someone like that.”

“What about Dave and Phil?” Marjorie asked.

“My assistant works for me, not the board. I’m happy to consider their recommendations, but the decision is mine. To tell you the truth, I’m not happy with the idea of a board member having an insider’s view of the pastor’s office.”

“It’s not like you have anything to hide,” Marjorie said.

“True, I don’t.” Glenn gestured vaguely in the air, “It’s just...” He turned on his side to face his wife. “This might sound weird or paranoid, but I don’t know that I’d be comfortable hiring a board member’s relative. What does that feeling, imagined or not, tell me about my relationship with my board? Some of them are members of our church leadership. What does that say about me and my ability to be transparent and candid with my people?”

“How does that make you feel?” Marjorie asked.

“Uncomfortable. I’ve been praying about this for a while. It feels as though I’m being dishonest. I don’t think it’s warranted, but that’s how it feels. Maybe it’s because...” Glenn was at a loss for words.

After a few moments of silence, Marjorie prompted him. “Maybe it’s because... what?”

Glenn grappled with the words. “You know, this sounds nuts, but sometimes I wonder if they have the best interests of the church in mind. And I’m not talking about the building, but our body of believers.”

Marjorie looked over at him, concern on her face. “Did something happen that makes you question their intentions?”

“They’re all about the sermons that promote love, forgiveness, grace, and salvation. When it comes to sin, repentance, and hell, they aren’t so enthusiastic. Apparently sermons condemning adultery, fornication, and drunkenness make some of our more generous contributors uncomfortable,” Glenn explained. “The board has asked, several times now, that I try to be more seeker-sensitive.”

“Do you think they’re going to fight your decision to hire the girl?”

“I don’t think so. It’s a *fait accompli*,” Glenn answered.

“They can ask you to undo it,” Marjorie pointed out.

“They’re an advisory board. They don’t make HR decisions.”

She nodded. “You have a point. Maybe I worry for nothing. Sometimes I get tired walking that thin line, trying to keep everyone happy.”

“I know, Margie. You do it so well. You have a knack for names and faces, and you know how to organize and delegate. I’d never survive here without you.”

Marjorie beamed. “Aww. You say the sweetest things. And what about you? How many meetings, prayer breakfasts, committees, and luncheons do you have lined up this week?”

“I *am* booked solid. I feel more like a PR front man than a preacher. There are so many things to oversee, chair, and approve. The Easter program, the Christmas program, or should I call it, our ‘Holiday Festival’? Oh, and the Harvest Celebration! Of course, everything has to be approved by the board.”

Marjorie laughed, “I sooo understand. The Women’s League. The Christmas Bake Sale. The Back-to-School Backpack Project.”

“I can’t help but feel a little ashamed,” Glenn confessed. “Here I am complaining, yet I feel very blessed. The board has been extremely generous with us. They’re a tremendous help in getting building projects off the ground and cutting through red tape.”

“We are very blessed.” Marjorie was quiet for a moment. Then she giggled. “Do you remember what we used to talk about when we first started to get serious about each other?”

Glenn was on his back, staring at the ceiling. He smiled. “Yes! We talked about how we were going to

finish Divinity College and then go off...somewhere. As I recall, we were somewhat vague about that.”

Marjorie clapped. “Very good. That’s right. I was leaning towards Africa, but you wanted to go somewhere remote in South America. We were going to volunteer with some group giving medical aid and do nothing but preach the gospel!”

Glenn was quiet for a while, lost in thought. “It seems so long ago. I used to be so on fire. I wonder where the fire went.”

Then he looked at Marjorie and said, “I hope I’m doing some good for our family.”

Touched by his love, Marjorie answered, “Of course you are.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

In a private hospital in New York, Sharon Sterling was having a very serious conversation with her son's doctor. The news left Sterling feeling untethered from the real world. Her hands gripped the sumptuously upholstered leather arms of her chair, steadying herself, willing herself back into the conversation.

"Sharon?" asked Dr. Reddy a second time, a look of concern on her kind face.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's a lot to come to terms with. I...I'm not sure I understand why he's not responding to the treatments."

Dr. Reddy sighed. As often as she'd had this conversation, there was no good way to explain to a parent that their child was going to die. "I'm a physician. I believe in causality. But the truth is sometimes a patient will respond well to treatment, and another will receive the same care and it will have no impact at all."

Sterling was a mother frantically grasping at straws. "But you said his chances were good!"

"In the beginning I told you I was cautiously optimistic because the five-year survival rate for children is good," Dr. Reddy reminded her.

“I remember,” Sterling admitted, nodding her head. She felt close to breaking down, but she refused to let herself become an emotional wreck in front of Cory’s doctor, the woman she now considered a friend. Still, the tears came, and Dr. Reddy offered her a box of tissues.

