



The Giving Heart Preview

CHAPTER 1

Snow began falling on Summer Island the first Monday of December. It shouldn't have surprised her – despite the name, winters here came early and often lasted into spring. But she hadn't checked the forecast, and as she stood peering out the big picture window of the Summerbrook Inn while thick, heavy flakes dropped from the sky, Lila wondered if she'd made a mistake in coming.

She'd never been good at looking ahead in life, even in the smallest of ways, like knowing if she should take a jacket when she left home – or in this case, a parka and mittens. Or in bigger ways – like failing to see the signs of imminent danger, the kind that were so easy to recognize in hindsight but you just didn't put the pieces together before it was too late. She tugged a furry robe that belonged to her sister, Meg, tighter around her, hugging herself to ward off a chill – whether real, from the cold and snow outside, or imaginary.

She'd always seen the trait as a sign of optimism – not worrying about the weather, or not expecting doom to strike. She liked being a live-in-the-moment woman. But since arriving two

days ago at the family inn – run by Meg since their grandmother’s death when Lila was only a teenager – she’d realized that coming to house-sit for her sister hadn’t delivered the peace of mind she’d hoped for when she’d made the offer. Leaving Chicago for the blustery month of December had seemed appealing for more reasons than one – but turned out weather and doom had followed her north.

North. *Why did I think the weather would be better in northern Michigan than in Chicago?* She’d been flustered and emotional at the time, but still. *This is why developing a weather-checking habit would be wise. If you’d checked the weather – and given this trip at least a modicum of thought – you’d have a parka, and a furry robe, and flannel PJs, and a pair of cozy slippers.* More things she’d had to borrow from Meg’s closet: below Meg’s purple flannel pajamas, decorated with white snowflakes, Lila wore Meg’s fleece-lined slippers with cat faces on the top.

Taking her cell phone from the robe’s deep pocket, she pulled up a weather app. *No time like the present to build a habit that will make you a more responsible person.*

Her immediate future looked snowy. Light snow was expected on and off ‘til nightfall, and tomorrow it would become heavier and more measurable. Each day in the extended forecast featured a snowflake. She chose not to dig any deeper beyond that, not sure she wanted the answers. *This is why I don’t check the weather.* Maybe she’d rather not know when bad things were coming. In case they didn’t. Maybe pure optimism could wish bad things away.

Though that had been easier to believe two weeks ago.

As it was, doom and danger had found her, and now so had snow. She should probably venture out to Koester’s Market today, stock up on some simple foods, and hunker down for the storm. Because even if she was a little sorry she’d come, it was too late to leave – she’d promised Meg to feed the cat and take care of the big Victorian house their great grandparents had built just after World War II while Meg and her boyfriend, Seth, spent time with his grandpa in Pennsylvania between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

She’d promised. And she’d never been a very good sister. And she wanted to start being one now.

And even if she threw Meg over and hopped the next ferry back to the mainland, where would she go? Back to Chicago? No, she’d left for a reason – and had no desire to return to the scene of the crime so soon. Or to her parents’ house in Ann Arbor? They’d all gathered there for Thanksgiving just last week, yet through no fault of her family’s, she’d suffered the strong desire to be alone.

Well, Summer Island in winter was good for alone time. And given that no motor vehicles were permitted on the tiny island near the point where Michigan's upper and lower peninsula's met, she'd at least have the solitude. Maybe she'd curl up in the overstuffed easy chair in the little room they'd always called the nook and read some of the many books in the house. Maybe she'd meditate by watching the snow silently blanket the lawn and the trees that cocooned the inn. Maybe she'd even get together with Meg's friends here, one of whom – Suzanne Quinlan – had kindly stopped by yesterday to welcome her. And maybe, somehow, through all the that, she'd figure out how to start letting go of the doom that had sent her haring away from Chicago as quickly as she could pack a suitcase – minus a robe, slippers, and parka.

