

## ONE

### 1824 Red Cliff Point, Moreton Bay

Sean Kelly suppressed a chuckle as he watched Lieutenant Miller descend from the government brig *Amity* and stumble as a wave hit the tender's side. *That will teach the bugger. To be sure, the commandant had to be first ashore as his exploit would be written in the history books.* Lieutenant Henry Miller of the 40<sup>th</sup> Foot Regiment, dressed in his fine red coat, white trousers, shiny black boots and high shako cap adorned with a feather. *Pompous bastards. Invading yet another land to suck its very juices to power the empire, the voracious empire.* Sean's hatred for the English had earned him a life sentence in the colony of New South Wales.

The small boat pushed away from the mother ship. The sailors dipped their oars, shooting the craft towards the shore. The sun had just risen over Moreton Island, a long low smudge of shadow about sixteen miles across the bay; while the air was crisp and salty the day promised well.

"Stow oars!" ordered the first mate.

Carried by its momentum the boat nudged into the sandy beach, coming to a halt, scattering a flock of protesting seagulls that rose up then settled at a safe distance from the intruders. A pair of kangaroos straightened from feeding, long ears pricked, before they bounded away into the trees. After the twelve rough days with unfavourable winds dogging them ever since leaving Sydney, Sean was more than happy to go ashore. The fine spring day beneath a cloudless blue sky was heaven sent.

A whack on the head woke Sean from his pleasant observations. "On ya feet, Kelly! Get moving man, this ain't no occasion to be dreaming." Sergeant John Norman employed a heavy hand with all his charges.

Sean staggered to his feet, picking up the chains linking his legs. He jumped over the side of the boat into the calf-deep water, falling awkwardly to his knees. All of the convicts attached a length of twine to a ring in the centre of the two foot chain between their legs, tying the cord to their belt. Otherwise, walking was almost impossible with the heavy metal dragging on the ground. A sailor joined Sean in the water, holding the boat steady while Lieutenant Miller climbed onto Sean's back: "Damnation Kelly, get moving man," he commanded. "We haven't got all day."

Sean almost fell under the weight of the solidly-built commandant; he made it to dry land before stumbling and dropping his passenger unceremoniously on his buttocks. Miller bounced upright, his stern face the colour of puce. The wide jaw and the prematurely receding hairline framed a tough countenance; its implacable eyes were now as inflamed as the worst fanatic's.

"You will pay for this, you Irish scum," he said through clenched teeth, dusting sand from his trousers. "Go help the others. Damned Papist Rockite!"

Sean knew only too well why the commandant and all the soldiers hated him. During the trip up from Port Jackson the soldiers had advised him in clear terms of their opinion of Irish activists. Lieutenant Miller and his men belonged to the 40th Foot which had been stationed in

south-west Ireland for two and a half years before being sent to New South Wales. Their task had been to suppress an uprising of peasants who were terrorising the country. Sean could not believe he had been sent to an isolated emptiness in the company of the very soldiers he had been fighting in Munster. He had not jumped from the frying pan – he had been tossed, right into the heart of the flames.

Miller, the son of a Presbyterian minister, had enlisted in the British Army as an ensign, aged fourteen. The soldiers had boasted of their regiment's proud history: the commandant had fought Napoleon in the Peninsular War where he had been severely wounded storming Badajoz in Spain. And many of them had been at Waterloo, they never ceased to remind him.

On the tiny beach surveyor-general John Oxley and Miller analysed the scene before them. To their left a bluff rose about fifty feet above the sea – mostly composed of stiff white clay tinged throughout with iron oxide, the cliff was named Red Cliff Point by English navigator/cartographer Matthew Flinders in 1799. To their right lay a marshy inlet beyond which a narrow strip of sand stretched northwards.

Searching for fresh water, the two men advanced inland into a forest of eucalypts where the sun filtered through the sparse clusters of leaves of various shades of green – the duller older vegetation in stark contrast to the vivacity of the bright spring growth – lighting the discarded pink bark at the base of cream-coloured trunks. Oxley slapped his arm, squashing a fat mosquito while a horde of tiny, vicious sand fleas feasted on any exposed skin. He used a stick to brush away the numerous spider webs – and their large hairy occupants – hindering their passage. Uncountable numbers and species of birds filled the air with a cacophony of sound as they flew from the path of the two men.

