

KEYNE ISLAND Pat Garwood

CHAPTER ONE

When Celia was born, in 1874, Hugh was thirty-four years old. He and his wife Mary lived in a large house called Brechan Hall, which was situated on a remote island off the coast of Cornwall. Brechan Hall was set on the top of a small hill leading up from the jetty, but you could see little of the house from the sea, due to the many trees surrounding it.

Keyne Island was a wild, rugged place, two miles long by one mile wide. It had been in Hugh's family for generations and he followed family tradition by keeping strict control over its privacy.

On the day of Celia's birth, Hugh paced around the huge drawing room listening to his wife's screams from upstairs and smiling as he poured himself a third brandy. Not long now.

Hugh had not married Mary for love. He had chosen her because she was rich and his own family coffers had begun to run alarmingly low. Also he badly wanted an heir. A son to carry on the family name and share the running of the island with him in times to come.

After an hour or so there was a sudden silence from upstairs and a little later a knock on the door.

'Come in,' said Hugh, buoyantly, expecting to be called upstairs to view the infant.

Hopefully Mrs Ripman the midwife would have cleaned everything up. He had no desire to observe any details of the birth. As no one entered, he strode over and flung open the door. Mrs Ripman was standing there, holding the baby wrapped in a white shawl. She had a look of doom on her face.

'Oh Mr Grundy,' she said before he had a chance to look at the child, 'I am afraid she has gone.'

'Gone? What do you mean gone?' said Hugh, not comprehending. He looked down at the child's face, it was definitely moving its lips.

'Not the baby, Mr Grundy,' said Mrs Ripman, following his eyes. 'I am afraid it is your wife, poor Mrs Grundy. She was so brave, right to the end, but she was not strong enough to withstand. She died shortly after the little one was born. There was nothing anyone could have done for her, poor soul.'

Hugh stared at her, 'What are you saying?' he asked, the colour rushing to his face.

'I am afraid your wife is dead, Sir,' said Mrs Ripman, lowering her eyes.

'Damnation,' bellowed Hugh, 'she cannot be dead. You must be mistaken. For God's sake get back upstairs and see to her.'

Mrs Ripman looked at him with sympathy, 'It is no good Mr Grundy, it is too late. We can do nothing to help her now.'

Hugh put his hand to his head and staggered back into the drawing room. Mrs Ripman followed him.

‘It is very hard for you Mr Grundy, I know. A terrible shock. But you do have a lovely little daughter, Sir. And she will be a comfort to you in the times ahead I am sure.’

‘A daughter?’ said Hugh looking at her in disbelief.

‘Yes, Sir. Poor wee thing, you are the only one she has now to take care of her. Would you like to hold her for a moment, Sir?’ Mrs Ripman held out the tiny bundle to him.

Hugh stared at her for a moment and then turned his back on them.

‘Take the bloody child away and leave me alone,’ he said.

As Mrs Ripman went back upstairs with Celia, Hugh slammed the door shut after them. He poured himself another large brandy and threw it down his throat. Slowly his breathing became calmer.

‘Unthinkable,’ he muttered to himself, ‘unthinkable. How could she die? How does she expect me to manage? She could not even provide me with a son. What does she expect me to do with a daughter, for God’s sake?’

He suddenly found his legs were giving way. He sat at his desk and put his head in his hands. He felt sick.

Upstairs, Mrs Ripman put the baby into the wicker crib, hung all round with delicate lace. She then went to the peach room to see Mary’s body. Poor Mr Grundy, she thought as she cleared away the blood and cleaned Mary up. She put clean sheets over and under Mary and brushed her hair so it spread across the pillow. It would be the last time her husband would see her, so she might as well look her best. Not that you could ever have called her a good looking woman, poor thing. But there you are. The Lord shares out his gifts in his own way and it is not for us to wonder why. She was not offended by Mr Grundy shouting at her. She had seen it all before. Some men sobbed, some men raged. He would be in to see Mrs Grundy before too long and sometime soon he would be holding the little one, she was sure of it. Thank the Lord the infant was healthy, she thought as she gathered all the stained linen together and stuffed it into a pillowcase. Even so, she looked quite delicate. They would have to find a wet nurse for the child as soon as possible if it was to survive. A good wet nurse was hard to come by at the present time. There had been two occasions recently when she had not been able to find one for new mothers who could not feed their babies themselves. Sadly, one of the infants had died. She suddenly thought of a girl on the mainland who had recently given birth to a stillborn child. She was a bit of a naughty girl and no one knew who the father of her child was, but her heart was in the right place. She had plenty of milk in her breasts still. She herself had been binding them for her, only two days before. She would do. Her name was Hannah Dryden.