Sterling asked, “What about another stem cell infusion? Maybe there’s something you haven’t tried yet, or maybe something you’ve forgotten.”

Dr. Reddy shook her head. “I wish that was true. I am but one person in a team of specialists who have been caring for your son. Mine is not the only voice offering possible solutions or evaluating results. I am very sorry, Sharon, but we’ve run out of options.”

Sobbing, Sharon took another tissue. “So what happens now?”

“Enjoy your son while you can. Encourage him. He is a very brave little boy, and he will look to you for strength. Bring him as much joy as you can in his last days,” advised the doctor.

Tears streamed down Sterling’s face as she asked, “Just how am I supposed to do that?”

Dr. Reddy asked, “Do you believe in God?”

Sterling snorted. “God?”

“Or a higher power. Do you believe in something greater than yourself?”

Sterling was silent for a long moment, and then she answered, “No. No one’s watching out for us. Nobody cares.”

“In that case you will have to find the strength within yourself to be the rock your son needs,” Dr. Reddy said.

“Do *you* believe in God?” Sterling asked.

“I do,” Reddy affirmed.

Sharon Sterling sat in Dr. Reddy’s office, nodding her head, tears welling in her eyes.

“How long does he have?” whispered Sterling.

“Three weeks. Perhaps more,” Dr. Reddy answered.

Afterwards, Sterling kneeled in the hospital chapel. Her hands were clasped together as she leaned on the small, cushioned pew. She wasn’t praying. She was thinking of her dying son lying in a hospital bed, hooked up to a collection of medical devices whose purpose she could only begin to guess. Why would God permit an eight-year-old boy to endure such torment?

Her chest hitched as she fought back the tears. She was losing her son. Her baby! In two years that little boy had suffered more than she had in a lifetime. And for what? To eventually die, exhausted, in pain, crying out for a mother who can’t possibly help him?

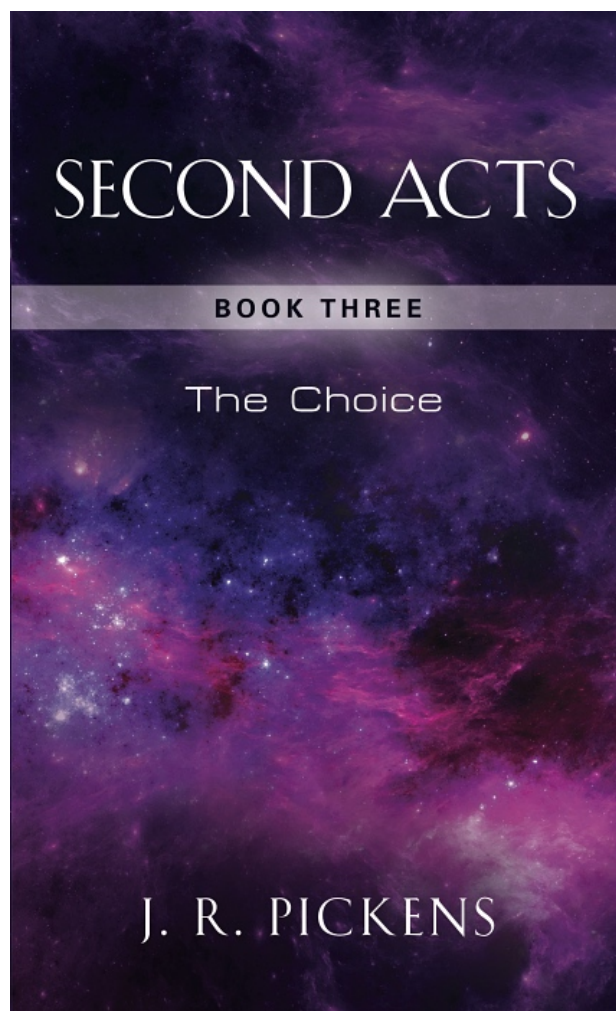
“What do you want, God?” Sterling pleaded. “Do you want me to beg for my boy’s life? I’ll beg! Please, God! Don’t do this to my son. He hasn’t even had a chance to live!”

Sterling wept unashamedly as she clutched the pew, trembling as she gasped for breath. Everything she kept bottled up inside, the fear, the anger, and the

overwhelming grief at the prospect of losing her boy, came out in a torrent of emotion.

Someone entered the room and knelt next to her. There was a soft touch on her shoulder. Sterling wondered who it could be but was afraid to show her face. She was ashamed at her outburst. Then the woman who knelt with her began to pray.

Sterling continued to pray long after the woman departed. "Please, God. Don't take my son from me. Please."



Weary from her months on the road, Madison is desperate to return home to her parents and friends. But home is not to be her destination as the Holy Spirit leads her to serve God in ways she could never have anticipated.

Second Acts: Book Three - The Choice

By J. R. Pickens

Order the book from the publisher BookLocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/12979.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**