

CHAPTER 1: NEW BEGINNINGS

The first week of school that hot and humid August would be difficult for the Hanson family. Indeed, it was a challenging, emotional time. Last year, before school started, they lost their twelve-year-old daughter to suicide.

Stephanie was a sweet girl, the youngest of three children. She loved reading books, daydreaming, and drawing horses. She was kind-hearted and full of joy. All who knew Stephanie loved her laughter and her long, beautiful, shiny hair.

One beautiful day, only a year ago, Susan Hanson watched her sweet Stephanie riding a horse, her hair swinging in the wind behind her. Stephanie seemed happy and full of life. However, nothing could have been further from the truth. Hidden from her family was Stephanie's inner pain and her possible plan to take her own life.

Why did their joyous little girl spiral into the depths of depression, enough to kill herself? How would they ever recover from this devastating event?

The family was shocked, devastated, and even angry at the suddenness of her death. Brian Hanson couldn't fathom what would make his seemingly happy pre-teen take her own life, in her own bedroom, much less. What had they missed? What had been the root of her despair? How did everyone miss the telltale signs? How did her friends not have suspicions? How could her family have prevented such a tragedy?

Such horrendous devastation rocked the Hanson family to the core. Their pain drove them to desire change — change in their surroundings and, thus, a move to a new town. Perhaps a change would help them heal? To better understand? To reach out to others in distress?

The Hansons decided to move to a midwestern town in the suburbs. Maybe it would be the best solution for starting over

without their precious daughter. It would be yet another life-changing event — to leave their home in Cartersville and purchase a new house in Millsville, about three hours away, uprooting everything they had ever known.

So, the journey began. The family prepared to move, packed up their things, and said goodbye to their lifelong friends and neighbors. It was time to launch out into the unknown, with hopes, perhaps, for a happier future without their loving Stephanie.

As they arrived in their new town, Brian noticed a sign posted at the Millsville United Methodist Church. The church was in need of a new youth minister. Brian decided to stop in and speak with the senior pastor.

Brian introduced himself to the Reverend Ralph Cunningham and explained that his family was just moving into town. He mentioned that they were searching for a new church home. He shared how he had been a youth pastor at his previous church. His desire was to minister to students, where he could lead and teach them God's ways as well as how to treat others. Brian also shared, a bit reluctantly, and briefly, about his family's recent loss.

Reverend Cunningham seemed to like Brian from the start and thanked him for sharing about the unexpected loss of Stephanie. He then explained to Brian that several people had applied for the role of youth pastor. He added that the pastoral staff would decide at their next meeting who they would hire.

Brian prayerfully completed an application. He then left it for the staff's review. He knew that if God wanted him in the position of youth pastor, he'd certainly get the job. After all, his passion was students and investing in their lives. He had a personal story that compelled him to want to serve youth.

Several days later, Brian received a call from the pastoral staff secretary. He'd landed the job as youth pastor. Certainly, God had plans to use Brian Hanson in a big way.

An average-sized man, Brian was tall — about six-foot two. He had brown hair with some grey hair along his temple. He was well-kempt overall and quite meticulous regarding his well-groomed mustache. He wore glasses and had bright blue eyes, which seemed to be smiling most of the time. Yet, occasionally people possibly saw sadness in Brian's eyes if something was weighing heavy on his mind.

Brian was not your typical Wednesday-night-youth-group minister. He was a gentle, kind, and ambitious — a man with a purpose as well as a desire, even at almost age forty, to help solve today's problems regarding adolescents. He was inspirational, motivational, and determined in his life work with youth.

His mission was to educate people on the hazards of bullying, especially regarding children and teens. He was determined to help other students from being bullied. His goal, too, was to save other families from the same devastating trauma that his family had experienced.

Brian wanted to inspire young people to practice respect and to treat each other in Christlike ways. He also realized that some of the problems today's kids faced were drinking, cyberbullying, and school violence.

To be effective, he needed to show his presence as a church leader as well as a concerned adult, both in the schools and in his new community. He truly wanted to interact on a personal level with all the students whom he could reach. He began praying, asking God to help him be a steady and strong influence in the lives of some specific teens — those needing his leadership skills the most.

Pastor Brian looked forward to the first Wednesday youth service. He was pumped. He knew that first impressions would mean a lot. He recognized the fact that he'd soon have to learn all the names attached to the numerous faces in the crowd. He was thrilled to learn that attendance the first evening was approximately one hundred and fifty.

Brian began the service by introducing himself, along with his children, to the youth group. Standing next to him were Gloria, his spunky and pretty seventeen-year-old daughter, as well as Patrick, his charming and handsome sixteen-year-old son. He was so proud of these two, especially in the way they were handling the loss of their younger sister.

Brian knew that God had planted them in a new city, a new school, a new church, and in a new circle of friends to make a difference for the Kingdom of God. Brian was eager to see how his teens would blossom in their new surroundings.

Then Brian shared with the teens how just last year the family had lost Stephanie, who was twelve when she ended her life. There was a brief pause as Brian shared how his family was still trying to adjust to the huge change in their family. Silence fell over the room as he related how sweet Stephanie had taken her own life for reasons of which they were unsure.

