

This is a work of imagination. None of the characters found within these pages reflect the character or the intentions of any real person. Any similarity is coincidental.

The Chairman

Copyright © 1999 by Harry Lee Kraus, Jr.

Published by Crossway Books
a division of Good News Publishers
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Cover design: Kirk DouPonce, UDG / Designworks, www.udgdesignworks.com

First printing, new ISBN, 2003

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kraus, Harry Lee, 1960–
The chairman / Harry Lee Kraus, Jr.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-58134-539-9 (alk. paper)

I. Title.

PS3561.R2875 C48 1999

813'.54—dc21

98-46847

ML	13	12	11	10	09	08	07	06	05	04	03			
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

CHAPTER

1

NATHAN MCALLISTER sat in the chair, planning his future, trying to make some sense of the past, struggling to remember.

He looked from the double window onto the broad green lawn. Spring rain had started early, and the effect on the shrubs and flowers around Briarfield Manor was nothing short of splendid. The only one who seemed to mind was Jack, the yardman, who swore that the thick grass grew faster than in any year he could remember. Wide sidewalks crisscrossed the landscaping, and decorative metal benches dotted the lawn every few feet to accommodate old, tired feet and lungs incapable of endurance. Beyond the lawn, highway travelers hurried by, uninterested in the pace of nursing home life. Beyond the highway, just visible above the roofline of Ling's Chinese restaurant, North Mountain loomed.

Beyond the mountain, nestled in a quiet valley, the town of Fisher's Retreat beckoned, calling Nathan McAllister home. For Nathan to get there from where he sat involved more than just the forty-five minute, white-knuckled passage on Highway 2 that snaked between Brighton and Apple Valley. *To get there from here*, Nathan mused, *will take a miracle*. He glared at the distant mountain face as if the intensity of his gaze might somehow lessen the giant separating him from his goal.

Why does Abby seem so scared to let me come home?

Next to his chair, a computer monitor and keyboard occupied center stage on a long countertop covered with numerous books. The

books, the writings of C.S. Lewis and other theologians, were not standing upright within bookends. They rested at the counter's edge, open and well worn, with broken spines. Beside the countertop, at a level awkwardly low for Nathan's rare visitors, a cluttered bulletin board whispered a story of pain and hope. Pictures of Melissa and Abby, vacation photographs, his daughter's artwork, and sympathy cards bordered an assortment of articles clipped from the *Apple Valley Journal* and the *Carlisle News Leader*.

In the center, a photograph of Nathan just prior to his graduation from the Police Academy accompanied an article entitled "Officer Critical After Drug Bust Shooting." Below it a second article—"McAllister Downed by Friendly Fire: Turner Suspended Until Investigation Concluded"—featured a picture of Officer Brian Turner, with his face partially shielded by his open hand. Below that, a single tack held an article updating the town's fund-raising push for Nathan's medical expenses, a voluntary effort spearheaded by Chief Joe Gibson.

On the board's lower right-hand corner, a Harley Davidson calendar marked the time since the accident—five months that seemed shorter because of his memory loss. Five months that seemed like forever.

The accident. In Nathan's mind it was: THE ACCIDENT. The sum total of his memory of the weeks surrounding the event was an isolated recollection in a sea of black nothingness. His doctor called it a memory island and explained the loss in terms of ischemic encephalopathy or other such fancy medical language that Nathan wished he'd never been forced to learn. Most of his thoughts of the event were gathered from his conversations with his fellow officers, especially his chief, Joe Gibson.

None of his visitors wanted to talk about it much, not even Joe, who had always been so talkative before. Now it seemed like Joe couldn't get beyond some deep sadness for Nathan. He would pump Nathan for his version of the events, then stay objectively distant, even mildly suspicious of Nathan, as if he needed to remain the unbiased detective in order to conclude the department's reports.

