

An Unexpected Father

second novel in the Collingwood Series

George Fillis

Nicht Fleisch und Blut, das Herz macht uns zu Vätern and Söhnen.

Johann Friedrich von Schiller

Die Räuber, Act 1, Scene 1

It is not flesh and blood but the heart which makes us fathers and sons.

Chapter One

Collingwood, Ontario

1959

Beneath the massive gray and white clouds billowing above Collingwood and racing to fill the sky in every direction, the leaves ignited into various shades of red and gold. Smoke swirled out of chimneys with the smell of burning logs. The temperature had fallen, and a brisk wind came off the bay as the wedding party made its way into the African Baptist Episcopal Church on Seventh Avenue.

Caitlin looked beautiful as she walked down the aisle wearing an ivory silk suit and a pill-box hat. Her long auburn hair curled below her shoulders and a contagious smile spread across her face, highlighting her bright blue eyes. My stomach was in knots, but I was the happiest man on earth.

I hoped Caitlin wasn't too disappointed that her mother didn't walk her down the aisle. Caitlin's father was still angry that his Irish daughter was marrying a man from China. He was adamant when he refused to attend the wedding. Caitlin said that her mother agreed to give her away, but her father would have none of it and told her, "If she's going to marry him, then by God, I'm not going to allow it to be a spectacle for everybody in the whole town."

When Caitlin walked down the aisle accompanied by Catherine, I was delighted. Everything good that had happened to me since coming to Collingwood came through Catherine. I

shared a closeness with Catherine like the one I had in China with my grandfather, YeYe. He had shaped my perspectives on life.

Every time I looked at Caitlin, her sparkling eyes were open wide, and she looked confident and radiant. I never thought I would marry, and it was beyond my wildest imagination to wed such a wonderful woman. My stomach began to spasm, and I was on-the-brink of tears, but when Caitlin took my hand and calmed me with her eyes, joy swelled inside me, and the world seemed a different place, full of grace and light.

After the ceremony, we were surrounded by our friends. Kai was my best man, which was only fitting since he had journeyed with me from Hangzhou. Kathleen's parents and her husband, Patrick, were invited, but they chose not to attend like the Mulroney's.

The wedding party was seated at the head table, and at the table next to us was my employer, Mr. Julian LeBlanc, sitting in his wheelchair dressed in his finest suit. My good friend Jackson was seated next to him and assisted him while Virginia, his nurse, and Rhoda, his housekeeper, were on his other side. I smiled at them, and they beamed back, happy for my good fortune. They all loved Caitlin.

The Coffey sisters, who helped me recover from injuries sustained from the thugs sent by Caitlin's father, were in the back of the room, making sure the refreshments were perfect. Kai's girlfriend, Wei Lei, was busy talking with them, and I was sure she told them about the peanuts she brought, explaining how peanuts were a traditional Chinese symbol for health, good fortune, and many children.

I whispered to Caitlin, "Did you notice Jackson and Kai, each holding hands with their girlfriends? Kai's feelings for Wei Lei have grown ever since he met her at Cott's Cleaners. They have known each other longer than we have."

She smiled and whispered back, “Ruth told me Jackson and Mildred have been talking about a wedding date, and I saw them hugging outside the church this morning.”

“Jackson said he loves Mildred and wants to settle down.”

Kai was grinning as he and Wei Lei approached us during the reception. “Winson and Caitlin, you motivated me to ask Wei Lei’s father for permission to marry her, and he said yes.”

“But what did Wei Lei say?” I asked, winking at Wei Lei.

She blushed, and Kai elbowed me as he said, “Ask her yourself.”

Caitlin took hold of Wei Lei’s hand and said, “I’m so happy for you both. What are your wedding plans?”

“A small wedding with family and friends.”

“I hope you’ll be as happy as we are,” Caitlin said.

“We marry for love like you,” Wei Lei responded.

Kai asked, “Will you be our witnesses?”

“I’d be delighted,” Caitlin said.

“I’m not sure!” I replied.

Kai looked at me, frowned, and then broke into a wide grin. We were fourteen years old when we met on the ship to Vancouver to escape the horrors of Mao Zedong. Only to discover that we were prisoners of a trafficking ring and held in a remote British Columbia logging camp. It had been eight years since we escaped.

With laughter in my voice, I asked, “When is the wedding?”

“In three weeks, on Sunday, we didn’t want to conflict with your wedding ceremony,” he said.

“That’s wonderful. We’ll make sure to be ready for the ceremony, and we’ll bring lots of peanuts. Where will you live?”

“We’ll live with Wei Lei’s parents until we can afford a place of our own.”

All of a sudden a red knitted cap was pulled down over my head. There was laughter as I lifted it off and saw Jackson and Mildred, both with big smiles. As Mildred handed a white one to Caitlin, she said, “These toques are your wedding presents.”

Jackson said, “Catherine knitted one for each of you with the national colors of Canada.”

I owed a lot to Jackson. He knew the train porters, so he planned an escape for Kai and me from the logging camp by hopping a train to Collingwood. Caitlin and I hugged Jackson and Mildred, then I asked, “Should I speak to Catherine about working on two more toques?”

Mildred flashed a big smile and said, “One never knows.”

I was amazed at the events taking place and how all our lives were changing.

Mr. LeBlanc was sitting with Virginia and Rhoda when Caitlin and I approached them. As a quadriplegic, he required around the clock care and being his personal assistant, Caitlin and I would live in his home.

With a warmhearted smile Mr. LeBlanc said, “Well this is the beginning of a wonderful life for the two of you. I have something for you, but please don’t open it until you get home this evening. Virginia, please give them my gift,”

Virginia handed an envelope to Caitlin.

“May I kiss you, Mr. LeBlanc?” Caitlin asked.