To lighten the atmosphere, Brian then expressed to the youth that they could call him “Pastor Brian.” He added that last names were too formal; besides he was okay with the title of Pastor Brian.

He continued to probe the crowd with direct questions in hopes of determining what the students wanted to do each Wednesday night. He fervently listened to their requests and concerns, as well as strived to hear from their hearts. Brian asked God to open both his natural ears and his spiritual ears, so he may truly be a friend to the teens in the youth group.

One of the new students, a young teen named Alysia Sanders, stood and asked if the students possibly could hold devotions around the flagpole before school every morning. Brian replied saying that she certainly had proposed a great idea. He would first need to get permission from the school. He then asked if anyone else had any other ideas for Wednesday night.

Another young lady raised her hand. Her name was Patricia Miller. She requested a Bible study time instead of socializing. She and others desired to go deeper in their walk with God.

Amazingly, all the students applauded with agreement. It seemed they all wanted a special time during their school week devoted to going deeper with God. Brian was thrilled to know that these students were hungry for God.

Brian ended the first successful session with the students by sharing how he was planning a bonfire party so everyone could get acquainted. It was scheduled three weeks away, just before school began. He closed the service in prayer and then reminded the students to invite their friends to the bonfire.

The following day, Brian called the school to get permission to hold a devotion around the flagpole each morning. The principal told Brian that she would check with the school board. She didn't think it would be a problem since other groups in the past had used the flagpole location for similar group meetings.

Pastor Brian began to plan. He was eager to determine ways that he may reach out to these youth. He recognized he had a tough road ahead of him, yet he was determined.

He began thinking about his own precious Stephanie. Many thoughts began racing through his mind. He dreamed of all the what-ifs. Just what could he have done differently? Did he spend enough quality time with his children? Did he communicate well? Was he a good enough father to raise his other children right? Why didn't he notice signs revealing that Stephanie was in trouble?

Brian got a grip on his thoughts. He knew, in addition to his role as a dad, he now needed to focus on getting ready for the bonfire party. It was time to get acquainted with all the students now in his charge.

He made all the arrangements and sent out group texts to the students, reminding them of the party's events. He was eager for them to share with their friends at school about the fun event. The week before school started, Brian began preparing in earnest.

All of the arrangements came together. The event proved to be a huge success. Many adults stepped in to help and chaperone. The crowd was big. At least one hundred teens showed up.

The students had a great time of fellowship, in addition to getting acquainted with each other. They enjoyed snacks around the campfire, singing silly songs, and taking priceless selfies. That night, Pastor Brian began to gain the respect and trust of the students.

Brian began eagerly thinking of the next event. What could he plan? What activities or events might help him connect with the students? How could he build communication channels?

He noticed his son, Patrick, was taking interest in Alysia Sanders. His daughter, Gloria, was popular with some of the boys. Brian soon realized that even his own children were just as interested in making connections with the students as he was. Maybe this could be a family affair? Maybe connecting with the students weekly would lead to making great differences in their lives?

Early the next week, Brian began working on his Wednesday night Bible study lesson. He finalized a good format for Wednesday evenings — announcements, opening prayer, Bible study, and prayer. Then, he planned to allow the students to hang out and socialize for about 30 minutes after Bible study. This time would also include playing games and visiting around the pool table. Overall, Brian was pleased with whatever activities the students wanted, in addition to the events he'd planned. After all, the primary goal was to develop strong and purposeful bonds with the students.

Brian knew God would use him in a big way during the upcoming school year. Brian committed himself to God, promising God that he'd spend time daily in prayer and Bible study so that he'd be his best for the students. And, he wanted to rely solely and totally on the Holy Spirit for direction, discernment, and wisdom.

Brian sensed a spirit of revival among the teens. He believed that a revival that would bring more commitment from the students to lean more on God. After all, a revival could even penetrate the community and reach beyond just the high school campus. The possibilities of what God could do with such a movement were limitless.

Brian was thrilled with anticipation to see what God would do. He wanted to be on the front end of the adventure. He knew that to lead as God intended him to lead, he first needed to be a servant leader.

He was determined to both serve and lead the students and the community. He challenged himself to do so, knowing that God would guide his every step. His spirit was joyful as he waited in great anticipation for what God was up to in Millsville, and, especially at the high school.

The students began to open up. They shared and requested prayer. Numerous concerns weighed heavily on them — problems at home, problems at school, issues with friends, and, of course, peer pressure. The concerns were certainly valid, but they were nothing that God couldn't handle.

Brian pondered weekly the prayer requests that the students had shared. He spoke to Susan that these first few Wednesday nights and the bonfire party were just what he was wanting to begin to connect with the youth.

A determined Brian began to ponder how he could capture the students' attention as well as keep them coming to the flagpole. He just knew that the flagpole would represent a good place for fellowship, socialization, and a sense of community.

That morning, over his coffee and toast, Brian surrendered his request to God. He knew God would make a way if the flagpole event were to be a reality. He petitioned God to begin to set the stage for a very successful, Christ-focused school year.