Abby wouldn't talk about it either. If she came by more than once a week, it surprised him. And when she did visit, she would simply talk

about the weather or Melissa or a hundred other superficial items of small-town life, but never the accident.

He had brought it up to Abby only twice since he arrived at the nursing home. Perhaps before, at the University Hospital or during his weeks at the rehabilitation facility, it had been a multitude of times, maybe even a thousand. He didn't know. He couldn't remember anything from those first critical weeks. He could only imagine how he must've tortured her over and over with, "What happened?" When he talked of the accident now, she would shift uncomfortably, cry, and insist that they dwell on the future. She didn't say it, but Nathan could hear it anyway. *Ignore it. Bury it. Never bring it up again!*

Even Brian, who had been his closest friend on the force, couldn't seem to face him. He seemed overwhelmed by the investigation, and too guilty to sit for more than a moment or two before finding some reason to leave. Not that Nathan blamed him. Knowing what he'd been told about the accident, Brian ought to feel responsible, even guilty. Even if it was an accident.

Nathan's best information about his own shooting was from the small-town newspapers in the Apple Valley. He could recite almost verbatim from the phrases he'd read and reread. "Nathan McAllister was shot by fellow officer, Brian Turner, during a gunfire exchange with a drug dealer, Lester Fitts. Turner claimed to have responded to a distress radio call from the scene. Fitts was accosted by Turner as the dealer exited the front of a drug safe house carrying over a kilogram of heroin. Fitts retreated toward the front steps, drew a 9mm handgun, and opened fire on Turner, who returned multiple fire, striking his opponent in the chest. Turner did not see Officer McAllister in the doorway behind Fitts, and the second officer sustained a near-fatal injury in the altercation."

What really happened, God? If it's all so tidy, like the newspapers say, why won't anyone talk to me about it?

Nathan broke his gaze at North Mountain when he heard the door squeak.

"Hi, Nathan," Libby Summers chirped. "Lunch is served."

He turned around and inched slowly forward to position his legs under the table, where she had placed a tray of overcooked meat loaf and

soft vegetables. He took a single glance at the plate before closing his eyes to offer a silent prayer. He *wanted* to be thankful, but what he really felt was a longing for Abby's homemade linguine with red pepper sauce.

He glanced at the tray again. All the food was cut into bites in the kitchen before he could see it. Another pet peeve of his—patient preference sacrificed in the name of efficiency.

I want to be thankful, Lord. But I'd like to see this stuff before they dice it up beyond recognition.

He looked again at the vegetables—instant mashed potatoes and creamed corn. He closed his eyes and dreamed of red peppers and garlic sautéed in olive oil, fresh basil, steaming pasta—

“Amen,” Libby interjected, looking at the clock on the wall.

Nathan nodded and began to eat. Today he ate in silence. Although he longed for someone to talk to, he felt bad taking up Libby's time. He knew she had other people who needed assistance. If he talked, the others would have to wait, and she would get scolded by the patients at the end of the hall.

After a few minutes Libby fell into a boring routine. She seemed to be moving from one food to the next without thinking.

“I've had six bites of meat loaf. How about some smashed potatoes?” He used his daughter's words to soften the request.

Libby winced silently, and a hint of pink colored her full cheeks.

He watched her as he ate. She seemed young, maybe just out of high school. Her complexion was clear and her hair blonde, pulled back from her face in a braid he suspected she wore just at work. He could identify her by her hand lotion. Every day she smelled the same—a soft, floral fragrance. *Roses perhaps?* He fought the temptation to lose himself in an unreal fantasy, imagining the texture of her hair, the softness of her skin.

He closed his eyes and dispelled the thought.

After a few minutes he spoke. “Thanks, Libby. I've had enough.”

She frowned. “You didn't finish.”

“Can't do it.”

“You really should drink more fluids.”

“I know. But I can't. Maybe later?” A smile belied his thoughts. *You are paid to be my hands, not my brain. I've still got that!*

Libby shrugged and snapped a large yellow lid down over the tray. "Suit yourself." She headed for the door. She turned back when she reached the hallway. "Say, any word from Social Services?"