“Anytime. You’re my daughter now.” Then she kissed him on both cheeks.

While Caitlin continued talking with Julian and Virginia, Kathleen tapped me on the shoulder. We stepped away, and she turned her back away from the crowd. It was just the two of us as she faced me and reached for my hand. Looking down, she said, “Caitlin and I have known each other since we were infants. When she told me she was in love, I was ecstatic for her. But

when I discovered that you were Chinese, I was disheartened. I am ashamed to say that I tried to talk her out of having a relationship with you.”

She cocked her head and cleared her throat. I squeezed her hand, and when we made eye contact, I smiled and she continued.

“When I saw the glow on her face as she spoke about you and how you made her feel, I had second thoughts. She was heartbroken when she found out that her father instigated your beating.” She stopped, looked away, and took a hard, dry swallow. “When my parents condemned Caitlin to her fate for wanting to marry you, she smiled and told them the love you two have is a gift from God...”

She choked up as I pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to her. “We were raised in the church and taught to believe that all people were created equal.”

Her eyes glistened with moisture, then she stepped forward, hugged me, and whispered, “I’m sorry for how I felt then, but I know better now.”

“Kathleen, look at me.” I held both her hands and waited until she lifted her gaze to me. Tears were running down her cheeks by now, and her lower lip was quivering. I was able only to whisper, “No apology is needed.”

“Thank you, Winson. Seeing the love between you and Caitlin is something I desire in my own marriage. I am so happy for Caitlin, for both of you. I hope one day, my husband will feel the same towards you.” She squeezed my hand and walked away.

Moved by what she had shared, I was hopeful that hearts would change but realized that change comes slowly. I had some time to collect my emotions before Caitlin returned. We said our goodbyes to the remaining guests, and Caitlin and I held hands as we walked the five blocks home.

Listening to the leaves blowing in the wind reminded me of applause, but the blissfulness of the day was shattered when we approached an intersection, and I saw a Chinese man dressed in black standing on a street corner watching us. He raised his arm, pointed at me, then Caitlin, then back at me. I had no doubt it was Tak.

I tried to remain calm as I looked around to see if anyone was with him. When I looked back at him, he patted his right coat pocket, where I assumed he hid a pistol.

As we continued walking, I tried to put him out of my mind when Caitlin said, “Winson, what’s wrong?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t give me that! Don’t treat me like a child and lie to me, thinking that you are somehow protecting me. I’m your wife now. You can’t keep anything from me if you love me. You do love me don’t you?”

“Of course I do. How can you think otherwise? It’s just that I recognized the Chinese man on the corner.”

We were silent until Caitlin said, “Stop! Look at me and tell me who he is. Please don’t keep anything from me.”

When she looked at me, my heart opened as a flower to the morning sun, and I knew I couldn’t keep anything from her. “Do you remember when I told you about being held prisoner in the logging camp and the men who inflicted so much horrible pain on Kai and me?”

“Was he one of them?”

“He was one of the overlords of the trafficking ring.”

“You paid your debt. You shouldn’t be worried.”

“I paid the debt and more, but Dung, who claimed to be our sponsor, said we belonged to him, and he could hold us as long as he wanted. He kept our immigration papers and took all the

money we made with Suk and Jackson from selling reconditioned leather shoes to immigrants coming off ships. We escaped with Suk's help, and then Jackson got us on a train to Collingwood." My spirits fell as I said, "I think I need to speak to Mr. LeBlanc about what to do."

"I want to be with you when you talk to him."

I had been fearful that Caitlin's father, Kieran Mulrone, might have done something to disrupt our wedding but never expected to see Tak. It was our wedding night, and I tried to put him out of my mind.

When we were alone in our bedroom, Caitlin opened the envelope from Mr. LeBlanc and read the card: 'Caitlin, this is a gift to pursue your music degree.' Enclosed was a check for \$3,000. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

I took her hand and said, "A few weeks ago, Mr. LeBlanc asked about our plans. I told him your hopes of getting a university degree to teach music and the requirement to apprentice under a certified teacher. I said these were future goals since we didn't have money for your education."

As I blotted the tears trickling down her cheeks, she said, "Catherine told me at the reception that she wants to reduce her teaching load and asked if I'd consider teaching several of her beginner and intermediate students. She knew of my dream to teach and that I didn't have the money to go through certification at the Conservatory of Music in Toronto. She's the only person in the Collingwood area approved to provide a certification, and she offered her services to me as a wedding gift." We hugged and were overwhelmed.

It was the happiest day of my life. Still, I regretted that her family and friends didn't attend, and my family had no knowledge of our marriage.

The next afternoon, Caitlin and I went into Mr. LeBlanc's office. When he saw us, he beamed and said, "How are the newlyweds?"

Caitlin said, "We are in love."

He studied me, then furrowed his brow and said, "Winson, I thought you would be all smiles on the day after your wedding, but you have been preoccupied with something all morning. Tell me, what's wrong."

I looked at Caitlin, she nodded at me, then I turned to Mr. LeBlanc and said, "Do you remember when I told you about escaping from the logging camp?"

"Yes."

"I thought I saw one of my captors about a month ago on the sidewalk in front of the house. Yesterday, on our way home from the church, I saw him again. This time I am certain it is one of the bosses from camp. His name is Tak, and I'm terrified of him. He told Kai and me that they owned us, and we would never be free from them."

Mr. LeBlanc sighed deeply, "Don't jump to any conclusions."

"What do you think I should do?"

"Let me talk to my attorney, Clive Owen, and find out if anyone knows about this man and what he is doing here in Collingwood. Try not to concern yourself with anything but your beautiful bride. The good news is that he did not try to contact you in the last month, and he did not approach you yesterday. Maybe he realizes he has no claim against you."