CHAPTER 2: GATHERING AT THE FLAGPOLE

*B*rian Hanson awoke early that sunny Monday morning. It was the first day of the new school year for his children. In addition, his wife, Susan, just two years younger than Brian, was beginning her job as a history teacher at the high school.

After taking a warm shower, Brian gazed into the mirror, only to realize the first signs of aging. Staring back at him were a few new gray hairs and some smile wrinkles around his eyes. The slight aging of his appearance reminded him that he was almost forty.

Brian then dressed in a fresh shirt and pressed slacks. He went down the hall toward his teens' rooms where they were still sleeping. As he approached his son's room, he heard the loud, ringing alarm of his son's phone. It was 6:30. He knew that waking Patrick would be a huge undertaking. He knocked on Patrick's door as he heard the rustling noise of his son trying to unravel himself from his bed covers.

"It's time to get up, son."

Patrick asked, "Dad, can I hit the snooze button for just five more minutes?"

Brian opened the door and leaned in. "You'd better get up. You don't want to be late for school."

Patrick rolled out of bed and staggered toward the bathroom to get ready. Brian was approaching Gloria's room when he heard the sound of running water coming from the bathroom. He knew his sweet daughter was getting ready. Gloria was a bright, cheerful, and spunky teenager. She felt lucky to have landed on the high school's cheerleading squad.

The Hansons were like any other typical, middle-class couple struggling to get their teens up for school each morning. But, this first day of school, however, the struggle wasn't overly challenging.

Brian casually walked downstairs. The aroma of apple wood-smoked bacon, sizzling on the stove, filled the kitchen. He asked Susan what she was preparing for breakfast, as he tenderly planted a kiss on her cheek.

"Pancakes, eggs, and bacon," Susan replied, smiling.

After he'd had a few sips of coffee and they had chatted briefly about the events of the day, Susan asked, "Brian, can you go upstairs to check on the kids?"

Brian turned and headed up the stairs. He heard Patrick pounding on the restroom door and yelling. "Dad, Gloria is taking too much time in the bathroom!"

"Patrick, stop banging on the door. Gloria, you need to hurry up in the bathroom and come downstairs for breakfast." Gloria replied that she was almost finished drying her hair.

"All right, Gloria. Would you hurry up so Patrick can get ready?"

Brian then headed back downstairs. By 7:15 a.m., his teens were slipping into their chairs at the table. Susan joined them. Brian asked God to bless their food and their day, and they ate breakfast together as a family. He polled his kids to see if they were excited about the first day of school in their new town. Patrick was concerned about making friends; Gloria confided that she was a little nervous about her classes.

“Don’t burden yourself about being nervous the first day, son,” Brian exhorted. “You’ll make new acquaintances and meet new classmates. The important thing to remember is to be yourself. It will take time to make new friends. Just ask God to help you be patient.”

Brian looked at his concerned daughter. “Gloria, I’m sure you’ll be okay in your subjects because you’re a smart young lady. Don’t worry about your studies. You will be all right. Give your worry to God. And, I’m proud of both of you for being honest.”

The family knew that the unspoken words that morning regarded Stephanie. They knew that the new school year would be difficult on all of them; missing Stephanie was still paramount in their minds. Even though they were in a new house in a new town, their home was missing her joyful smile. Brian knew he needed to be strong and courageous for his family. He knew that’s what Stephanie would have wanted.

Brian reminded himself that the move to a new town was just what God had chosen him to do — to pursue his mission to reach out to troubled youth. And, the local high school may just be the answer he was searching for to make a difference in the community.

The stillness in the kitchen was suddenly interrupted when Brian’s phone rang. It was the school principal. Mrs. Jackson was calling to inform Brian that he’d received permission to meet up with the students every morning around the flagpole.

After Brian shared the good news with his family, he realized he was a bit nervous as well as optimistic. He couldn’t wait to announce this good news to the students Wednesday night. He began working on his devotional. He planned for some students to play music on their guitars and share testimonies. Then, in the last half of the meeting, the groups would gather to pray. Brian knew that if he could get some popular students to attend, others would join.

Brian drove his teens to school. Susan left in her car; she had to get to her classroom before the first bell. Brian dropped off Gloria and Patrick at the big high school and asked God to reign over the school. He then headed to the church, knowing he had much to accomplish and pray about before the students gathered Wednesday night.

Wednesday rolled around and Brian eagerly announced to the students that they could start meeting at the flagpole the following Monday. He asked if anyone wanted to play music at the flagpole. Several volunteers raised their hands.

Brian distributed invitations and urged the students to hand out the invitations at school as well as use social media to invite their school friends to the flagpole gatherings, beginning the following Monday.

Pastor Hanson arrived at the flagpole early on Monday. As he prepared to share with the students who had gathered, he glanced over and saw a young man sitting alone. The student was on a bench near the front of the school. His head was down and he seemed sad.

The student was slender with brown hair. His eyeglasses contained thick lenses. He wore a t-shirt that was ripped in several places, stained jeans, and weathered tennis shoes.