And if nothing else, maybe she'd finally get some sleep. Somehow. A large yawn reminded her that sleep had been difficult to come by the last couple weeks. She'd been sure that would change when she reached the winter solitude of the inn, but no such luck – at least not yet.

That was when a loud *clank* jarred her from her thoughts, followed by an ominous rumbling noise.

Her spine went rigid at the grating sounds. What were they from? Some kind of ... big truck? Heavy machinery?

But no, not possible here. This was Summer Island, land of no vehicles. And it was winter. If you discounted some whipping winds, no place could – or *should*, anyway – be quieter.

Yet the clanking and rumbling sliced through the otherwise silent snowfall until Lila convinced herself she wasn't hearing things and began trying to track its source. She stalked through the house, peering out windows, and startling the calico cat from a bookshelf in the library. "Sorry, Miss Kitty." Across the street, nothing but choppy Lake Michigan and the South Point Lighthouse. To the east, the pastel shops and businesses lining Harbor Street, most of them closed for the season, their roofs all covered with a dusting of snow. Out the west-facing windows of the nook and sunroom, only the inn's sprawling yard and gardens could be seen, and the thick woods that stretched beyond. Even while all but the evergreens stood bare of foliage just now, the woods to the west marked the spot where quaint Harbor Street narrowed to a wide bicycle trail and gave way to untouched hillsides and shorelines.

Rumble, rumble, rumble, clank, clank, clank.

And then a sharp, sudden *crack, crash.*

Was that ... the sound of falling trees?

Heart beating fearfully, Lila rushed to look north out the kitchen window near the back door – and saw a bulldozer. A bulldozer! Ripping down the trees across the brook that gave the inn its name!

Her heart froze in her chest. How could this be? *It can't be. That's all. This can't happen.*

She couldn't make sense of it – and she wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't seen it with her own eyes – but indeed a big yellow bulldozer violently mowed down the woods behind the house as she stared in horror. Every awful cracking noise as another tree broke and fell pierced her like a gunshot to her soul. What the hell was going on?

Quit watching. Do something.

Without another thought, she shoved through the back door, crossing the snow-covered patio, and trudging across the lawn, barely registering the cold and wetness seeping up through the bottoms of the cat face slippers. Heart pounding like a hammer against her chest, she glanced down at the stream, running a little more heavily than in some seasons. As a kid, she'd picked her way across easily on dry rocks that stuck up above the water. Right now, she spotted only one and it was risky – but she had to get across that creek, now, so she boldly made the leap, touched down on the flat ridge of the rock, and catapulted herself to the other side. She slipped in the snow on landing, her feet flying out from under her, but caught herself on her hands – stingingly cold in the snow – and soon marched forward again, up the hill, between the trees, toward that horrible rumbling, clanking, tree-murdering machine.

She ran, to the best of her ability in the wet slippers, through the slick snow beginning to coat the ground between pines and oaks that had stood here her entire life. Wet, heavy snowflakes landed on her hair, shoulders, face, making her feel as if she were out in a cold drizzle. Nearing the loud bulldozer, she could see that the older man operating it – signature yellow hardhat perched on his head, gray hair peeking out from underneath – hadn't noticed the woman running toward him in purple pajamas and a fluffy open robe fluttering in the wind. He looked serious, focused on his work – his tree-slaughtering. But Lila would be damned if one more tree was killed on her watch, so she didn't hesitate to run right into the path of the dozer's destructive bucket – which, she realized, actually bore something like teeth.

Now the driver noticed her. The dozer came to a squeaking halt in the snow, the man staring down at her as if he feared he was imagining things. She intended to make clear that she was very real.

His bushy gray brow furrowing, he turned off the machine – presumably only to enable conversation, but having the silence restored eased a little of the alarm inside her. He leaned out over the panel of levers before him to eye her critically. He'd probably never had a woman in

pajamas throw herself in the path of his bulldozer before. But she'd never had anyone come mowing down the trees behind her family's inn, either.