Nathan tilted his head from side to side. "Janice is doing a site visit in Fisher's Retreat today. Everything should be set. I should be going home."

"That's great." Libby spun on her heels and began pushing a dietary cart to the next room.

As she disappeared, Nathan added with a soft whisper, "If Abby agrees. If . . ."



Paige Hannah stood with one hand on the open refrigerator door and the other on her lips.

"Don't just stand there," her mother urged. "Take something and close the door!"

She pulled a diet soda from the bottom shelf and shut the refrigerator. "It's too hard to decide."

"Come on, Paige," her mother laughed. "You act like it's culture shock just coming back home."

"It is culture shock," she protested. "You should see what my roommates live on. Tofu. Alfalfa sprouts." She gagged. "Wheat germ on bananas."

"Sounds simply scrumptious."

"Maybe to a rabbit." She wrinkled her nose. "What's up, doc?"

Barbara, her mom, heaved a sigh and opened the door again. "Here. Have some leftover lasagna. Or this pasta salad. Or curried chicken with rice."

Paige smiled sheepishly. "Couldn't we just order a pizza? I've been dying for a Tortina's deep-dish combination forever."

"I do all this cooking and—"

Paige caught her mother's eye. "Please? It's my last night home."

"Ugh." Her mother laughed. "You!" She lifted a phone book from the table. "You call."

Paige held up her hand. "I don't need the book." She picked up the phone. "82pizza. It's been the same forever."

Her mother rolled her eyes, then leaned forward. "Order some breadsticks too. And a side of ravioli."

Paige covered the phone with her hand. "Mom!"

"We might as well make it an occasion."

As long as Paige could remember, her mother was making "an occasion" out of something. Someone arriving. Someone leaving. A good grade. The first Monday of the month. A new baby in the neighborhood. A sale at Wal-Mart. Anything or everything provided an excuse for "an occasion."

Forty-five minutes later Paige watched as her mother greeted the pizza deliveryman by name and tipped him five dollars.

Barbara shut the door with her foot and carried a pizza box and a large bag to the kitchen.

"You know that guy?"

Barbara shrugged. "Everyone in this neighborhood knows him."

They sat and ate as Barbara talked excitedly about her upcoming trip.

"Mom . . ." Paige rearranged the crust remnants on her plate.

Her mother looked over her half glasses and lightly touched the corner of her mouth with a napkin.

"I've been thinking that going to see Dad might not be such a good idea."

Barbara took a deep breath. "Honey, we've been over all this before."

"But Dad's so busy. I'll just be in the way—"

Barbara didn't respond. She watched thoughtfully as Paige formed a triangle out of the crust fragments.

"He's always operating."

"You haven't stayed with him for the summer since you were sixteen."

"Mom, he's—"

"He's a very successful surgeon. And one who happens to love his daughter just as much as I do."

Paige began tearing off smaller and smaller pieces of crust, form-

ing first an X and then a serpentine wave with the doughy nuggets. “Take me to Europe with you. I could do research, maybe even get credit for an independent study. We could sit in the little cafes, talk about your art—”

“Paige, you need to spend some time with your father.”

“What will I do when he goes in for cases at night?”

“You’re an adult. Go with him if you want.”

“What if I can’t find a job?”

“We’ve been over this before.”

“Mom, he—”

“He’s a driven man, but he’s still your father. Besides, maybe it’s time you saw what a jealous mistress medicine really is.”

“And what’s wrong with medicine?”

Barbara sighed. “Nothing. Everything.” She paused. “Oh, Paige, you know my opinion.” She shook her head slowly. “Medicine is a demanding profession.”

“But so exciting.”

Her mother turned away. “You’ll see. It’s not as romantic as you imagine.”