Brian observed several other students chatting. They walked by without even speaking to or acknowledging the teen.



After the students had sung a few songs, Brian began the morning's devotional.

“Good morning, students. My name is Pastor Brian Hanson, but you can call me Pastor Brian.”

“I’m glad everyone can support each other around the flagpole! Thanks for joining us today. I wish to share a devotional regarding life’s directions. First, I would like everyone to please join me in prayer.” As the students stood around the flagpole, silence came over them as they joined Brian in prayer.

After his introduction and prayer, Brian continued with the message. “When you think of your life direction, what comes to mind? I believe the course God wants every person to follow is the way that leads to salvation and to Jesus. Yet, we sometimes

stray away from wholehearted dedication to Christ. But, we must always focus our eyes on Jesus and keep trusting God. Think of a way in which we, as believers, can live our lives by allowing God to direct our paths.”

“The only way to achieve the right direction is to continue moving forward while trusting Jesus to lead us. Whatever our own goals may be — whether it is reaching out to other students, graduation, college, a job, or even getting married and having a family — we must trust in God. No matter what direction or path you are pursuing at the moment, put your trust in God to lead you and direct you,” Brian urged the students.

He continued, “Everyone should ask themselves where this road called ‘life’ will take you. If your answers to this question are ‘to Jesus Christ,’ ‘to salvation’ or ‘to heaven,’ you’re on the right track. If your answers are ‘I’m not sure’ or ‘to destruction,’ you may need to change the direction your life is going. Only you can answer according to what’s in your heart. The time to change is now before time passes you by and it’s too late to change. God wants the best for you and He loves you very much.”

“When we take our eyes off of Jesus and focus on something else, we may have tendencies to sink deeper into our sin until we turn our eyes back to Jesus. Christians may not see what God is planning for them. All we can do is trust Him and love one another as we follow the direction he intends for us.

“The way God expects us to take is the path to salvation. And, we must live out our salvation day by day. Let’s remember this Bible verse from Second Corinthians, chapter 4, ‘So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.’

“Christians can’t allow Satan to distract them and lead them away from their destiny, which is to reach out to one another. Christians have a choice — to take the broad path, which leads to destruction, or the narrow path, which leads to Jesus.” Brian continued.

“Let’s listen to this passage from Matthew, chapter 7. ‘Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.’

“The choice is yours, students,” Brian said. “Only you can decide to follow Jesus and ask Him into your heart to help find your life’s direction. This morning you can make the first step. Choose to walk God’s path for yourself and turn your life around.”

“In closing, find someone you don’t recognize and invite that student to join us around the flagpole. Help this student to discover how God’s love can change them and how the decision you make or have already made can change you. The power to change lives is your choice to make if you allow Jesus to work through you.”

“Let’s ask God to enable us to continue to follow the direction He has for us. Let’s be the leaders in this school whom He wants us to be. Let’s be positive influences on other students. That’s all for today. The bell will ring soon. Come up here and see me if you want prayer.” Brian closed out the first session by asking the students to invite their friends.

The next day, Brian noticed the same boy wearing earbuds and sitting on the bench. The boy began to scrutinize the students as they gathered around the pole. This time Brian walked away from the group, in hopes of finding out the teen’s name and asking him to join them.

Alysia Sanders said, “Mr. Hanson, where are you going?” The pastor turned around and glanced back at Alysia. “I’m going to talk to this guy and invite him to come over and join us.”

Pastor Hanson casually approached the teen when he witnessed some students teasing him because of his glasses and his clothing. The pastor got closer when the students scattered, leaving the boy with his head hung low as other students passed by laughing.

Alysia approached Brian and he explained, “I am constantly amazed at how cruel kids can be to their peers.” Alysia shook her head in agreement and headed inside.

Brian walked to where the teen was seated and asked the young man his name. He responded in a soft, low tone, “My name is Johnny Goodwin.”

The boy wiped the tears away. Brian asked if every-thing was alright. He could not help but notice the tears and wondered how many times Stephanie had cried when no one had noticed. Small things kept bringing her to the forefront of his mind that particular morning.

He snapped back to the present as Johnny said, “I’m fine.” Brian knew the teen was indeed not fine. As Brian walked away, he remembered that he forgot to invite the teen to join the group.

Brian called out and asked Johnny if he’d like to pray with them. Johnny turned his head and responded, “I’m not interested.” The pastor turned to leave and said, “I understand, but you are welcome to join us anytime.”

Brian suddenly remembered his own daughter sitting on the school bench that dark and dreadful morning. It hadn’t occurred to him at the time to ponder what she was thinking. Now he wished he’d taken more time to notice what really took place that day. Brian thought about how many times his precious daughter cried, and no one even took the time to comfort her. Small things kept popping in his head again. What was the weather like that day? What clothing was she wearing to school? Did something happen at breakfast? He just kept thinking about the events that took place that horrific day. He shook his head and tried not to think about the sad events.

The pain and suffering she had endured because of others must have been unbearable. Brian soon realized what Johnny was going through and the pain he was probably experiencing. The youth minister needed to help guide Johnny in the right direction and give him a reason to smile again.