The men pressed through the scrub until more marshy land populated with reeds and flaky, white-barked melaleuca trees halted their advance. When a long brown sinister form slithered out of sight into the grass both men blanched and took a step backwards. They beat a hasty retreat to the beach, their flailing hands no match for the aggressive insects attacking their flesh. “The insects won't kill us but that brown snake most certainly would – the blacks swear the creature is deadly poisonous,” Oxley informed Miller as they emerged from the trees.

Miller did not possess his companion's sangfroid. “Hate the damn things,” he confessed with a shiver.

Oxley had often encountered snakes on his explorations; he smiled at Miller's discomfort. “In general, they take off as fast as they can, but a good few convicts and soldiers too have been bitten by snakes, with a number dying,” he said, and Miller paled further.

“Damned creatures should be eradicated,” grumbled Miller.

“No sign of good water here, Lieutenant. What do you think?” enquired Oxley.

“Definitely not,” Miller replied. “This is no place for a civilised man. A pox on these damned insects. Did not the governor recommend exploring the islands as a preferred site?”

“Not exactly preferred,” countered Oxley who had suggested the site at Red Cliff Point to the governor. “However, I think we should examine them first. If they are unsuitable we can explore the mainland further.”

Miller's belly rumbled. “Let's go back to the ship to discuss our next step over breakfast,” he suggested.

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Governor Brisbane wanted to locate the new settlement along the line between the bay's northern entrance and the mouth of the Brisbane River. In high, expectant spirits, their bellies full after a

copious breakfast, Oxley, Miller and botanist Allan Cunningham boarded the whale boat to explore the islands fitting the requirements.

The three men returned to the *Amity* later that night, exhausted and disappointed. The 148-ton *Amity*, built in New Brunswick, Canada, was a two-masted square-rigged brig, seventy-five feet six inches long. She was a pretty boat with pleasant clean lines, reputed to be a sturdy, reliable vessel.

Oxley slouched in his chair. "We explored the three main islands near the river mouth; sadly, none are suitable," he lamented to Penson, the ship's captain, as the explorers quaffed a much-deserved claret. Walter Scott, the commissariat storekeeper/surgeon, listened silently to the exchange in the restricted space of the captain's cabin. "Not a bloody drop of decent water anywhere. Dry as a desert. God knows we looked," Oxley continued, brushing thick black hair out of his eyes. The explorer's sharp, angular nose dominated his boyish features.

Penson eyed them with an amused grin; he announced, "Well gentlemen, your explorations may have been futile but I have some good news for you on that subject." He took his time refilling his glass while the others fidgeted.

Oxley lost patience. "Spit it out Captain, we're too tired for riddles."

"A few soldiers went ashore to have a look about. Mind you, it weren't easy, so they said."

"What wasn't easy?" Miller interjected.

"Finding fresh water, upon my word."

"What? You're telling me the soldiers found water?" Oxley asked.

"Upon my honour, sir. About a quarter mile from the beach beyond the marshes. A couple of small lagoons holding the sweetest water you have ever tasted. Here, you can judge for yourselves," he invited, pouring water from a jug into three glasses.

"I'll be damned. This is quite good," exclaimed Cunningham, licking his lips.

"Perhaps we shall explore the area again on the morrow." Oxley remained unpersuaded. He yawned, stood and stretched as best he could in the confined space. "I'm for bed. Goodnight gentlemen."

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Early next morning Oxley, Miller and Cunningham went ashore accompanied by the soldiers who had discovered the fresh water. Having inspected the lagoons and ascertained that sufficient timber grew in the vicinity for the proposed works, Oxley surveyed the immediate area and began staking out the planned buildings. Meanwhile, Miller had the convicts setting up tents as temporary accommodation while others began unloading the supplies under Scott's critical eye. The settlers numbered about seventy including the commandant, storeman/surgeon, sergeant, corporal, eighteen privates, several wives and children. Sean Kelly was one of twenty-nine felons, many of whom were volunteers.

