

Chapter One

Across the Rubicon

A simple hewn log cabin stands on the north slope of Elsberry Mountain. It offers a spectacular view of the dense woods and fields covering the red clay of North Georgia. Standing barefoot on the planked porch, a small boy clutches one of the rough cedar posts, staring down on the panorama. Across the acres of underbrush and trees, he watches as dust clouds begin rising from one of several narrow, serpentine roads that twist and turn around the low hills, dipping through the ravines, and finally converging at a small rustic Methodist church known simply as New Hope.

Since early that Wednesday morning, the boy has seen the long lines of gray-clad soldiers spilling into the churchyard, heard the shouts of commands from officers. Now he gapes at the madness of men rushing about, frantically digging ditches, cutting down trees, and piling them in rows in front of their works. The digging and piling begins in front of the church near the old cemetery then extends north and east till he can no longer see the end of the line of breastworks. Behind the church, drivers curse and crack whips as the wheels of artillery wagons and caissons roar into position. It's a strange cacophony, mixing the clamor of men and equipment with the braying of mules and horses. Still, the clouds of dust continue drifting south toward the tiny church.

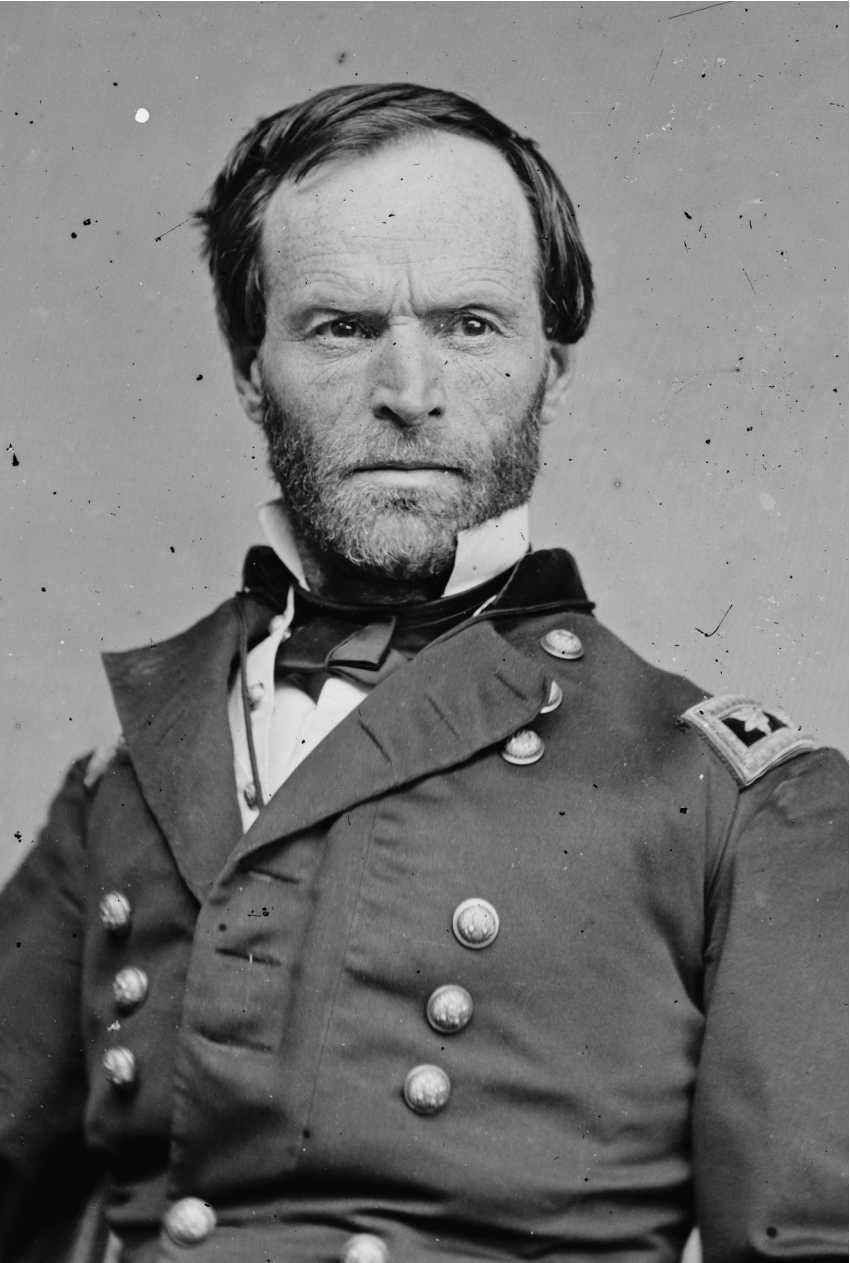
Shrouded beneath all the stirred up dirt trudges the leading division of "Fighting Joe" Hooker's XX Corps, the center of the powerful Federal army now invading Georgia. The huge army is actually an