The pastor couldn't bear seeing another child hurt by other students. Brian thought he would generate a challenge to help Johnny before something bad happened and it would be too late. Mr. Tom Blackford, the math teacher, and Mrs. Sue Rawlings, the science teacher, walked over and asked if everything was okay. Brian must have looked worried.

Brian had a blank look on his face when he told them everything was fine. He explained that he was thinking about the ways of life. The way some things affect people and how certain events could change. He could not tell them he was again reminded of Stephanie and how the hurt of missing her was almost unbearable.

Brian then rejoined the group for a final prayer, adding a prayer for Johnny. Afterwards, he asked the group why the students were teasing and laughing at Johnny. Patricia, who was sweet, yet outspoken, informed the pastor that none of the students liked Johnny because he was strange and different from the other students. The teenagers talked about Johnny because they noticed he seemed unkempt and wore the same ragged clothes every day.

Pastor Brian said, "Johnny's in need of a friend. I suggest each student take a minute to speak to Johnny and invite him to join in." The youth pastor also told the students how important it was to stand up for others, such as Johnny, and others who are victims of bullying. He reminded them to inform school officials and the principal if they believe a student needs help.

Brian arrived the next day to gather with the teens. Johnny was there on the bench as the day before, only this time he wasn't alone. George Dillings from the group was typically shy, so speaking to Johnny was a milestone for each of them. George rushed over and told the pastor and the other students in the group that Johnny didn't say anything to him. The boy seemed to be disinterested as he sat on the bench with his head lowered.

Brian encouraged George not to give up, but to continue to talk with Johnny and invite him to join in. The pastor also told

George how proud he was of him for taking the first step. George said he would continue to ask Johnny to worship with them around the flagpole. Brian also encouraged the other teens to invite Johnny to join them. George was determined to make sure that someone would care. The others agreed to help George and continue to encourage Johnny.

Pastor Brian and a small group of students gathered to sing songs and listen to a message of encouragement. After speaking, Brian became even more proud of his son, who wished to share his touching and heartfelt testimony.

“My name is Patrick Hanson,” he began. “I’m on the sophomore soccer team as a left wing forward. I’m a sinner. I struggle with being truant from school and skipping classes. Also last year I was charged with possession of marijuana for being at a friend’s party. The police showed up and arrested everyone in the house. I was released because I didn’t smoke the pot, but I was with some friends who did. When my dad arrived at the police station, I saw the pain on his face and how disappointed he was in me. I was put on probation and did community service for six months.”

“While sitting at the station, I realized I needed to change. I gave my heart over to the Lord that night at the station,” Patrick continued. “When I got home, I turned my heart over to God and was baptized the next Sunday.”

Brian was almost in tears as he listened to his son talk about what he’d been through. Patrick’s testimony was refreshing, a promise of knowing that God was looking after him. Pastor Hanson and the group of students said a final prayer around the flagpole. They asked God again to look after Johnny and to continue to guide each of them.

Patrick came over, gave his father a hug, and thanked his dad for allowing him to share his testimony. Then he also thanked his father for loving him and his sister. As they broke their embrace, Gloria rushed over and poured herself into her father’s arms.

Brian told them he loved them both and said sweetly, “You need to get to class.”

After everyone had left, Brian felt an urging to take a road trip to Cartersville to visit Stephanie’s gravesite. The youth minister left a voice message on his wife’s cell phone, asking her to call him during her lunch break. Then he stopped by the florist to pick up yellow carnations to place on Stephanie’s grave.

Brain also called his previous pastor, Jim Walters, to ask him if he could come by for a visit while he was in town. Brian was planning to gather some ideas about how to help Johnny.

Later that day, Pastor Hanson arrived in Cartersville and met up with Pastor Walters at a diner.

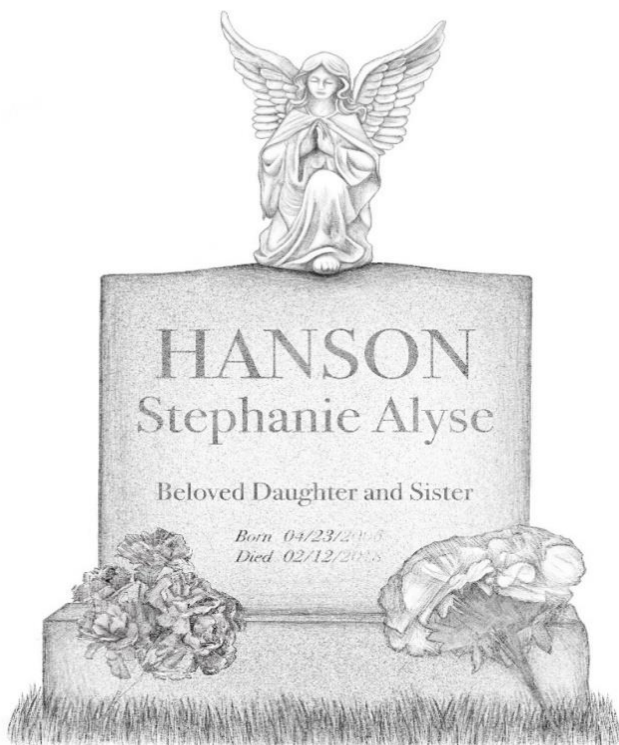
“How is your family, Pastor Walters? And everyone at church?”

