

## CHAPTER 1

“Look at the cherry blossoms!  
Their color and scent fall with them,  
Are gone forever,  
Yet mindless  
The spring comes again.”

– IKKYU

The sun filtered through the fluffy, white blossoms, each petal so delicate, it was nearly translucent. Capturing a snowy white branch as it wafted in the breeze, Chloe Clark leaned closer to inhale its subtle fragrance.

Click, click. Click, click. The camera’s shutter snapped as the photographer caught the moment for posterity.

“Turn your face a little toward me. Now, tilt your head slightly to the right.” The photographer held up his thumb as he snapped again.

Hud Beaulieu looked on, arms crossed, his dark eyes twinkling in the sunlight.

Glancing at him, a pleasant shudder ran down Chloe’s spine despite the balmy May day.

“Hud,” said the photographer, the camera hiding his face, muffling his words. “Stand behind Chloe for a shot of you both.”

The broad smile from Hud’s finely-chiseled face caught her eye as he started toward her. His lean body moved sinuously, like a cat’s.

“Move the veil slightly, so it’s not shading her eyes,” said the photographer, still watching them from behind the lens.

Obliging, Hud's dimple deepened as he gently swept the lace from her temple, brushing it back over her shoulder-length, tawny-brown hair. Leaning over her, he gazed into her dark eyes.

His hair tickled her neck, and another shudder raced down her spine.

Click, click. Click, click.

"Perfect," said the photographer. "Now, put your arms around her waist and hug her from the back." As they moved into position, he said, "Chloe, look up at him."

Peering at Hud through her eyelashes, she still had trouble believing it. *Are we really getting married Saturday?*

The memories of the past months rewound like a DVD. Meeting Hud that first summer day, he had been tanned, bare-chested, wearing his captain's cap over a dark mane of hair as he skippered their sunset cruise. Later as they watched the northern lights shimmer and swirl across the sky together from the back of his truck, she began to trust him and eventually fall in love with him.

As the summer wore on, Hud had initiated her into Door County's signature festivals and foods: fish boils, booyah, and tart-cherry pie. Through example, he had gradually introduced her to faith and family, concepts that had been foreign to her.

But it wasn't until Hud's proposal that she believed he loved her. She swallowed a smile, recalling it: a banner, a separate poster for each letter, two strung rows reading, *WILL YOU MARRY ME, CHLOE?* A tiered cake, its icing spelling out, *WILL YOU MARRY ME, CHLOE?* Frosted to the top layer was a square cupcake shaped like a jeweler's box. Lightly set into its frosting was an engagement ring.

Chloe glanced down at her left hand and again peered up at him through her eyelashes. *How much I love you, Hud Beaulieu.*

Click, click. Click, click.

"*That's* the look I wanted," said the photographer, "the look of love."

"Couldn't agree more," whispered Hud. Staring into her eyes, he smiled and met her lips in a kiss.

Click, click. Click, click.

"Hey." Hud wrinkled his brow, pretending to be annoyed. "That one wasn't for the camera. That was personal."

"I know." The photographer's eyes twinkled. "That's why it was so good." He chuckled. "Okay, that should wrap it up for the pre-wedding shoot. I'll meet you at the church Saturday morning for the wedding pictures."

## *Christmas in Cahokia*

This time an icy chill swept up Chloe's spine. She caught her breath.

"Are you cold?" Still holding her, Hud looked into her eyes.

Shaking her head, she gave a nervous chuckle. "Scared."

His grasp around her waist tightened. "Nothing for you to be frightened about." Then he grinned. "I'm scared enough for the both of us."

Breaking out in giggles, she felt his body shaking against hers as they let go the tension in laughter.

Sighing as the chuckling subsided, she turned toward him, drawing him nearer. "I love you, Hud Beaulieu."