"Miss," he began in a slow and uncertain tone, "pardon my French, but just what the hell do you think you're doing?" He sounded more perplexed than angry.

"I'm stopping this travesty, that's what," she called up to him. "And I was about to ask you the same question."

The man blinked, looked tired.

She didn't care.

"Well, I'm clearing this land."

She remained incredulous, and shook her head. "But why? Why would you do that?"

He blinked again, a couple of times.

She stood her ground, adamant.

"Well, they're fixing to build some houses up here, miss – that's why."

Now it was Lila who blinked. Houses? Here? Behind the inn? She shook her head. This didn't make sense. It had to be a mistake. "This land belongs to Harvey Vanderkamp," she informed him. It had belonged to Mr. Vanderkamp her whole life. He was a goat farmer. Occasionally brought Meg down some goat's milk. A quiet but friendly neighbor up the hill from the inn.

"Sorry to tell you, Miss, but Mr. Vanderkamp died."

Her face fell, any shred of hope she'd harbored dropping away along with it. "He did?"

The older man nodded. "Land was sold to a developer."

God. This was awful. Really awful. The woods behind the inn had always just ... been here. A thing you didn't question. A thing you never thought would change. And houses, here, right behind the inn – they would ruin the view. The idyllic sense of seclusion. The inn's lovely, quiet, private backyard would be ... someone else's backyard now, too.

Lila tried to think fast. Because developer or no developer, she refused to let this happen. "I'm still not moving," she said. Simple as that.

Mr. Bushy Brows was back to blinking. “You have to, Miss. I have to clear this hillside.”

She tried to do that thing she wasn’t great at – thinking ahead. “It’s winter. It’s snowing. Why not just stop this now and give me some time to get it worked out with whoever bought the land?”

The man sighed. She almost felt bad for him. But she felt worse for *her* if she couldn’t stop this from taking place. *You had one job – take care of the inn.* And she’d never done much to take care of Meg in any other way, even when Meg had needed it. She was *not* going to tell her sister that the one time she’d deigned to leave this place for more than a few days in fifteen years that Lila had allowed someone to come along and mow down the picturesque forest behind it.

“That’s not how things work, Miss,” the gray-haired man said.

“It’s how they’re working now.”

“I’m just trying to do my job.”

“And I’m just trying to save my sister’s inn.” She pointed to the big yellow Victorian down the hill.

More blinking. “We’re not going to hurt your house, Miss.”

“If you mow down all these trees, you’re hurting the house.”

Still in his seat on the bulldozer, the agitated operator extracted an outdated cell phone from a pocket, flipped it open, and dialed a number. Lila tried not to look as cold as she felt as he explained to someone on the other end that a woman wearing pajamas was blocking his bulldozer. He had to say it twice. “No, you heard me right. A woman in pajamas is blocking the dozer.”

When he disconnected, he told her, “That was my boss. He lives right up on West Bluff.”

Hmm. Figured. Rich people territory. And at the moment, rich men who thought they owned the world and everyone in it were on her blacklist.

“He’s coming right down.”

She nodded. And tried like hell not to feel the cold permeating her bones. But her fleecy slippers were soaked through and her hair hung wet with snow. She wanted so badly to be back inside the inn, where it was warm and cozy. But she couldn’t leave. She couldn’t. Even if she looked like a crazy person.

Five long, cold minutes later a tall, broad-shouldered man wearing a winter coat with blue jeans and some weird, worn, leathery sort of cowboy hat on his head came walking down from the direction of West Bluff. Despite herself, and for the first time ever in her life, she found herself envying work boots like the ones he had on because they appeared so sturdy and dry. She braced herself for a fight.

When she looked up at him, two things struck her simultaneously. First, he was ridiculously handsome – with dark hair peeking out from beneath that dumb hat, and dark stubble on his chiseled jaw to match. And second, his warm brown eyes wore that same confused, cautious look as the man on the bulldozer’s as he said, “I’m Beck Grainger. And ... there seems to be some sort of problem here?”