That night, Hugh sat in front of the log fire trying to make sense of what had happened. So Mary was dead, poor creature. She had not been a bad woman, although he could never pretend to himself that he had loved her. When he discovered how little money had been left to him in his mother's will, he had realised he would have to do something about it. To marry a wealthy girl, was the obvious answer. Any man worth his salt would have done the same, he thought to himself as he stared morosely into the flames. Mind you, you could hardly call Mary a girl. She was twenty-seven when he married her. Well, at least she had not been a sad old spinster when she died. He had given her that. And as for her mother, he would finally be free of her, now Mary had gone. The wretched woman had never liked him. Despite the fact that he had fallen over backwards to be polite to her. She was a far cry from his own mother. What a woman she had been.

Hugh's eyes filled with tears as he thought of his mother, and of the many wonderful times they had shared at Brechan Hall. They had been just about as close as two people could be, Hugh thought. His father had died when he was young, so Hugh had his mother to himself. The only fly in the ointment had been Hugh's need for young women, as he got older. He had managed to get over to the mainland quite often though. Once or twice he had tried to bring a girl home to meet his mother, but she had never approved of them. She had died six years ago, when he was twenty-eight, and he had got married two years later. He smiled wryly to himself. His mother would not have thought much of Mary.

As he sipped his brandy and saw the bottle slowly empty, he set his mind to the future. Mrs Ripman had sent a message by boat to the mainland. Apparently, she had some girl in mind as a wet nurse. Was trying to get her to come over to Keyne Island tomorrow because of the emergency. He suddenly began to feel absolutely exhausted. He stumbled his way up the stairs, pausing on the landing to listen to Mrs Ripman trying to settle the infant, who was screaming. She would have to stop it making that noise, he thought, or he would not be able to get any sleep.

As he passed the room where Mary was lying, he suddenly felt he wanted to see her before going to bed. It was his nightly ritual. She had been sleeping in the peach room during the last few months of her pregnancy, so that she did not disturb him with her restlessness. He slowly opened the door. Mrs Ripman had lit the room with candles and as he looked at his wife lying back on the white sheets, it struck Hugh that for the first time since he had known her, she looked almost beautiful. He pulled the door shut behind him and walked slowly over to the bed. He stared down at her for several minutes. No sense of reality. No sense of time. Just silence and a cold stillness.

'Sorry, Mary,' he said eventually. 'Sorry it happened like this.'

He bent over to kiss her goodbye, but found that he could not touch her skin. He ran the back of his fingers across her hair spread out on the pillow, straightened up, cleared his throat and walked to the door. As he opened it, he turned and had one last look at her.

'Pity it was a girl,' he said, and left the room.

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The following day Hannah Dryden, twenty-four years of age, found herself on board a small boat, crossing the sea to Keyne Island. There was quite a swell, despite the fine April day, and she was feeling rather seasick. It was only two weeks since her child had been stillborn, and she was not yet back to her full strength. But she was a big girl and it would not take her long to recover. She had glossy dark hair and a slow warm smile, which women found pleasant and most men found sensual. She had felt sad about losing the baby although she knew it was probably for the best. The father was long since gone. He had only been passing through the town anyway. She was quite excited about meeting Hugh Grundy. There were many rumours about him in the town. They said he was too close to his mother, a 'mother's boy'. But if that were the case, how come he had married and had a baby? Anyway, what business was it of theirs? She felt the milk from her breasts soaking through Mrs Ripman's binding, and through her mother's dress that she was wearing. She could not fit into her own clothes since the baby. Her mother would be angry if her dress were stained. Still, if she got this post as wet nurse it might be some time before she went home, so she would not worry about that now. She would quite like to work on the island for a while. Life had been dreadful since she had got with child. Blame, shame, she had had enough of it. It was not her fault, what had happened. Not really. She had gone down to the beach with him, yes. But he had seemed a real gentleman. He had taken her arm and told her all manner of interesting things about London and life in high society. Then, when they reached the far end of the beach, he had sat her down on the sand and started to kiss and cuddle her. Before she knew what was happening he was making love to her. It was over very quickly. Afterwards, he had apologised. Said she was so lovely he could not control himself. He walked her back up the beach again and told her not to tell anyone, or they would think less of her. He gave her a guinea and told her to buy herself a hat. By the time she realised that she was with child, she could not even remember his name.