Though Saturday morning started early, Chloe was glad for the busyness. Focusing on the details kept her from thinking about the step she and Hud were about to take. *Marriage!* She gulped another cup of coffee while she whisked on mascara. Hardly a wink of sleep and up since four, she was running on pure caffeine and adrenaline.

Her great-aunt Ed, Hud's mother Barbara, and his sister Rose were helping her get ready in the bride's dressing room. Barbara was making a last-minute alteration to Chloe's dress, nipping in the waist.

"You've lost weight since our last fitting." Barbara shook her head.

Chloe gave a wry chuckle as she smoothed Aunt Ed's wedding gown. "Nervous energy."

"Young love," Barbara grinned, "but try to stop fidgeting long enough for me to finish."

"You're sure you don't want to wear the veil at the reception?" Aunt Ed lovingly fingered the veil she had worn just months before.

Chloe glanced from her to Rose and back. "Show her the wreath you made, Rose."

Her dark eyes dancing, the girl carefully lifted a beribboned flower crown from the cooler. "Chloe's wearing the veil during the ceremony and this wreath at the reception."

Chloe smiled warmly and then turned to Aunt Ed. "Since Hud and I are getting married in May, Rose wanted to make a May crown—"

"And a bouquet, mini-bouquets, boutonnières, and floral table arrangements, all with baby's breath, wildflowers, and white cherry blossoms," Rose finished proudly.

“We have a budding florist in our midst.” Chloe reached out to hug her.

Flinching, Barbara pulled the needle and thread away just in time. “Hold still!” She chuckled as she knotted and cut the thread. “We don’t need a harpooned bride.”

A polite knock sounded at the door, and the four looked from one to another.

“That isn’t Hud, is it?” whispered Rose, wide-eyed. “Don’t let him see you until the wedding.”

Chloe called tentatively. “Who is it?”

“It’s Cecilia. Ceci.”

Barbara grinned. “Ceci Lupo, you’re just in time. Rose, get the door for your . . . *almost* cousin.”

First peeking left and right, making sure the coast was clear, Rose opened the door wide and hugged the tall, slender woman with high cheekbones and dark hair.

“Come on in.” Chloe hugged her next. “Help us get ready.”

Still holding onto her arms, Ceci stepped back, looking at the bride from nose to toes. “Your dress is gorgeous!”

Chloe gestured toward her soon-to-be mother-in-law. “Barbara made it—twice. Once for aunt Ed’s wedding, and again when she cut it down for me.”

“But Miss Ed’s the one who chose the material.” Barbara smiled at her mother-in-law.

“I love this vintage, ivory-colored lace.” Ceci ran it through her slender fingers, listening to the rustling sound of its satin underlayer. “They don’t make fabric like this, anymore.”

Aunt Ed gave them a wry grin. “I bought it over sixty years ago.”

“Sixty years!” Her dark hair flying, Ceci’s head spun toward her. “There’s got to be a story.”

Aunt Ed scoffed. “Long story short, I married my high school sweetheart sixty years after I should’ve.” Her eyes took on a wistful expression. “Sixty years too late.”

Chloe crossed to her. “The point is, you married Jake—eventually, and now you’re living happily ever after.” She gave her aunt an encouraging smile.

Returning the smile, the elderly woman nodded. Then she turned to Ceci. “A piece of advice, don’t postpone your wedding too long. Gather ye rosebuds while ye may . . .”

## *Christmas in Cahokia*

“Speaking of rosebuds . . .” Rose pressed a small spray of flowers into Ceci’s hands. “Here’s your mini-bouquet. The theme’s cherry blossoms. Everything about the wedding’s cherry blossoms. The cake has frosted cherry blossoms on the icing *and* cherry filling.”

“It’s five tiers of fondant icing,” said Barbara, “frosted with delicate cherry blossoms.”

“Even Chloe’s dress has cherry blossoms. Look!” Rose shifted the fabric between her fingers, letting the sunlight capture the subtle floral motif.