Paige began to protest. “Mom—”

“You just go,” Barbara interrupted. “Spend time with your father like you should. Maybe it will deter some of these pre-medicine notions you’ve gotten into your head.” She shook her head to answer her own thought. “Knowing you, you’ll just love it.”

“Think I’ll be able to get into the O.R.?”

“If you want to. Your father can work it out. He is chairman, you know.”

“Of course.” Paige pushed the crust pieces into a straight line along the edge of her knife, then lifted her nose in the air to speak. “Chairman of the Surgery Department, Brighton University.”

Barbara started clearing the dishes. “You’re a lot like him, you know.”

Paige showed her straight teeth in a cheesy grin and closed her eyes in an exaggerated blink. “My fair face?”

“Your determination to be the best,” her mother snapped. Then, softer, she added, “And your fair face, honey.”

Her mother looked at the kitchen clock. “My oh my. Why don’t you let me take care of these plates? Your plane leaves early in the morning, you know.”

Paige nodded and kissed her mother on the cheek. “I know, Mom.” She turned and started toward the den before pausing again. “I’ll try to keep an open mind. About a career in medicine, I mean.”

Her mother shrugged. “Fair enough.” She lifted a pizza box from the table. “I called your father yesterday. He’ll pick you up at the airport.”

Paige nodded.

“And, Paige?” Barbara paused and reached for her daughter. “This summer will be important for him too. He needs a praying woman in the house again.”

“He’s too together to need anyone, Mom, not even God.” She shook her head slowly. “He doesn’t need me.” Their eyes met. “He never listened to you.”

“This is different. You’re different.”

Paige watched her. Her mother seemed to want to say more but somehow couldn’t bring herself to do it. After a moment Paige nodded and walked silently to the stairs.



Nathan eased forward through the doorway and turned right. He loved the wide hallway. Here he could move forward unrestricted, without the bother of bumping things or asking people to assist him. Here at Briarfield there were no pretenses, and no awkward labels. Everyone was here for a reason, and not many of their stories were happy ones.

Late evenings were his time. There was no one telling him when to get up or eat or move his bowels. No one doing his physical therapy, combing his hair, or brushing his teeth. No one making sure he didn’t drown in the shower. In the evenings Nathan enjoyed the freedom of making his own choices, a liberty that seemed too rare for someone so smart and so young.

Nathan identified his first contact—Mrs. Ethel Bailey. Because she used a walker, she moved more slowly than Nathan, and he had no trouble catching her.

“Ethel . . .” He spoke quietly. “There’s going to be a jailbreak at midnight. Are you in?”

Ethel smiled. “Hello, Nate,” she chuckled. “I’m too old for that.”

“Not you, Ethel.”

They moved forward at a slow pace, comfortable with not speaking.

When they reached Mr. Smith’s room, Ethel said, “This is as far as I go.” They turned together and headed back up the tiled walkway. “Not quoting C.S. Lewis tonight? Or Bon—” Her head bobbed.

“Bonhoeffer?”

“That’s him.”

Nathan shook his head. “Not tonight. How’s the hip?”

“I have a new one, you know. My sister is getting her knee done this week.”

“Maybe that’s what I need,” he joked, tapping his legs with his mouthstick. “Couple new hips, couple of knees . . .” He looked up to see Jake Peterson carrying a power screwdriver in one hand and a collection of papers in the other.

Jake’s tired face broke into a wide grin. An official brown hat with a Briarfield Manor logo topped his head, covering a scalp as slick as the floor.

Nathan smiled in return, as he did almost every time he saw Jake. Why anyone would want to wear a brown hat with the initials of Briarfield Manor embroidered on the front was beyond him.

“I got the stuff I was talking about. My boy got it off the Internet just like I said.” He pinched the screwdriver under his left arm and started shuffling through the papers. “These boys in Miami are the best.” He pointed to a picture. “Look at their logo. He’s standing up!”

Nathan read the heading slowly. “The Miami Project.”