amalgamation of three different Union armies. Together they total some 100,000 men, five times as large as the population of Atlanta, the state's largest city and their ultimate objective. With them they bring 254 cannons, 5,150 supply wagons, and 860 ambulances, all pulled by nearly 45,000 mules and horses.¹ From Nashville, twenty freight cars a day lumber down the Western and Atlantic Railroad, the artery that has fed the great horde since they left Chattanooga. Like a swarm of locusts, the army has gnawed up everything in its path. It is a machine of war, entrusted to a man who some whisper to be crazy, William Tecumseh Sherman.

At West Point, they called him "Cump," a nickname given him by his brothers and sisters. The soldiers know him as "Uncle Billy." Whatever the sobriquet, Sherman is clearly a man cut from a different cloth. Scarred with wrinkles, he looks older than his forty-four years. He is tall and wiry and has dark red hair and a short matching beard, all surrounding a set of cold steel eyes that stare holes in their targets. He likes to curse, and does it often, especially when it comes to politicians, most of whom he dislikes, and newspaper reporters, all of whom he considers to be pests and spies. He's a kinetic man, pacing floors, never still, and always wreathed in a cloud of smoke drifting from his ever-present cigar.²

Sherman is an intellectual sort with a razor-sharp mind. He's cerebral, constantly thinking and agonizing over every decision he makes. Even life's small distractions and aggravations bother him. Whatever the subject, he rarely hides his feelings. Those around him are bombarded with his incessant, rapid-fire speech, emphasized with quick, nervous gestures. With such a temperament and lively personality, he is the extreme opposite of his superior, Ulysses S. Grant, now the supreme commander of the United States forces.³

During the course of the war, Sherman has won the confidence and admiration of the quiet and introverted Grant who appreciates Sherman's loyalty and devotion to the Union and has tapped him to command the army in the West. What Sherman needs, and has always needed, is direction and a purpose, which Grant gives him. The plan is for Sherman to drive for Atlanta, crushing the Confederate Army of Tennessee while Grant destroys Lee's army in Virginia. The simultaneous effort, as Grant sees it, will keep the two Rebel armies from reinforcing each other as they had successfully done in the past.⁴



William T. Sherman (Courtesy Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress)

To Sherman this is more than an order from above. Grant is his friend, maybe his best. It's a strong friendship, tied together by the misery and glory of war. Earlier in the war both men had weathered the criticism of their character flaws: Grant for his drinking and Sherman for an emotional breakdown he had experienced in 1861. A sort of mutual empathy then developed and helped create a bond between one ridiculed for being a drunk and the other labeled as crazy. Both were, in a sense, outcasts. But at the battle of Shiloh, their friendship was solidified, and both proved they could fight. Aside from the differences in their personalities, the two are similar in some ways. These West Point graduates have experienced their share of disappointments and failures in the past. Neither presents an image of one who would command the largest armies ever assembled on the continent. Sherman, like Grant, sports the rumpled uniform bearing gravy stains with few signs of rank, and both are forever engulfed in billows of blue cigar smoke. Whether he looks the part or not, Sherman, at the behest of his friend, now finds himself in that role and in the middle of one of the more remarkable adventures in the history of the United States, an adventure that won't end until he reaches the coastline of the Confederacy. Moreover, during this experience, he will redefine the meaning of war, showing its ugliness to soldier and civilian alike.