'Come and sit down, Miss Dryden,' said Hugh, welcoming Hannah into the drawing room.

He noticed the full swell of her breasts and the dark stains over them and found himself unexpectedly stirred by the sight.

'You must be quite fatigued after that climb up the hill,' he said.

He motioned to Mrs Ripman, who was hovering in the doorway, to leave them alone. Mrs Ripman quietly closed the door and went back to check on Celia, who had been asleep for over an hour now but had suffered a very restless night.

'So tell me, Miss Dryden,' said Hugh, 'how do you come to be in the position to help feed my infant daughter? A sad tale I fear, but you had best tell it to me, if I am to take you on board my ship.'

'On board your ship, Sir?' said Hannah, still feeling sick from the trip over from the mainland, 'I did not realise a voyage was intended...'

'No, no, no,' said Hugh, smiling at her concerned face, 'I was speaking metaphorically.' As Hannah looked none the wiser he continued, 'I just meant you would be living and working in this house as one of my staff.'

Hannah blushed as she realised that she had misunderstood him. Then she smiled her slow, warm smile.

'Oh, I see Sir. I am so sorry, Sir.'

‘No cause for concern,’ said Hugh, ‘no harm done.’

He came and sat opposite her, enjoying the changes in her complexion.

‘Now, what has happened to you, that has brought you here?’ he asked her, gently but firmly.

He had already heard the story from Mrs Ripman, but he wanted to hear it from her own lips.

‘Oh Sir,’ said Hannah, the tears beginning to prick behind her eyes, ‘I do not know where to begin.’

She had not intended to break down in front of him. Her plan had been to tell the tale of a husband who had deserted her and left her before the birth of the child. But now, being in the presence of such a fine gentleman, in the beautiful big house and the fact that he was being so nice to her, so understanding, completely threw her senses and she told him the whole story. Exactly as it had happened, right up to her baby boy being born dead, such a tiny little body he had. By now tears were streaming down her face and she was finding it impossible to breathe through her nose.

‘Steady down, now. Steady down,’ said Hugh, putting his arm round her. He had found himself greatly excited by the story of the seduction on the beach. He would have liked to have heard it in more detail, but did not feel this was the moment.

‘Here you are,’ he said, fishing a white, lawn handkerchief from his pocket, ‘dry your eyes now.’

He caught a smell of lemon wafting from her hair.

‘I think you will fit in very nicely here, young lady,’ he said, giving her arm a comforting squeeze, ‘let us hope it will ease your pain, to nurse another infant and who knows, if all goes well, there may be a place for you here for some time to come.’

Hannah took a deep breath. It was as if all the clouds of the last months were lifting at last.

‘Oh, thank you, Sir,’ she said. ‘Thank you. I will take great care of your little one. I will love her like my own.’

‘I am sure you will,’ said Hugh, patting her arm.

‘Might I ask, what name have you given her, Sir?’ asked Hannah, looking shyly up at him.

Hugh paused for a second, and then said with great certainty, ‘Celia. I have decided to call her Celia. Celia Margaret Anne.’

‘Oh, that is a lovely name, Sir,’ said Hannah.

‘Yes,’ said Hugh, smiling, ‘yes it is, indeed.’

Mary had wanted to call the child Ida if it was a girl, after her wretched mother. Hugh had been so sure that he would have a son that he had not contested it. Indeed he had refused to discuss it. If the child had been a boy he would have been called Clive Stanley James Grundy. But now that a name was required for his daughter he would have a name of his own choosing. The name Celia came to him on the spur of the moment. Celia had been a favourite name of his mother’s. In fact, had he himself been born a girl, his mother was going to call him Celia.

‘Would you like to see her now?’ asked Hugh, suddenly tiring of Hannah’s presence. He just wanted to get things settled now, and have a large whiskey.