“Fine, fine. And, how are you and your family doing?”

“Well, thanks. I’m a youth pastor, and the high school has allowed me to share devotions around the flagpole every morning. I’m really enjoying it and I believe God has great things in store for me. However, there’s this one boy, Johnny, who seems to be an outcast. He just sits on a bench each morning, outside of the group. How might I encourage Johnny to take part with the other students?”

Pastor Walters said, “Try to connect with him and get better acquainted with him. Another suggestion could be to talk to the school and ask permission to share your story with the other students at a school-wide assembly.” Walter added, “And, keep trying to encourage the students to be friends with him.”

After Jim and Brian had eaten, Brian stopped by the cemetery to drop off the flowers. He wanted to reflect on the special times he shared with his daughter. He gently took Stephanie’s picture out of his wallet and kissed it. He spoke softly to her gravesite.



“Remember when I took you out on your twelfth birthday for a date? First, I took you to your favorite restaurant and gave you a locket. Stephanie, your eyes and smile just sparkled and you hugged me tightly in front of everyone. I took you to a movie and bought you a beautiful dress with flowers and a white bow around the waist. It was the perfect dress for your birthday party.

“I just loved our father-daughter dance. We danced to your favorite song. And, your smile. Your smile was fabulous, sweetie. I’ll never forget how you loved having all your friends at your party. I’ll never forget it.”

Brian placed her picture back into his wallet and dropped to his knees and cried. He was angry and upset as he reached up to God with both arms stretched to the sky. “Why did this happen? Why didn’t I realize she was hurting? Why, God, why?”

He got up off the ground, lifted his head toward heaven, tears pouring down the side of his face. “Stephanie, you don’t know how much I love and miss you.” The tree leaves began to blow, and he sensed a cool breeze come over him. He then felt peaceful, as if covered by a blanket sent from Heaven.

On Brian’s way home, Susan called. He explained, “Susan, I visited Pastor Walters and then went to Stephanie’s grave. Would you like to visit my parents for the weekend to commemorate Stephanie’s passing?”

Susan wasn’t sure if she was ready. She took a long, deep breath and said, “Yes, of course I would.” Brian then called his mother, Emily, to confirm a visit.

Saturday morning, Brian loaded the van and they left for his parents’ house. The children were excited to visit their grandparents. As they arrived, Gloria and Patrick jumped out and rushed over to hug their grandma. While Emily and Susan prepared lunch, Brian and his father, Richard, watched the football game on television. The teens went outside to enjoy the backyard.

While sitting on the couch, Brian and his dad talked about the teen who was being bullied at the high school. The two also discussed Stephanie and why Brian may have missed some signs indicating that she was having struggles. Brian wondered what could have been different if he’d examined her behaviors a bit more closely.

Richard turned his head toward the window and asked Brian, “What do you detect out the window?”

Brian responded and said, “I can view my teens playing and laughing in the backyard.”

Richard asked, “Do you love your kids?”

“Yes!” Brian replied with a hint of disbelief in his tone. “Where is my father going with this?” Pastor Hanson thought. “I love my children.”

Taking Brian's right hand, he looked into his eyes. Richard's aging eyes were full of compassion and understanding. "God, our Father, loves you just the same way."

The words hung between them for a long moment and Brian didn't know what to say. Richard then patted Brian's hand and said, "My son, give your problems to God. He will help you work through the issues you're dealing with." Richard smiled and perhaps he detected something outside the window. Brian remained unconvinced. "Let's take a walk. I'd like to show you something else to help you understand."

Brian and Richard walked down a path in the woods. The son listened intently to his father. The two men sat on a bench in an open, grassy area surrounded by trees. Richard turned and calmly explained what Brian didn't understand about the view from the window.

"Son, I know how much you love your children. The time you spend with them reflects on you as a father. Take hold of this Bible and show me where it says life is going to be easy. We can't focus on the past because we can't change what happened; yet, we can learn from our mistakes. The view from the window resembles the reflection of your life as a man."

Brian looked at his father. "Why didn't you tell me at the house instead of out in the woods?"

"My son, we are only here a short time and it is important to take the time we have and share God's love with our children. The Bible has the answers. I knew my message would be more meaningful if we talked with no interruptions."

Richard took Brian's hand. "Let's pray and ask God to reveal what you need to know as a father." After they'd prayed, the two headed back to the house. Brian hugged his dad. "Thank you, Dad," he said sincerely.

Sunday morning, they attended their previous church, Cartersville United Methodist Church, with Brian's parents. All

of them went to their Sunday School classes, where they were eager to see friends whom they'd not seen since their move.

After Sunday School and before the worship service began, Pastor Walters asked, "Brian, I know this is a bit last minute; but, would you be willing to play something special on the piano for the congregation?"