Lila drew back. *This* was Beck Grainger? Who Meg had spoken of so fondly? And even Suzanne, too, during their short visit yesterday, had mentioned him as a friend. Meg had told her he’d been interested in dating Suzanne and she’d declined, but they both still thought he was a great guy.

“Well, I’m Lila Sloan,” she said. “And yes, there’s a problem. I’m not letting you destroy Meg’s property value like this.”

Beck Grainger’s dark eyebrows shot up beneath his leathery brim. “You’re Meg’s sister?”

She gave a terse, crisp nod.

The handsome man sighed, shifting his weight from one work boot to the other. “Look, no one is trying to destroy anyone’s property value. And I assumed Meg knew about this. It’s not a secret. It was brought publicly before the town council and zoned for residential use back in the spring.”

Ugh. None of this was good news. But Lila was certain Meg didn’t know. Her sister had been dealing with a lot this past year and perhaps hadn’t been paying attention to island business. They’d actually discussed these very woods over the Thanksgiving table last week, recalling how they’d played here as children when their grandmother was still alive and running the place. Meg said that a couple of years ago she’d crossed the stream to plant some shade-loving trillium and blue cranesbill among the trees, and that the small blooms had added color visible from the patio each of the last two summers. Meg loved and valued these trees. And Lila brimmed with anger that no one had made Meg aware of this – but that was neither here nor there. “I can assure you she doesn’t know.”

The handsome man’s brow narrowed skeptically. “Well, if it’s a problem for her, why didn’t she just pick up the phone and call me?”

“Because she’s away right now – traveling. And even if she were here, she wouldn’t have known you were the person to call. And maybe she would have done something sensible – because Meg is definitely sensible – like contact someone on the town council. But I, being less sensible and more rash, took a more direct approach. Meg left me in charge of the inn while she’s away – and I can’t let you do this. I just can’t.”

The tilt of Beck Grainger’s handsome head told her he was going to try reasoning with her. “You know, it’s not gonna be that bad. Luxury homes. With big yards. They’ll fit into the landscape.” He even ended the sentence with a wink. Was he serious? Given what Lila had been through recently, he was definitely barking up the wrong tree with an elitist suggestion that rich people made better neighbors.

“I don’t care what you’re building – you’re doing it at the expense of my sister’s inn. People stay here because of the ambiance and atmosphere. They stay here to listen to crickets in the trees and see fireflies blinking in the woods. We played in these trees as kids. They’ve been growing here since ... well, since before Summer Island was even Summer Island. I can’t let you tear them down.”

Again, the tree-murderer was shifting his weight, clearly trying to figure out how to get the crazy woman to go home. And maybe she should. Hell, maybe she *was* crazy. She was standing in pajamas in the snow in front of a bulldozer, after all, a place she couldn’t have imagined herself even an hour ago. But if she had to go back inside the inn and hear the hideous sounds of these trees being destroyed, if she had to face Meg with the news that she’d let some rich developer ruin the inn’s picturesque setting, she didn’t think she could handle it. And she was still in no frame of mind to let some entitled, wealthy man run roughshod over her.

“Listen,” he said, “I’m sorry Meg didn’t know. Sincerely. We’re friends.”

“Some friend,” she muttered.

He went on. “But it’s freezing out here and you’re soaking wet.”

“Thanks for that newsflash,” she murmured again.

Which he continued to ignore. Since she probably appeared to be insane. “I understand your compulsion to run out here and try to change the situation, but standing in front of this bulldozer isn’t really gonna fix anything, so I’m afraid you’re just getting wet and cold for nothing.”

She simply glared at him. “You’re not as nice as Suzanne said you were.”

His eyebrows rose. “You know Suzanne?”

“Yes.” Suzanne, whom he’d previously expressed romantic interest in. Maybe she should have mentioned Suzanne sooner. “She claimed you were a good guy – but she may change her opinion when she finds out what you’re doing to Meg’s inn. People here love Meg, you know. You may not have any friends left if you go through with this.”