On May 21, 1864, Sherman's army pulls up at Kingston, Georgia, on the north bank of the Etowah River. "The Rubicon of Georgia," he philosophically remarks in a wire to his quartermaster.⁵ Since moving his army forward on May 5, he has experienced little difficulty. True, there had been the battle at Resaca the week before, but for the most part everything is right on schedule. He has used his numeric strength to pull one flanking movement after another, and the Confederate Army of Tennessee continues to backpedal. Supplies, too, have been plentiful. To this point, he has enjoyed crossing rich fertile ground covered with farms and plantations that yield forage of wheat, rye, and corn, and his supply trains from Chattanooga continue to clatter unmolested down the tracks of the Western and Atlantic rail line.

Sherman, however, knows the difficulties that await him beyond the muddy river. In 1844, as a young lieutenant of artillery, he had passed through this land. "I had ridden the distance on horseback and had noted well the topography of the country," he remembers.⁶

Gone are the sprawling farms, fields, and plantations, replaced instead with mountains, hills, ravines, and knobby ground, all thick with trees and tangled underbrush. In addition to the rigorous terrain facing the army, his soldiers will find little to confiscate from the inhabitants who are, for the most part, women and children, destitute and living in poverty. “The country here is very desolate,” writes an appalled war correspondent, “not a house more attractive than a miserable cabin can be seen. There are no fields nor gardens, nor sign of verdure nor tillage. The population, like the soil is poor and disaffected. Most of the men are off in the woods, and the women are silent, ignorant and surly. It is the midnight corner of Georgia.”⁷

More troubling to Sherman, however, is the path that the railroad follows. If he pursues the important supply line across the river, it will take him through the Allatoona Mountains, a narrow gorge some eighty feet deep that offers the perfect geography for his army to be trapped and defeated. The pass, he admits, “would be hard to force,” and thus he resolves not even to attempt it.⁸ With all of the problems lying before him, Sherman decides to stop in Kingston, for a few days at least, to replenish his supplies, rest his army, and mull over his next move.

In a small frame house near the railroad depot in Kingston, Sherman sets up his headquarters. Here he studies maps and reports, trying to determine some way around the Rebel army that is waiting for him to pass through the jagged mountains at Allatoona. Over the next three days, he paces, billows cigar smoke, and scribbles orders and directives. This is also an opportunity to write letters to his brother, John, and his wife, Ellen. “I have no doubt you will complain of neglect on my part,” he writes Ellen, “but you have sense enough to see that my every minute has been taken.”⁹ Theirs has been a strained and unusual relationship. He had grown up with her as a stepbrother, having been adopted by her father, the Hon. Thomas Ewing, when he was nine years old. Over the years, he had grown to love her, and they were married in 1850. Adding to the woes of his emotional breakdown early in the war, they had lost their son, Willie, to typhoid fever in the fall of 1863. It was a loss that grieved them deeply. “Of all my children,” writes Sherman, “he seemed the most precious.”¹⁰ This and all the tribulations surrounding the war have caused them to become closer, and Ellen is his confidant.

Writing his brother, John, Sherman confides his plan to leave Kingston and skirt around the formidable Allatoona pass: "I propose to cross the Etowah here, and go to Marietta via Dallas."¹¹ This, of course, means that Sherman will be forced to temporarily leave the railroad, his vital supply line. The detour, however, should not take long. Dallas is only about fifteen miles south of the Etowah. After reaching that point, he will press back to the east another fifteen miles, rejoining the railroad at the town of Marietta. This, he believes, will force the Rebels to abandon their strong defensive position at Allatoona, causing them to retreat to Marietta or perhaps across the Chattahoochee River with their backs to Atlanta. In any event, he doesn't expect much opposition in this maneuver. It will be another grand flanking movement and a safer course, or so he hopes.¹²

On May 23, 1864, at several crossings, Sherman pontoons his huge army across the Etowah River, weaning it from the railroad and pushing southwest toward Dallas, Georgia. He clicks off a telegram to the quartermaster in Nashville: "We are now all in motion, like a vast hive of bees."¹³ The quartermaster, Lt. Col. James Donaldson, doesn't have to be reminded of "Uncle Billy's" meaning here, recalling Sherman's words before the campaign had begun, "And if you don't have my army supplied, and keep it supplied, we'll eat your mules up, sir—eat your mules up."¹⁴ Impatient, abrupt, sometimes plain rude, Sherman knows how to deliver a message with no misunderstandings, and Donaldson will attend to it, pronto. He will continue pumping supplies by rail to Kingston. From that point, however, Sherman must now rely on his wagons to haul his food and supplies, and he has ordered provisions for twenty days to be loaded on them.¹⁵