Brian told Pastor Walters that he would love to. He offered up a quick prayer to God, asking Him which song would be best. Brian sat at the piano as the crowd grew quiet. Gently he began playing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." He played all the stanzas and heard a few faint "amens" from the crowd.

The Hansons remained after the service for the monthly potluck luncheon. They had a great time of fellowship, visiting with other church members, many of whom were thrilled to see the Hansons.

Brian was feeling quite emotional about being back in the same church that Stephanie once attended. He had a strong longing in his heart.

"Mom and Dad, we want to go to the cemetery to place flowers on Stephanie's grave. We'll meet you back at your house," Brian said as he turned to walk to his car.

At the gravesite, Brian and his family placed flowers on the grave and hugged each other as they stood quietly. Susan talked with Stephanie, telling her how much they missed her. Gloria knelt gently and placed a rose on her sister's grave. She began sharing with her sister about how much she missed her. Patrick then laid a rose beside Gloria's. His words were kind and sweet, as he choked back tears, telling his baby sister how much he missed her.

Afterwards, they headed to Brian's parents' house. Brian loaded the van as they said their goodbyes. Later, at home, they retrieved their bags from the car and went inside. After the kids headed to their rooms, Brian was still in a reflective mood. He didn't really want to try to focus on anything. He knew this season

of grieving would catch him off guard at times, just when he was not expecting it.

After dinner, the family met in the living room for Bible study and to discuss the upcoming week.

Brian asked Patrick and Gloria, “Is there any indication to you that I’m making a difference at the flagpole every morning?”

Patrick said, “Yes, and we’re excited about it.” The children reinforced their father’s eagerness and wrapped him in hugs. Gloria added with enthusiasm in her eyes, “Dad, you are creating an impact and, if we’re patient with Johnny, he’ll change his life.”

CHAPTER 3: TRANSPARENT SCARS

*P*astor Brian wished to discuss the problems of school bullying with the principal, Barbara Jackson. He also wanted to obtain permission to address the student body at a special assembly. He knew the principal would be receptive to his request and purpose for such an assembly.

As Brian proceeded toward Mrs. Jackson's office, he noticed Johnny approaching his locker. Roger Smith, Carl Fitzgerald, and Fred Carlson were standing near Johnny's locker. The three teens were chuckling and verbally picking on Johnny as Johnny opened his locker.

A few students banged the locker doors as they walked by. Brian heard one of the football players say, "Hey, Johnny, did you get a date?" Samuel Dalton suddenly grabbed Johnny's books away from him, forcefully threw them on the ground, and took off quickly with the other football players.

Three girls a few lockers down were snickering and giggling. They turned and started laughing at the comments directed toward Johnny. Other students walked by, strolling and laughing with the crowd. No one bothered to ask Johnny if he needed help picking up his books.

Brian could see the smirk on Roger Smith's face as if Roger's comments were meant as a sarcastic joke. Brian wanted to approach the students, grab them, and shove them into the locker. He felt his anger well up inside. He started yelling at the kids to stop bothering Johnny.

Brian then inhaled slowly to calm his emotions and walked over to the boys. He kindly and firmly told the boys to stop the harassment and get to class. Then, Brian overheard Roger Smith say in a crude voice, "Who does this man think he is to tell me to get to class?"

With the next class period quickly approaching, mobs of students were scurrying down the hallway to get to their lockers before the bell. A few students lingered next to the drinking fountain; others were talking on their phones. Several others were coming in and out of the restrooms.

The sounds of metal locker doors slamming closed echoed through the hallways. Pastor Hanson saw Johnny in front of his locker. He gingerly approached the teen.

"Hello, Johnny. Do you remember me?"

Johnny turned and saw that it was Brian. Johnny shook his head yes and then walked away, never making eye contact with the youth pastor. Brian was saddened that Johnny avoided eye contact; yet, he knew in his heart that someday, in some special way, he'd get to know this teen. He knew God had a purpose in causing their paths to cross. He was determined to pray for Johnny every day.

Brian continued down the hallway where he spotted Patrick and his girlfriend, Alysia Sanders, talking next to their lockers. As they were reaching for their books, Patrick glanced up and saw his dad approaching.

Brian spoke quickly to his son. "I just saw Johnny and I witnessed him being bullied. It was a few of the football players." Then he asked Patrick to keep an eye on Johnny. He reminded

his son to let Johnny know that if he needed anything, Pastor Brian could help.

Patrick agreed to keep an eye on Johnny. Alysia also agreed to help make sure Johnny was okay. Patrick said to his girlfriend and his dad, "Johnny has been bullied in the classrooms, restroom, cafeteria, and other places in school. It's always those same guys." Brian then asked his son if he knew the kids who had picked on Johnny.

Patrick assured his father that he knew the students. But, he reassured his dad that they could discuss the situation more after school. The bell rang for the next class to start and the teens hurried to class.

Brian knocked on the principal's outer office door and asked the school secretary if he could speak with the principal. The secretary buzzed the principal's office. Brian heard his invitation to come in and he went into her office. He quietly closed the door behind him.