At this, however, he just let out a sigh. “Well, guess that’s the chance I’ll have to take.” Another shift back to the other boot – which reminded Lila her own feet were in that painful place between freezing but not quite numb. “Look, this is just business, nothing personal – and I’m afraid it’s a done deal. It’s not something that can be stopped.”

“Done how?” She didn’t even know what she was asking – but she would grasp at any straw.

“This land is valuable and plans are already in place.”

This gave her an idea. “I could buy it. Or we. Meg and me. The land.”

But Beck Grainger simply cast her the sad look one bestows on a delusional child. “The land has already been bought. Zoning’s in place, and permits have been obtained. Plat maps have been drawn and lots marked off by surveyors. Sewers and utilities will be going in by spring. And don’t take this the wrong way, but I doubt you’d want to pay me the amount I’d have to ask to make up for the loss incurred by not building homes here. I’m sorry, Ms. Sloan, but this is happening, with or without your blessing.”

At a loss, Lila leaned her head back, peering up through the trees at a white sky, only to be smacked in the face by more big, wet snowflakes. Her voice came out more softly than it had so far – with an honest question. “You do this work in winter?”

“When we can,” he answered, holding on to the same no-nonsense tone he’d used for the entire conversation. “Permits just came through a few days ago after a lengthy process. Thought we could get a good start on clearing the land today, but the snow’s coming down heavier than expected. The town council requested we halt work during the tourist season, so that means doing it anytime it’s reasonably dry and not sub-zero. After today we’re probably stalled until the weather gets a little better, but we’ll keep moving forward whenever we’re able.”

“Like ... gets a little better in the spring?” she asked, hoping to buy some time.

But he shook his head. “Like gets a little better by next week, hopefully. It’ll be a day by day decision.”

Another honest question from her. “What happened to there being no motorized vehicles on Summer Island? Isn’t this ... against the law? Or something?” She didn’t really *know* the laws, but it seemed worth asking.

He only shrugged. “They make exceptions in the name of progress and practicality.”

That irked her – and also reminded her that the island authorities also possessed a few snowmobiles for wintertime emergencies, and a small SUV-sized ambulance. Summer Island talked a good game of simple living, touting streets filled with bicycles most of the year, but apparently simplicity came with limits.

“I’m not leaving here,” she proclaimed, no matter how bad her feet hurt from the cold, no matter how wet and clammy she was beginning to feel – despite Beck Grainger somehow looking perfectly warm and dry next to her, “until you give me the key to that bulldozer.”

He blinked. “Are you kidding?”

“Not at all.”

“You might freeze to death,” he pointed out matter-of-factly.

“Then you’ll have that on your head.”

“It’s not my fault you’re irrational.”

“It’s not my fault you’re unreasonable.”

He sighed, glanced heavenward, then drew his gaze back down. “Fine,” he bit off. Then glanced up to the man still on the bulldozer, who’d been quietly observing the entire exchange. “Jim, give the lady the key.”

“Seriously?” Jim asked.

“Yep. I can’t have her getting hypothermia and somehow blaming me.”

When Lila stepped toward Jim, she realized that her feet had become painful nubs that didn’t work quite right anymore. She tried her damndest to hide the discomfort as Jim passed the key down into her nearly numb hand.

Then she turned and started down the hill on her nubs.

“Taking that key isn’t going to stop this from happening, you know,” Beck Grainger called after her.

“It’s going to stop it for today,” she called back, still moving forward, hoping she didn’t add insult to injury by slipping and sliding her way down the hill on her ass.

She kept her footing, painful though each step was, and even when one foot landed in the frigid water of the brook, she just kept going, driven by knowing warmth lay only footsteps away and she had at least stopped the tree destruction for right now. Suddenly, she became grateful for the snow, grateful it would fall for days to come.

Because turned out doom really *had* followed her to Summer Island. She’d let an entirely different kind of it drive her here, and now Beck Grainger was heaping still more onto her.

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