

## **Chapter 35**

### **Thomas Fort Snelling November 1862**

Water trickled down the ridged wall of the stone barracks. The slow moving beads of water dripped onto the floor forming a growing mound of ice. Thomas admired the smooth shine and perfect symmetry of the ice mound, watching it grow bigger from one day to the next. A shiver passed through his seated body. Thomas pulled his knees in tight and tried to wrap his thin cotton blanket tighter, but he struggled to reach the edge of the blanket because of the metal shackles that held his wrists together. An older man—not more than forty-five or fifty—pacing back and forth and sipping a tin of water noticed Thomas' struggle. He set down his tin, grabbed the blanket with his shackled hands, and pulled it over Thomas' knees. Thomas and the older man, both now prisoners of war, regarded each with a nod. Then both returned to their previous occupations; Thomas watching the water drip onto a mound of ice and the older man pacing back and forth.

Hundreds of men, former defenders of Fort Snelling, wallowed in the barracks living in a passive state of uncertainty. They knew nothing of their families; nothing of their futures. They lived in monotony. That monotony was broken when a key entered the prison door, and the doorknob turned. Each of the prisoners craned their necks to watch. As had become routine, three Indian guards entered. Wearing forage caps and Union coats over their leggings and moccasins, the guards appeared quite humorous. Looking at them, Thomas sneered knowing that the Indians had taken army uniforms from the commissary, or worse, from a dead soldier.

With rifles in their hands and knives on their belts, the guards scanned the room. The prisoners standing near the door stepped back, slinking away like young children afraid of their

parents' discipline. Recognizing the fear in the faces of the prisoners, the guards turned to each other and laughed. As their laughter died down, one of the guards stepped toward the center of the room. His satisfied grin quickly changed to an unpleasant glare. He searched the room leaning forward at the neck and turning his head from left to right like a vulture looking for rotting flesh. "Niye," he said in a demanding tone while gesturing toward a group of prisoners, his hand still gripping his rifle. "Niye!" he said again. "Niye!"

A stocky man with a thick graying beard put his shackled hands to his chest, acknowledging the Indian's command. Thomas looked at the stocky man with curiosity, unsure if he knew him before the fort had been overrun. All the men looked the same now, tired, dirty, covered in frayed, torn blankets.

"Niye!" the guard said again using the same demanding tone, this time waving his arm forward as if to say *come*. "Yakuwa, yakuwa," the guard added.

The stocky prisoner looked to his left and right in search of sympathy but found only darting eyes and lowered heads.

"Niye! Yakuwa!"

The prisoner walked forward slowly, hesitantly, with the chain between his ankles clanking and rattling as it dragged over the wooden floor of the former barracks.

With narrowed eyes the guard watched as the prisoner edged past him and was ushered out the door by the other two guards. He remained there in the center of the floor searching the room, eyes moving from one prisoner to the next. Thomas looked up and caught the attention of the guard who looked back at him with a subtle, satisfied grin. Then he strode quickly to the door smirking as he walked out, pulling the door shut behind him. With a turn of the key the room returned to a state of dismal silence.

The men continued their aimless milling about while Thomas lowered his head between his knees and took a long, slow breath. He felt the cool, dry air enter through his nostrils. He held it in his chest as he closed his eyes and listened to the dripping of the water like the ticking of a clock. His stomach churned, and his feet stung like they'd been soaked in ice-cold water. He released his breath, but kept his eyes shut tight.

How could I have been so naive, he thought? How could I have been so dumb? My father is dead. My friends scalped by...by...by Savages! And what was Samuel to do about it, that prissy, over-achieving louse! He never loved our father, not like I did. He couldn't. And what was he to do! To take revenge? He couldn't even scold a cat if it bit him on the cheek. Huh! He was there when father died and he did nothing. He turned and ran away like the fleeing, pea-brained oxen while father stood bravely to protect our cranberries—to protect the only thing that would provide for our family. Samuel is to blame for bringing us to this place; for planting the seed in our heads. He is to blame for father's death. He's to blame for me being here, now. I was forced to seek my own revenge by joining the army in the midst of a war. Was I to know there would be an outbreak on the frontier? Was I to know these Indian beggars, the ones I once thought of as friendly, would band together with enough numbers to overtake the United States Army. Look at us. We have become the beggars, imprisoned in our own fort. God, I had done so well, too. I had done so well once I joined the army to learn discipline and order; to take commands and complete chores—all the things Samuel was harping on me about. I would have returned to the farm and shown Samuel what I could do; shown him that I had grown into a man; shown what I could be if he had only cared less for himself and more for our family.