The sun was halfway to its zenith when Sean jumped into the shallow water from the boat. He regained his balance, spinning around just in time to grasp a large heavy chest being thrust at him. A deep gruff voice he already knew well and despised rasped: "Drop that and you'll regret it." Private Taylor, as did all the soldiers, picked on Sean and the only two other Irishmen in the band; they all had friends killed or maimed by the Irish. Sean thumbed his nose at his persecutors, refusing to show weakness. His gaol mates were slightly more accommodating. However, while they shared a common enemy, ingrained prejudices and questions of faith erected solid walls between Sean, a Catholic, and the majority of the prisoners

who were Protestants. The Irishman hugged the chest, carrying it up the beach to a grassy knoll where he added it to a growing pile of supplies brought in from the *Amity*.

When the last stores had been ferried ashore, Sean watched the boat leave the beach, the oarsmen pulling strongly as they sped back to the brig. He slumped in the sand, his breathing fast and shallow. On recovering his composure he reached into his pocket, extracted his tobacco pouch and stoked his clay pipe. He felt no joy at the prospect of establishing a settlement in such a hole although he had to admire the beauty of the bay: the stately *Amity* silhouetted on the gently lapping sea, her masts thrusting majestically into the surrounding blue; Moreton Island hunched in the background, light-yellow stretches of sand blotching the green vegetation. If he could get hold of a bit of paper and a pencil he would do some sketches. He puffed on his pipe, content but not for long. A sudden dread descended upon him, destroying his fleeting tranquillity, when he recollected his upcoming punishment for dropping the oaf of a commandant on the beach. "Jaesus," he said, making the sign of the cross.

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The commandant kept his word and Sean was flogged for his misdemeanour. "It wasn't your first flogging, Master Kelly," Scott observed as he wiped blood from the convict's back and applied an ointment to ease the torment and facilitate healing. Scott was parsimonious in his application of Copaiba Balsam as the clear yellow oil was known. He didn't comment on the several other scars visible on the young Irishman's body.

Anger burned in Sean's guts like a smithy's forge. Jaesus, Mary and Joseph! Ten lashes for dropping the commandant on his arse! At least the other occasions he had been whipped he had merited the punishment. But not this time. "There's no justice in the world," he moaned.

Scott raised an eyebrow as he wiped his hands. "Nay, not if yer a mule-headed Irishman, there is not. Ye'd do well to keep your head down, laddie, keep out of Miller's way."

Despite their difference in age – Scott was thirty-six to Kelly's early twenties – they had struck up an unlikely friendship on the voyage from Sydney although they had scarcely spoken at the time. The surgeon had been woefully seasick. Sean, a much better sailor, had brought him water and emptied the malodorous bucket. Walter was a product of the Scottish Enlightenment, he told Sean. He held a broad, open view of the world and sympathy for the plight of the Irish peasants.

Sean sat up, carefully pulling on his shirt. He wore the standard convict attire of grey calico trousers sporting buttons on the side, allowing them to be worn over leg irons, plus a shirt, grey jacket and leather cap. Broad arrowheads were stamped on the outfits indicating they were government property with the word "felon" printed on the jacket. Sean stood five foot ten inches of sinewy muscle. He had an earnest, pleasant face although his nose had been rearranged by the butt of an English musket. His best feature was his startling sapphire-blue eyes set off by curly pitch-black hair. "Bit hard to remain unseen in this tiny settlement, don't you think? All the soldiers hate me and there is no avoidin' them," Sean said without rancour, just the truth.

"Listen; give it a few days for Miller to forget the incident on the beach. Then I shall ask him to assign ye to the store as my assistant. Yer the sole decently educated prisoner in the camp and I need your help to run the store, what with my duties as a surgeon patching up the likes of ye. I'm sure he'll see reason, Sean. Ye just have to be patient."

"Well thank you for your doctorin', Walter. I do hope you can persuade the commandant to your way of thinkin', to be sure. I'd best get back to work or the sergeant will have me thrashed for malingerin'. I'll see you later." Sean hefted his leg irons, clanking outside the tent that served as a dubious temporary hospital. He scanned the western sky where a wall of blue-

black cloud loomed dark and menacing. He swatted at the remorseless energised flies as they buzzed about his sweaty face. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed, shaking the very air.