“Yeah, just look at this stuff. Nerve research. Grafts. I tried to read it.” He shrugged, shoving the papers toward Nathan. “You can understand it.”

“Wow,” he responded with more enthusiasm than he felt. He looked up at Jake. “Thanks.” He nodded. “Thanks a lot.”

Jake grinned.

“Can you put it on my desk? My door’s open.”

“Sure.”

Nathan and Ethel watched Jake shuffle down the hall and listened as a whistled melody disappeared with him.

“The only thing bigger than that man’s heart is his smile. If I was twenty years younger, I’d ask him out,” Ethel announced with glee.

The duo maneuvered around a yellow plastic pyramid warning about a slippery floor. Ethel called into an open door, “Come on, Bob. Time for a walk.”

Bob Price had his ear two inches from a blaring radio. He didn’t look up.

Ethel shrugged and kept moving. “I’ve invited him for a walk sixteen days in a row. He hasn’t heard me once.”

“If there wasn’t so much in the way, I’d go in there and ask him myself.”

Ethel paused at the next doorway. Inside, Sam Miller snored on, oblivious to his restraints. “He hasn’t recognized his wife in months.” She nodded. “Some things make no sense at all. You and—”

Nathan eased forward. “Come on.” He sensed Ethel’s hesitation, but he wanted to move on. He and Ethel had bantered the why question around many times in the past months. He didn’t feel like doing it again tonight.

She looked down at him and squinted. “Don’t rush me. I know what you’d say anyway. Something about sovereignty—”

“Comin’ to the rec room, Nate?” Tilly Swanson interrupted, smoothing out the front of her nursing whites.

She didn’t wait for an answer. “Ella’s volunteerin’ tonight. You could play a game. She’ll roll the dice for you.”

“I want to stay in the hall. Janice might—”

Tilly frowned. “Have you ever seen her here this late before? She’ll be in the Social Services office at 8 in the morning.”

“She said she’d stop by after talking with Abby.”

“In Fisher’s Retreat?”

Nathan nodded.

“Hummmph. That explains it. If I had to travel Highway 2 from the Apple Valley, I’d be ready for a drink.” She unwrapped a stick of Dentyne. “She’ll be in tomorrow, mark my words. Gum?”

“No thanks.”

He watched as she deposited the gum on the tip of her tongue, which quickly retreated between generous, ruby lips. “It’s cinnamon,” she offered a second time.

“It gums up my mouthstick.”

Tilly wrinkled her nose. “Of course.”

Ethel spoke up. “I’ll take some.”

“Here, honey. I’m sorry.” She handed Ethel an unwrapped piece and hurried down the hall.

“You leaving us soon, Nate?” Ethel started forward again.

“I don’t know. That’s what I’m waiting to hear.”

“It takes time to make all the modifications you’ll need.”

“It’s been over four months—first at Brighton University Hospital, then in rehabilitation, and now this.” He shook his head. “I’m twenty-eight years old.” His voice thickened. “I don’t belong in a nursing home.”

Ethel shook her head. “Nate, I—”

“When I first came to Briarfield, I thought it was just going to be a few weeks,” he continued. “Seems like Abby always has another reason to put it off—”

Ethel interrupted him by placing a wrinkled hand on his shoulder. “She’s afraid, Nate. That’s all. Give her time.”

“It’s more than that.” *She doesn’t want me like this. It’s time to face the music, Nathan. You lost more than your body. You’ve lost your family.*

“She’ll come around.”

“If anyone can convince her, Janice Marsh can.”

“It’s not Janice’s job to convince her. She can make sure the health resources are available, but—”

Ethel pulled her hand from his shoulder just as the bedraggled social worker they’d just been discussing trudged into the hall.

Nathan and Ethel looked up at the sound of Janice’s wooden clogs.

Janice stumbled forward. “Wait ’til you see what’s cookin’ in Fisher’s Retreat!”