‘Oh yes indeed, Sir,’ said Hannah, thinking what a good strong body he had, as he strode to the door to call for Mrs Ripman. And what a brave man he was, to be in so control of himself, with his wife having died only the day before. He was still in shock like as not. Well, she would be on hand now to help him through. She would help him get over his loss. And maybe he could help her get over hers. Her eyes fell on a huge portrait of Hugh, above the fireplace, in an ornate heavy gilt frame. It showed him on a craggy rock, with the sea behind him, looking straight out at the observer with a proud smile. Hannah thought it a very fine painting.

Hugh saw her looking at it.

‘A present from my wife,’ he said.

Hannah nodded sympathetically.

It had actually been Hugh’s own suggestion that there should be a portrait of himself above the fireplace to replace the one of his father, which he had never liked. Fortunately Mary had paid for it.

Mrs Ripman came to the door a few moments later, wondering how the interview had gone.

‘I think Miss Dryden will do very well for us, Mrs Ripman,’ Hugh said. ‘Kindly take her upstairs and let her acquaint herself with the child.’

‘Yes Mr Grundy, of course. I am sure you will not regret your decision,’ said Mrs Ripman, ushering Hannah into the hall.

As she passed Hugh, Hannah handed him back his handkerchief. Her hand touched his briefly as she did so.

‘Thank you ever so much, Sir,’ she said, and smiled.

When they were gone Hugh started to put the handkerchief on a small table by the door to be taken for laundering, but at the last minute he brought it to his nose and caught again the fresh smell of lemon. He smiled and put the handkerchief back in his pocket.

As they entered the nursery Mrs Ripman put her hand on Hannah’s shoulder.

‘I am very pleased for you, my duck,’ she said. ‘You have been through a bad time, and you have been a brave girl, but you must take great care now to look after this little one as well as you can, and that means taking care of yourself. Three good meals a day, to keep your strength up and two glasses of stout, one in the morning and one in the evening, to keep the milk up. You may not like the taste, but that is of no matter, you just drink it, understand, my girl?’

Hannah nodded, in a daze from everything happening so fast. She could not believe the size of the nursery. It was big enough to be a bedroom. Fancy giving all that space to a tiny baby.

‘Are you listening to me, girl?’ asked Mrs Ripman, watching her staring around.

‘Oh yes, I am,’ replied Hannah quickly, a flush coming to her cheeks.

‘Well then,’ said Mrs Ripman, ‘let me show you this lovely baby.’

She took Hannah over to the crib and they peered in. Celia was lying wrapped in a swaddling shawl. The moment she saw her, Hannah's heart lurched inside. So small, so perfect. So like her own little baby that had been born dead. She felt the pain of loss well up inside her and was about to be overcome, when suddenly Celia's tiny face twisted and went patchy and red. She opened her mouth wide and began to cry, loudly.

'No time like the present,' said Mrs Ripman, briskly, 'I will show you your room later, but for now, you just get yourself out of that dress, and we shall take those binders off you. That will be a relief to you I am sure!' she said, smiling.

She helped Hannah to strip to the waist, removing the thick linen strips of sheeting which had been bound around her breasts to keep the milk flow under control. Hannah gasped as her breasts fell free. They were so painful, so heavy.

'I know my pet, I know,' said Mrs Ripman sympathetically. 'They will soon start to be more comfortable, once we get this little one feeding.'

She sat Hannah in the low nursing chair, put a pillow on her lap and a shawl round her shoulder. Then she gently lifted Celia from the crib, brought her over to Hannah and laid her in Hannah's arms.

'There we are, my beauty,' she said softly.

She went behind Hannah and brought her hand down over Hannah's shoulder and put it under Celia's head. She then took Hannah's right breast and brought it up to Celia's mouth. As Celia's mouth opened, feeling the breast against it, Mrs Ripman pushed Hannah's nipple firmly into it. Hannah's breasts were so full of milk that had not been drawn on, that both breasts had milk flooding out of them. For a moment it seemed that Celia would choke, but Mrs Ripman let her pause for a moment and then returned the nipple to Celia's mouth. After a short while she began to suck.

'Good,' said Mrs Ripman, with a sigh of relief. 'Good, it is not always as easy as this, you know. Sometimes they will not take to the nipple and it is an uphill battle you have on your hands.'

As Hannah felt the milk throbbing through her breasts and watched the little cheeks moving rhythmically against her, she felt a glow of love for this tiny creature who had become part of her life. As Mrs Ripman moved round and knelt by her, she gave Mrs Ripman her slow warm smile. Mrs Ripman smiled back at her.

'You two are going to get along just fine,' she said.