In the week since the *Amity* had anchored off Red Cliff Point the settlement had already adopted an air of permanence. Everywhere soldiers and inmates alike were busy as ants, felling trees, cutting slabs and gathering thatch. Basic slab huts for accommodation had been built while work had started on the commissariat store. Sean was on his way to the kiln near the lagoon where he was detailed as a labourer. He felt soothed by the noise of intense activity and hard labour, the ringing of the axe sinking into the hard wood of a giant gum, the sawing, the hammering beating a rhythm to the day. He sniffed the air like a dog, capturing the rich odour of freshly cut timber, the verdant smell of the forest, the sweet ashy smoke of the fires.

The impending storm had everyone on edge. Sean passed the area where the soldiers' quarters were being built, keeping a wary distance. A ragtag lot of children played in the spaces between the tents, hollering as they chased each other in a game of tag. A woman came out of a tent and watched him pass. She was young, of average height, dressed in a light cotton skirt; probably only eighteen or nineteen, Sean estimated. She had an upturned nose and voluptuous lips he imagined kissing. Her eyes were the colour of the sea, tinged with an unfathomable sadness that touched the Irishman in his heart. She was brushing her long blond hair that fell below her shoulders. Many months had passed since Sean had made love to a woman; he became aroused as his eyes slid over her well-proportioned body before revisiting her face. She awarded him a timid smile before disappearing into the tent.

Private Taylor's wife Celestine, Sean knew: he had first seen her beside the soldier on the boat from Sydney. The disturbing image of the young woman took root in the Irishman's head as he followed the path marked by blazed trees through the dense forest from the landing place to the waterhole. He was nearing the site where the commandant's house was under construction about a hundred yards from the creek when he heard raised voices. He ducked behind a tree.

"What do you mean, Corporal, when you say there is to be a delay?"

Corporal Robert Thompson pointed at the bare skeleton of the house. "As you are aware, sir, the frame was built in Sydney; it was supposed to be a simple matter of putting it all together. Unfortunately, a couple of parts happen to be missing and other parts don't fit properly. It's going to take days to make all that's needed, I'm sorry to say, sir."

Miller was unhappy about the situation. "Assign more men to the task, Corporal. This building is to be your priority; I want it finished with the utmost urgency." He glanced over his shoulder at the strengthening storm and made a face. "I cannot have my family living in a tent like commoners. Now get to work man, get cracking." He didn't add that his wife was into her eighth month of pregnancy – she had told him in unequivocal terms she would rather have the baby in her own house than under canvas.

"Yes, sir." Thompson saluted before going off in search of extra hands. He too was worried about his wife who was already overdue – the baby would most certainly be born in a tent.

When Miller left for the store, Sean came out of hiding and continued on to the kiln. He appraised the tumultuous sky with foreboding.

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The commandant assessed the approaching storm then ordered the men to secure the settlement and thereafter return to their accommodation. Sean shared a tent with five other felons. They all huddled on their camp beds as the rain battered the canvas. The wind howled in the trees like a frenetic demon, pushing and tugging at the flimsy shelter. A rope tore loose – Sean and fellow

Irishman Dom Marley rushed outside. One side of the tent began flapping wildly and water poured in through a narrow gap. Sean grabbed the rope; with Marley's help, he tied it to a peg. He was soaked to the skin; the sudden drop in temperature that accompanied the storm had his teeth chattering. Back in the tent he undressed, dried himself and climbed under his blanket.

In the morning the convicts' first job was to clean up the settlement which, in parts, appeared as though it had come under cannon fire. Several tents had been ripped from their ties and blown into the trees. The possessions of those who had occupied the now-shredded shelters were strewn about haphazardly. Sean soaked up the sun's spring warmth as he hung his wet clothes to dry on a line strung between two trees. A sudden high-pitched scream from the vicinity of the soldiers' camp froze Sean's blood and he pivoted to establish its source. Then he recalled Walter telling him that Mary Thompson, the corporal's wife, was due any day now – she must have gone into labour.

The men from Sean's tent sat around a fire eating their oatmeal porridge, saying little, avoiding eye contact as yet another prolonged shriek pierced the morning stillness, provoking any birds still in the neighbourhood to flight. Sean scoffed his meal, glad for once to go to the kiln, far enough away from the settlement to muffle the woman's cries.