"Hello, Pastor Hanson. Please have a seat," said Principal Jackson. "What can I help you with today?"

Brian had his mental notes ready to proceed.

"Do I have your permission to speak to the students about the problem of bullies and bullying?"

Principal Jackson did not hesitate. She replied, "Yes, that would be perfect."

"Do you know about the situation with a rather shy student named Johnny?" Brian was curious to know the reasons why this particular student seemed to be a target of bullying.

Principal Jackson told Brian that Johnny was a fairly good student and was very quiet. The teen had some problems with missing class once in a while and she said that Johnny seemed to be troubled, as if something bothered him, but he never really talked about it. She'd suggested in the past that Johnny speak with a school counselor, but he'd refused.

Principal Jackson continued, "Maybe you could try to reach out to Johnny?"

Brian said he'd tried; but, thus far, had no response from Johnny. The principal then suggested that Brian speak with the school counselor, Mr. Jim Fannigan. Maybe Brian and Jim could find a solution together.

Brian walked intently to Mr. Fannigan's office and knocked on his door. Mr. Fannigan opened the door and said, "Come on in and have a seat."

Brian asked, "May I speak with you for a few minutes?"

"Yes, I have a few minutes to spare."

"How can I help you, Pastor?"

Brian introduced himself as the youth minister at the Millsville United Methodist Church. He then asked Mr. Fannigan if he were aware of the constant teasing and bullying that Johnny was enduring at school.

Mr. Fannigan said, "I've had no idea that anything like this has been going on, Pastor." Jim continued, "No one has been in my office about Johnny except for issues regarding his attendance and grades." Brian was curious about the fact that no one had reported anything to the counselor's office.

"Mr. Fannigan, do you have any ideas on how the school can prevent the students from being bullied?"

"I'm not aware of any resources at the moment. But, let's see what we can find." Mr. Fannigan then turned to his computer screen. He began researching some campaigns that other school districts had implemented — campaigns geared toward teaching students how to prevent and report bullying. To his amazement, several web sites and articles were quite pertinent to his discussion with the pastor.

Brian and Mr. Fannigan spent several minutes perusing the information they saw online. Jim suggested that they could gather enough information and try to put something together.

Brian added, "I think that's an excellent idea! I'm planning to speak to the students at a special assembly soon." Jim was pleased to see a parent be willing to plan such an event. He agreed to contribute to the assembly.

"I need to get busy with my day, but I will let you know when I have something. Maybe between the two of us, we can come up with ideas to present to the board."

Brian said, "I believe my own children are wanting to help with the campaign. I'm sure they would appreciate the information." Jim was very proud of Brian's kids wanting to get involved in such a great event for their peers. He agreed that the assembly was an important project.

After several minutes discussing Johnny and the topic of bullying, Brian thanked the counselor for his time.

"You're welcome. Maybe we can also get the teachers and staff involved. But, even before we get this assembly on the calendar, I'll ask the teachers to stand outside their classroom doors before school, after school, and between periods to watch the students. Maybe we can try to avoid the harassment you witnessed this morning."

Brian shook his head in agreement and said he'd make time to meet. As he left the counselor's office, he noticed it was close to 11 a.m. He knew the students would line up for lunch soon. He decided to hang around and join Susan for lunch in the teachers' corner.

Brian looked around the large cafeteria. He was quite surprised to see how many students sat by themselves or gathered in small groups. Several football players sat with the cheerleaders. He noticed a group of popular and outgoing girls who sat together. He realized that the students seemed to be divided into different types of social groups. Brian was amazed at how quiet the cafeteria was.

During lunch with Susan, and in a lull in their conversation, Brian noticed Johnny sitting by himself. A few other teens were

throwing their lunch at Johnny. Johnny just sat there, with his head down, trying to ignore the teens, and eating his lunch as if nothing bothered him.

A loud, vibrant noise rang out across the cafeteria as Brian slammed his fist on the table and stood. Susan looked up at her husband. She calmly asked him to take a deep breath. "Please relax, Brian. Be calm. The students are staring."

Brian gained his composure, apologized to his wife, and sat down. He was perturbed, but, he knew he needed to handle his anger more calmly. The students began talking again as they ate. Brian was still determined to make his presence and seniority known. He got up and purposely walked over to the guys who were throwing food.

With a firm and direct voice, he told them to stop. He was polite, yet he meant business. He asked again firmly, "Please stop throwing your food at Johnny. Finish up, guys. Take your trays to the tray return. Head to class!"

The teens gazed at the pastor and shook their heads in cockiness. Then, they looked at him and didn't reply. Brian was still not satisfied by their silence, but, returned to join Susan. From the teachers' corner, he could still hear the teens laughing and making fun of Johnny. He turned to glance again at the boys and shook his head in disbelief.

Brian looked at Susan and apologized again. She had disappointment in her eyes; yet, calmly forgave him for his outburst. Brian, trying to change the subject, asked Susan how her day was going. She replied she'd have a huge stack of homework papers to grade that evening. Brian leaned over, gave Susan a peck on the cheek, and turned quickly to leave.