The clunky scratching of the key entering the door startled Thomas from his thoughts. His eyes burst open, and his head shot up as he looked to see who entered, though he knew exactly who it would be.

The three Indian guards emerged from the door frame, still wearing Union blue over their deer skin and fur. Once again the prisoners slinked away, not wanting to discover what awaited them outside of their uncomfortable but safe jail cell. Wasting no time, the Indian guard who eyed Thomas earlier took a direct path to where Thomas was seated.

Standing just inches away, he leaned over Thomas and said in English, "Get up."

Keeping his head level, Thomas turned his eyes upward to see a determined glare and a face filled with hate staring back at him.

"Get up!" he said again, his frozen breath lingering in the air.

When Thomas didn't move, the guard pounded the butt of his rifle against the wooden floorboards, making a cracking sound so loud it hurt Thomas' ears.

With all of the prisoners watching, Thomas raised his shackled hands up toward the Indian guard indicating that he needed help getting up. The guard stepped back and furled his brow as if offended by the gesture.

Quickly, the older man who had been pacing nearby, stepped beside Thomas, grabbed his arms by the wrists, and hoisted him to his feet.

"Thank you," Thomas said in a hushed tone as the blanket slid from his back.

The guard narrowed his eyes and pointed toward the door where two other guards stood waiting. "Go now!" he said. "Go!"

Thomas stepped forward, minding the chain between his ankles so he wouldn't trip. As he did, the prisoner who had helped him said, "Admit to nothing."

Thomas lowered an eyebrow, uncertain of the meaning of the statement. But as he turned to ask him, the man was struck forcefully in the jaw by the butt of the guard's rifle, and he fell to the floor. Thomas winced at the sight of it.

Thomas continued his slow walk toward the open door of the prison. Thin and hunched, only the wisps of long blond hair on Thomas's chin hinted at his true age as a boy of merely sixteen years.

Stepping outside Thomas immediately brought his hands to his face to shield himself from the blinding sunlight glinting off the pure white snow that covered the parade ground. One of the Indian guards grabbed Thomas by the arm and gently steered him to the right. The two trailing guards said something in their native language and then peeled away to the snowy parade ground where there were numerous tepees and wigwams. Thomas and the lone remaining guard moved along the porch corridor of the barracks toward the iconic round tower in the western corner of the fort. It was partially toppled by cannon fire and looked more like a pile of stone than a tower, but Thomas didn't care now. Shuffling along he breathed deeply the cool, crisp air feeling grateful to be alive.

"Where are we going?" Thomas said.

The Indian guard looked at him curiously. Thomas noticed the age in his face shown by his sunken cheeks and wrinkled upper lip. He appeared old enough to remember a time before Thomas and others like him had moved onto his homeland.

"Where are we going?" Thomas said again.

The guard smiled, revealing several cracked and broken teeth and then said, "To-ked eniciyapi he?"

"I don't speak Indian."

“To-ked eniciyapi he?” the guard repeated. When Thomas didn’t answer the guard held his hand to his chest and said, “Hepañ. Hepañ.”

“Oh . . .” Thomas said. “Your name is Hepañ.”

“Hepañ,” he said again, with his smile widening enough to hide his sunken cheeks.

Thomas brought his shackled hands to his chest. “I am Thomas. Thomas.”

Hepañ nodded, sounding out the name, “T–omm–iss.”

Thomas couldn’t hold back his smile, and then they both laughed.

Hepañ held out his hand as if to say ‘wait’ and then reached into the pocket of his Union jacket. He pulled out a piece of dried meat and offered it to Thomas. “Woyute,” he said.

“Woyute.”

Hesitant at first, Thomas grabbed the meat and brought it to his mouth. Ripping it between his teeth, he savored its toughness. He put the rest in his mouth and chewed greedily, noticing how pleasurable it was to feel real food on his tongue rather than just the hot broth he had grown accustomed to.

Thomas savored the meat as long as he could, swallowed, and then nodded in gratitude to his captor. Hepañ’s bright face suddenly dimmed. He ushered Thomas forward, and within a few feet they reached what used to be the schoolhouse and chapel. Hepañ briefly made eye contact with Thomas, showing him a look of compassion, but then his face hardened as he pushed Thomas forward through the open door of the former schoolhouse.

Inside the one-room schoolhouse there were a dozen Indian men seated in a circle on the floor. In perfect unison each one turned their head to look at Thomas as he entered. Startled, Thomas stood, still unsure if he should proceed within the circle.