The brick-makers were guarded by Taylor who had lost a brother, also a soldier, in a skirmish against rebellious Irish peasants in Munster. As far as he was concerned Sean Kelly was, by direct association, guilty of his brother's murder. The track to the kiln was muddy following the rain. As Sean shuffled past Taylor, the soldier muttered: "Bloody Papist." He stuck out a boot, causing Sean to fall flat on his face; the mattock he was carrying went flying. Taylor kicked Sean in the ribs, making him grunt in pain. The bully was a hulk of a man with thighs like a ship's masts. Incongruously, his head seemed too small for the body, perched like a potato on a sack of corn; the shifty eyes cruel, the face twisted.

"Get up, ya good-for-nothin' Irish bastard," Taylor ordered.

Sean got up favouring his ribs, snatched the mattock from the mud and walked on, head down. *I'll get that sod one of these days*, he swore under his breath.

On arriving at the kiln Sean and Dom went to a nearby pit. Sean stepped into the shallow diggings. He swung his mattock at the ground with great force, imagining Taylor's head exploding from the impact of the blow. Instead, he broke the grey-white clay into manageable lumps that Dom shovelled into a wheelbarrow. He grimaced as his effort provoked a jab of pain in his ribs. Dom and the other Irishman, who was busy cleaning moulds, were both older men in their late thirties who kept to themselves. Dom pushed the wheelbarrow to a large tub where he dumped the earth before breaking it down into small pieces with a short-handled mattock. Another convict, a brick-maker by trade, poured water over the clay, paddling it about until he had the required consistency. He then passed the mixture to another brick-maker who proceeded to force the wet clay into wooden moulds, ensuring they were tightly packed. The last member of the party loaded the moulds onto a cart and carried them to the drying area which was protected by canvas. Once partially dry the bricks would be extracted from the moulds then fired in the kiln.

The men trudged tiredly back to the camp for the midday meal of salted pork stew and hard, stale bread. The food was never enough to appease the convicts' hunger. Having eaten, Sean made his way to the surgeon's tent where a beaming Walter greeted him.

"Have ye heard the news? Mary Thompson gave birth to a bonnie wee lassie and both are well," Walter announced with a certain satisfaction, having delivered the baby himself.

"The first baby in our fledglin' settlement. That was quick. Does she have a name?"

“Aye. They’ve called her Amity Moreton Thompson, can ye believe it?”

“Amity Moreton? Well, that is innovative. She’ll never forget her origins, to be sure,” Sean remarked as he pulled off his shirt.

“Your back is healing nicely, Sean. Aha! What do we have here?” he inquired, touching the ugly bruise on the Irishman’s side.

Sean winced at the contact. “Bloody Taylor’s way of sayin’, ‘top of the mornin’ to you. Ha!”

Walter prodded the area. “Seems there’s nothing broken. It will be sore for a while yet. As a matter of fact, I’ll be dining with Miller this evening. I’ll talk to him about ye. I am sure it won’t be a problem. They can delegate someone else to work at the kiln.” Walter patted Sean on the shoulder. “Aye. And ye’ll be out of harm’s way from that brute Taylor.”

Sean wasn’t so sure. Nowhere in the settlement would he be safe from the soldier bent on avenging his fallen brother. Could he escape? Perhaps. But where would he go? Join the natives?

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The following day Sean was about to fall in alongside the rest of the brick gang when Taylor shoved him hard on the shoulder. “Bugger off, Irish. You’re to report to the store. Whose arse have ya been lickin’?” he sneered. Sean felt a rush of relief at the news; he left without hesitation.

On entering the store tent he clutched Walter’s hand, shaking it vigorously. “I cannot thank you enough, Walter. So old Miller came around after all, eh?”

“Aye. Think nothing of it, Sean. Our intrepid commander readily agreed once I explained that everyone was grumbling because I spend more time at the surgery than the store and they cannae get their supplies.”

Walter’s face was long and narrow, harbouring a pointed nose below steel-grey eyes and brown hair. Everyone respected him for his integrity and enterprise. Imitating the commandant, he stood straight, rigid as a flagpole, clasping his lapels. In a pompous voice he said: “We cannot allow any reason for dissent among the men, Mr Scott. As you say, the wretched Irishman is the only one in the whole sad group boasting any sort of education. You shall have him on the morrow.’ Simple as that, old chap,” he smiled and Sean laughed.