Sherman rides across the Etowah on a fine new horse, just arrived by rail with compliments from the tormented quartermaster, James Donaldson. Riding along next to him is Gen. George Thomas, now commanding the Army of the Cumberland, the largest of Sherman's armies and the "column of direction." They cross the river at a point Sherman describes as "the valley of the Eucharlee, a tributary coming into the Etowah from the south." From there, he later remembers, they "gradually crossed over a ridge of mountains, parts of which had once been worked over for gold, and were consequently full of paths and unused wagon-roads or tracks." Of course, none of the roads that carry them south of the river are

much better than the old mining roads and movement along them is painfully slow.¹⁶

The weather, too, is extremely hot. There has been little rain, and the roads are dry and churning with dust from the columns of men, animals, and trains of wagons driven by feuding teamsters who constantly argue for the right of way. Soldiers are ordered off the narrow and bottlenecked roads and forced to march through the woods and thickets where they struggle to cross “lagoons and small streams bordered with treacherous quicksands.” Canteens are quickly drained, and men fall from the ranks. That night, young Capt. Charles Wills writes in his diary, “I never saw so many stragglers as today.”¹⁷

By May 24, Sherman’s entire force of three Federal armies is now across the river, doggedly pressing in the general direction of the town of Dallas. Generals John Schofield and James McPherson, two smart, young academy men, both products of the famed class of 1853, command the flanks of the vast army. Schofield is moving immediately to the left of George Thomas while McPherson, on the army’s right, is wheeling through the village of Van Wert for a westward approach to Dallas. Between the two wings plods Thomas’s powerful Army of the Cumberland, always the main muscle in Sherman’s movements. They are marching for the same point via Stilesboro and Burnt Hickory, and Sherman rides with them. “I think I have the best army in the country,” he had boasted to Ellen in his last letter, adding with confidence, “if I can’t take Atlanta and stir up Georgia considerably I am mistaken.”¹⁸

Although Sherman is not mistaken in his expectations, he is becoming frustrated with the progress his army is currently making. The stifling heat, bad roads, and miserable terrain have slowed his columns to a crawl. Adding to these woes, skirmishers from the Rebel cavalry have suddenly begun popping out of the thick woods, ambushing the marchers and then quickly disappearing into the underbrush.

Throughout the day, forty-four-year-old John Geary, who is commanding one of Joe Hooker’s divisions and in the van of the entire movement has been listening to the crackle of sporadic gunfire. He sits rigidly in the saddle and no one can miss him. At six feet six inches tall, he’s a gigantic man whose prominent feature is a frowning, foot-long, tangled, black beard. By 1864, Geary wears the

star of a Union general and carries the scars of nine battle wounds that may explain his ill humor and short temper. In formal military circles, they refer to the likes of Geary as a strict disciplinarian who goes by the book and is a stickler for rules. A former politician, he has been accused of being an opportunist who will pursue political gain through a laudable war record. Here in the North Georgia woods he will find another opportunity. His orders are to press forward through this vine-clogged wilderness until he reaches a small village known as Burnt Hickory, named for its spooky black hickory trees that appear to have been scorched by fire.¹⁹

Early in the afternoon Federal cavalry that have been guarding Geary's flank capture a Confederate courier wandering lost in the woods and carrying a dispatch to Gen. "Red" Jackson commanding the Rebel cavalymen who have been harassing the columns of Union infantry. The message says that the entire Confederate army is moving in the direction of Dallas to intercept them.²⁰ They immediately take the dispatch back to Sherman, who is still riding with Thomas. He reads it then quickly rejects it as nonsense. He's still confident that the real strength of the Confederate army is perched in the hills surrounding Allatoona, ready to send them all to hell if they pass through that gap. Still, there may be some force in front of him in those forbidding woods. The question troubles him. Who could be waiting there? How many? He's not sure but is satisfied that any Rebel resistance would only be minimal. Tomorrow is Wednesday. He'll know more then. Geary and the rest of Hooker's Corps will bivouac at Burnt Hickory and cross the Pumpkinvine Creek in the morning. If they encounter the enemy, it will probably be nothing larger than a brigade located somewhere around Dallas. If so, he'll whip them there, but his gut feeling tells him the enemy is nowhere near.