“Look at that.” Ceci lightly touched the material, watching how movement changed the view. “Depending on how the sun reflects off the lace, individual blossoms shimmer into sight.”

“Never noticed that. My eyesight’s going.” Aunt Ed rolled her eyes before turning toward Ceci. “Like I said, don’t wait too long to follow your heart. Gather ye rosebuds while ye may . . .”



At the first chords of “Trumpet Tune in D,” Hud’s choice for the processional music, Chloe’s eyes locked with his. Chills shot up her spine as Father David, Hud, and his best man Louie took their positions.

Rose began walking toward the altar with Ceci, the maid of honor, following several steps behind. After a few paces, Chloe fell into step with Aunt Ed’s husband, Jake, who was giving her away.

Barbara and Rose had lined the central aisle and steps leading to the altar with tree stands of cherry blossoms, pink peonies, and white carnations. Twinkling candles in oversized hurricane vases completed the fairytale illusion. As Chloe approached it, she felt she was entering a springtime wonderland.

Then her eyes locked with Hud’s. With his dark mane of hair and flashing eyes, he looked as if he had stepped from the cover of a novel. His eyes held hers until she took her place beside him. Then she gave him a sidelong glance, her smile shy, tentative. He gave her a private wink.

During preparation, the choir chanted, “Panis Angelicus,” and during communion, another Gregorian chant, “Ave Verum.” As they finished, Hud smiled at them with an approving nod.

*So that’s what they’ve been rehearsing these past weeks.* Chloe smiled to herself.

For the recessional music, the organist played Purcell's "Trumpet Tune" with pageantry and fanfare, all stops pulled out. Chills raced up Chloe's spine as they recessed out of the church.

In the vestibule, Hud swept her to him in a kiss. For a moment, they were alone in each other's arms. Then reemerging into reality, they formed the receiving line behind Aunt Ed and Jake, graciously greeting their guests, one by one.



As they were about to leave for the reception, a stretch limo pulled up in front of the church. The driver jumped out, opened the door for them, and said, "This way, sir."

Hud glanced at Chloe, his eyebrows raised. Shrugging, she shook her head.

Wearing a wide grin, Louie slapped Hud on the back, and then he took Ceci's hand in his. "Our wedding gift to you, cuz. Hop in."

The four stepped inside with the two couples facing each other as Hud glanced around the leather interior. "This is riding in style. Thanks, cuz."

Ceci chuckled. "It was a gift we didn't have to wrap or pack, the easiest kind when you're traveling." She leaned toward them. "Incidentally, your wedding was beautiful."

"Agreed. Great choice of music." Louie nodded emphatically. "Love Gregorian chant."

Hud's eyes lit up. "If singing's praying twice, chant's more, especially in Mass. It adds another layer, embraces a sense of the sacred."

"Couldn't agree more. I've been slowly introducing chant to our congregation." Louie gave him a lopsided grin. "Our choir's been singing the offertory propers each week. Now, we're adding an occasional communion propers."

Hud nodded thoughtfully. "I've been wondering how to launch chant at Our Lady of Good Help." Turning toward Chloe with a warm smile, he took her hand in his. "While we're on the subject, the wedding music was a surprise from the choir and me."

"A perfect gift. I loved it. Thank you." Chloe kissed him. Then squeezing his hand, she turned toward the others. "Hud's volunteered to be the music director at our church."

"Really?" Louie's eyes opened wide as if getting an idea. "Have you thought about attending the Chant Colloquium in St. Louis?"

## *Christmas in Cahokia*

Hud's eyes met his bride's. Then he turned toward Louie with a half-hearted chuckle. "Between grading the university finals and Chloe's new freelancing job, we don't have time for a workshop. We're barely squeezing in a weekend honeymoon as it is."

"The Colloquium's not till next month, when you'll be on summer break." Louie's eyes sparkled. "Combine your honeymoon with this sacred music conference. Music and love. What could be more romantic?"