At the store in the morning Walter handed Sean an open notebook. “Here’s the list of each convict’s entitlement. Ye’ll see they can choose different mixes of bread, wheat meal, maize, rye, or oat-meal. Fresh beef or mutton when available, otherwise it’s salt pork. Then there’s the sugar, salt and soap, the last only for convicts in Government employ who do not receive pay. There’s more about reductions for men on the gaol gangs.”

Sean nodded as he ran his eyes down the list.

Walter continued. “The prisoners also receive a yearly issue of gear: two shirts; two frocks; two pairs of shoes and two pairs of trousers. It’s all fairly straightforward.”

Every morning Sean weighed up the rations required for the entire camp for the day. For the prisoners he had multiplied the weights of each item by twenty-nine – every morning he would deliver the rations in a cart to the recently-built convicts’ barracks and kitchen, which were enclosed in a low stockade in the camp area about four hundred yards south of the store. The soldiers drew more of each item, while the married men, commandant and Walter received even more generous helpings.

The job of assistant storekeeper afforded Sean physical protection from the soldiers during work hours, although he had to suffer their incessant verbal abuse whenever they came

for supplies. Otherwise, he enjoyed the work: writing lists, making inventories, keeping track of every last nail or piece of soap, the distribution of rations.

The inmates worked from daylight to eight then stopped to clean up before breakfast, worked nine-thirty to twelve and were allowed two hours for dinner before returning to their task until sunset. Sunday was a rest day and the convicts were obliged to bathe before attending a Divine Service delivered by the commandant.

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One day Sean and Walter were having dinner together, seated at a small table in front of the store tent, when Walter paused, a piece of pork skewered on his knife. "I know the soldiers hate ye for an Irish activist, Sean, but what exactly is a 'Rockite?' I cannae say I've heard the term before."

Sean chewed and swallowed a mouthful of meat, savouring the juicy pork before responding. "The title comes from our leader Captain Rock, yet no one can say for certain if he really exists. Most of us were just peasants wantin' a fair go from the landlords, do you know? A few firebrands got a bit out of hand; people were killed, soldiers too." Sean tried to minimise the violence and intimidation that were part of the movement.

"Soldiers of the 40<sup>th</sup> Foot?"

"I'm very much afraid so," admitted Sean.

"Christ," said Walter. "Yer in it up to the neck. And were ye a firebrand?"

Sean dropped his eyes. He avoided the question by posing one of his own. "What about you, Walter. Where are you from in Scotland, now?"

"I grew up on Glendinning Farm in Eskdale about sixty miles south of Edinburgh, not far from the English border. Have ye ever heard of Thomas Telford?"

"Is he not some manner of builder or engineer?"

"Scotland's finest civil engineer, born on the very same farm as I," Walter said, eyes alight. "My father was an antimony miner who died when I was three. Mother was left to care for me and my older brother William on her own. However, the church and the villagers always made sure we wanted for nothing. What about ye, Sean? Are your parents still alive?"

A pained expression crossed Sean's face as a flood of memories invaded him. Nightmare memories of a fourteen-year-old boy. He placed his knife on the table and contemplated the remains of his meal. Then he spoke, not looking at Walter. "We were after havin' dinner one day when British Redcoats burst into the house shoutin' that they had a warrant to search the premises," he began. "They were huntin' for evidence Father was a prominent member of the Rockite movement. They hoped to unearth documents or pamphlets incriminatin' him. Father ordered me to the bedroom. They ripped out drawers, dumpin' the contents on the floor. When one soldier swept crockery from a shelf, Mother tried to save her precious heirlooms." Sean's voice became quiet, intense. Walter stopped eating, leaning across the table to hear better.