A young man with bone trinkets hanging from his long, dark hair stood and said, "Please, enter." He gestured toward the center of the circle where a chair had been placed. It was the only piece of furniture in the entire room.

With the chain of his ankle cuffs scraping the floor, Thomas edged forward. The rich scent of tobacco filled the room, and a smoldering fire burned in the stove giving off enough heat to shield the space from the cold air outside. The seated Indian men parted as Thomas entered the circle and took his place on the lone chair. It creaked loudly as his thin figure landed gently on its rickety frame.

There was a moment of silence while the Indian men examined Thomas with their eyes. Their dark faces were lined with age marked by years of life experience. Their heads, hair, and necks were adorned with various jewelry, ornaments, and beads. Some wore eagle feathers atop their heads while some had muskrat tails hanging from their ears and hair. Others, had colorful glass beads ornamenting the hair that fell over their shoulders and chest. Some even had pieces of elk horn and bear claws hanging around their necks. They passes a pipe among them, inhaling deeply and exhaling slowly, as they looked at Thomas with their worn, expressionless faces.

They began to speak. Not toward Thomas, but toward each other. They spoke quickly, first from one side of the circle and then the other, back-and-forth, exchanging words in their own languages.

Thomas felt himself growing hot, uneasy, frustrated. He didn't know if they were discussing his fate.

After a minute or two, the circle of Indians stopped speaking and looked at Thomas as if waiting for a response. The young Indian man with bone trinkets in his hair, who was apparently the interpreter, said to Thomas, "How many years do you have?"

Thomas looked around at their expectant gazes. "Sixteen."

"Ake šakpe," the translator said, then the men resumed their back-and-forth discussion, this time in a more urgent tone.

After another minute or so, the men grew silent once more. "Are you a soldier in the U.S. army?" the interpreter said.

Thomas hesitated. "Y-yes."

"Did you fight in the white man's army the day the fort was attacked? Did you fire your weapon at the attackers?"

Thomas recalled the words of the prisoner who told him not to admit to anything. But if he said no they would know he was lying. They would find out and then punish him for the lie. He could admit to firing his gun. What crime was it to fight as a soldier in a battle?

"Yes," Thomas answered.

Recognizing the word 'yes' the circle of Indians continued their discussion without waiting for a translation. This time they spoke quicker than before. To Thomas, it was a blur of sounds. The tone was intense and urgent.

Was he being condemned? Would he be hanged or worse, scalped? Would he, like his father, be scalped by savage Indians simply for coming to a place where the land was open and free, where the trees and rivers were untamed by settlers?

The Indian men became silent once more, their faces now hard and menacing. "Were you with the Long Trader, the one you call Sibley?"

Thomas could feel his heartbeat pulsing in his temples, hard and quick. Sweat gathered on his forehead. He felt nauseous. Sick. Scared.



“I didn’t do anything wrong. I—I came to Minnesota with my family. We were encouraged to come by the government. They said it was all right. They said the Indians had been given new lands. Reservations. But then . . . then they killed my father. You killed my father. And a war started. So I joined. I didn’t know we would be fighting Indians. I just wanted to prove my brother wrong. I wanted . . . I wanted . . . I wanted to show him that I was grown up and that I didn’t need him anymore. That I was my own man.”

“Enough!” one of the Indian judges said, surprising Thomas with sudden and strong tone. The man, who wore an eagle feathered headdress and flaxen colored trousers, turned his head to the interpreter.

The interpreter then turned to Thomas and said, “Answer yes or no. Were you with the Long Trader Sibley?”

Thomas paused, looking about the room while he tried to settle his pattering heart. For a moment he admired the wooden planks of the walls, wondering if a sawyer like his father—a sawyer like his brother—had cut them. Where was Samuel? Where was his family? Were they alive?

Thomas opened his mouth, held his breath, and finally said, “Yes. Yes, I was, but he was our commanding . . .”

The council did not wait to hear more. They spoke over him, showing no interest in his explanations. When they finished, the Indian wearing the eagle feathered headdress spoke clearly and directly to the interpreter. Thomas watched as the interpreter nodded. He knew his fate had been sealed.

“Thomas Copeland,” the interpreter said. “The intertribal council of elders have determined that you—first as an intruder settling on foreign land, second as a part of an armed

resistance—have been a part of a rebellion against the tribes and people of Mni Sota Makoce and their ancestors. Your punishment, as is customary in your country, is that you are to be hanged by the neck until you are dead.”

Thomas was breathless. Numb. He felt nothing. He heard nothing, as if he were floating in an empty void. Who could deserve this? Who could have everything taken from him so quickly? So completely. Merely for existing.

Certainly not me.