"I was hidin' in the bedroom, watchin' through the partially-open door. The soldier seized her. 'Not so fast, my pretty,' he leered, squeezin' her bosom. Father flew at him like a madman, punchin' him on the nose. The soldier reeled back in shock, blood pourin' down his face. Father advanced ready to do more damage. Another soldier loomed in the doorway, his bayoneted musket levelled. Mother screamed as the Redcoat stuck the bayonet into Father's belly. He fell to the floor in an ever-growin' pool of blood, now. The soldiers fled outside. Mother dropped to her knees beside Father, wailin' in such a way I knew he was dead. I had hated the English before that day, but my hatred paled to nothin' compared to the fierce burnin' passion that my father's murder produced."



The scene Sean described shocked and appalled Walter. “I ah, I don’t know what to say. Christ, Sean, I . . .”

“’Tis alright, Walter. ’Twas a long time ago.”

“Is the commandant aware of this?”

“I doubt it. ’Twas well before his tour in Munster.”

Walter changed the subject. “How is it yer so well educated, Sean? Ye do not exactly fit the image of a bog-Irish peasant.”

The question brought a sad smile to Sean’s face. “My father,” he explained, “was master of a *scoileanna scailpe*, a hedge school; he and others like himself taught me all I know.”

“Hedge school?”

“You may know the English have imposed strict penal laws forbidding Catholics from settin’ up schools or goin’ abroad to be educated. The government is tryin’ to pressure Catholics to convert to the reformed Christian faith as practised by the Anglican Church. So we have secret classrooms, often outside near a hedge but also in houses and barns, wherever it’s safe to meet.”

“Tell me, what is taught in these schools?”

“A great many things, to be sure. I was very lucky to receive such an education. We learnt readin’, writin’, arithmetic, history, geography, Greek, Latin, Irish culture, traditions and ancestry. What about you? I imagine a more relaxed atmosphere in Scottish schools. What were you taught?”

“Aye. Similar subjects to yours it would seem. I attended the village school like everyone else. However, we possess something most small towns do not: a library. The miners of Jamestown all pitched in to establish the library over thirty years ago. They chose the books themselves: literature, history, chemistry, mining science, natural history, theology, the classics and so on. I had access to a rare collection of quality works not often found away from the major cities. And ye, Sean, did ye have access to a library?”

“Ha! I did. My father kept us poor, forever spendin’ what little he earned as a teacher on yet another book for his collection, God bless his soul. All the same we never went hungry; we lived modestly with few needs. Besides, Limerick boasts a grand library and Father would take me on his regular visits.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the appearance of young Henry, the fourteen-year-old son of Henry and Jane Miller. He had been put in Walter’s charge as a sort of apprentice storeman. It was Sean though – the despised Irishman – who assumed the responsibility of teaching Henry the many aspects of storekeeping. It hadn’t been difficult for Sean to break through the barriers of prejudice that were a part of being English, and charm his new offside into accepting him as a teacher.

Sean stood, stretching. “Time to get back to work. We cannot let the young master put us to shame, can we now, Walter?”

Walter consulted his pocket watch. He hadn’t seen the hour pass. “Nay. Indeed not. I had better hasten to the surgery. There will surely be a queue already.”

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Several days later Sean was minding the store, a distrustful eye on a hairy grey spider the size of his hand climbing the tent pole, when Oxley and Cunningham came striding up the beach after an absence of twelve days. Following the governor’s instructions, the two men had set off in two boats to explore the Brisbane River to its source. Simultaneously, Captain Penson and Huddle took the barge to inspect the water between Stradbroke and Moreton Islands in the hope of discovering a passage. “Who are you?” Oxley demanded. “Where is Mr Scott?”

“He’s at the surgery, sir. I’m afraid a number of the men have been struck down by a fever.” Sean kept his eyes lowered until Oxley stomped off to inspect the progress of the new store under construction in the vicinity. The log walls were up but much still remained to do. *The man does not seem too content*, Sean chuckled to himself. *Miller will get a bollocking*. He savoured the image.

Sean learnt later from Walter when he came to the store how Oxley had taken Miller to task. “It must be said that the commandant defended himself quite admirably. Smoothed Oxley’s ruffled feathers. Explained that this place was so damn unhealthy we would all die off. When Oxley calmed down he recounted his journey up the river. He has selected a possible site for a future settlement, immediately the governor gives the order.”

“I agree with Miller.” Sean sagged, elbows on the counter, head clasped in fretful hands. “If we don’t move soon Red Cliff will be the death of us all, to be sure.”

