



## Prologue

**I**t is 1809. The United States consists of only sixteen states, but there are new, wild areas to the west. Every day, more and more people take their chances and load up wagons to travel along dirt trails for weeks or even months in search of a better life. One of the greatest dangers these new settlers face is angry American Indians, whose lands continue to be brutally taken from them. Many Indians have now learned how to use guns, and they use them to protect their homes. Many others, believing that a person's soul is in their hair, still collect scalps. As a form of revenge, it becomes popular to kill and scalp Indians; and people begin to collect, buy, and trade Indian scalps as a hobby.

It is 1809. In New York City, pigs roam the streets, eating the mountains of garbage that are piled everywhere. Trash collection and indoor bathrooms are still many years away. Even so, the population of New York City doubles every

ten years as thousands of immigrants arrive on ships. Like the settlers heading west, the immigrants are also looking for a better life. They have heard that this new country, the United States, offers more freedom and more opportunity. They have heard that part of the Declaration of Independence states, “All men are created equal.” Wishing to escape countries where people are not treated equally, they continue to pour into America.

It is 1809. Doctors rarely understand why people get sick or how to cure sickness. The most common treatment for anything from a cold to cancer is “bleeding,” since doctors believe that cutting a person and allowing blood to drain out will get rid of disease. Often, leeches are used to suck blood out of patients. Only ten years earlier, George Washington died of a simple sore throat after doctors bled him heavily four times, made him gargle with vinegar and butter, and placed a paste made of crushed beetles on his throat. Meanwhile, nearly a third of pregnant women die during or just after giving birth. It will be decades before doctors realize that washing their hands before delivering babies will save thousands of lives.

It is 1809. Later in the century, many things will be invented, including raincoats, balloons, bicycles, sewing machines, zippers, potato chips,

toilet paper, and shoes that are actually made differently for right and left feet. Perhaps the best invention of all, in about twenty years, will be the match. But for now, people must strike flintstones together and hope for a spark that will start a fire. Most people simply keep a fire going day and night so that they will not have to build a new one. Since there is no such thing as electricity, a fire is absolutely necessary for everything from heat to light to cooking. And out in the areas of the country known as the “frontier,” fires are often left burning outside all night long to ward off wild animals such as coyotes, wildcats, and panthers.

It was into this new and often difficult world that Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809. Sleet and cold rain fell on the roof of Nancy and Thomas Lincoln’s one-room log cabin in the frontier land of Hodgenville, Kentucky. Two-year-old Sarah Lincoln sat near the fireplace as her father and her Aunt Betsy helped deliver her new baby brother. Childbirth was dangerous. Everyone in the room, except for little Sarah, knew that Nancy Lincoln or the baby might die. If something went terribly wrong, both might die. Few words were spoken, and Thomas Lincoln practically held his breath until Abraham’s first cries were heard.

Gently, Abraham was placed on a bed made of piled cornhusks. The only blankets in the cabin were heavy bearskins.

“Baby girl?” Sarah asked carefully as her aunt covered Abraham up.

“No, dear,” Aunt Betsy whispered. “It’s a boy. It’s your brother, Abraham.”

“A boy!” Thomas Lincoln said happily. Thomas was a carpenter who built cabins. He also worked as a farmer, growing and raising everything the family ate. He had hoped for a son, someone to help him with all the hard work that never seemed to end in a life on the frontier.

Suddenly, accompanied by a burst of icy wind and sleet, Sarah’s nine-year-old cousin, Dennis, opened the door and rushed in to see the new addition to the family. But when he looked at the long, thin baby, Dennis shook his head with a frown.

“Don’t look like he’ll ever be much,” Dennis muttered. “Ain’t much more than a string bean.”

“Well, you wait and see,” Thomas said, gazing down at Abraham. “Reckon he’ll be a great cabin builder one day.”

Little did Thomas and Nancy Lincoln know, on the stormy February morning in 1809, that one day their son would be much, much more than that.



## Chapter 1

**Six**-year-old Abe Lincoln was in the field behind the family's cabin, helping his father plant squash and pumpkin seeds. Dark clouds hung low in the distance, and every few minutes Abe could hear a rumble of thunder echo through the Kentucky hills. When the lightning flashed, Abe would stop planting seeds and stare up at the sky. Sometimes he would become so fascinated by the oncoming storm that the sack of seeds would fall from his hands.

Abe's father, Thomas, looked at his son and shook his head. Laziness irritated him, and he wouldn't stand for it in his own son. "Abe! Pay attention. Stop playing around. We have to get these in the ground before the rain comes."

Abe jumped back to work, but as soon as the next boom of thunder reached him, he gazed at the sky again.

“What makes the thunder, Pa? Is the lightning making it?”

Thomas kept planting seeds. Growing up, he'd never gone to even a week of school. He couldn't read or write or sign his own name. And he certainly didn't know what caused thunder. More and more, Abe was asking questions that Thomas couldn't answer. *Foolish questions*, he thought. *That boy can waste half a day just thinking up new questions about things that don't matter.* Thomas looked at his own scarred and weathered hands as he planted. It took an incredible amount of work to live on the frontier. Daydreaming and laziness could ruin a man.

“I reckon that thunder is God's way of telling you to stop wasting time and get back to work!” Abe's father finally said angrily, his voice rising above the wind that was now blowing some of the seeds across the dry soil.

Abe worked in silence as the storm approached. When big drops of rain began to plop against his back, he looked at his father. Thomas just nodded at the last section of the field to indicate that they needed to finish the job, rain or not. As the rain began to fall harder, Abe worked faster. Soon, he was soaked to the skin, but he and his father moved side by side on the last row. Finally, all the seeds were planted.

Thomas reached over, patted his son's back, and pointed toward the cabin. Both ran quickly to the front door—a door that was only a bearskin hanging on four hooks. But as Thomas ducked into the dry cabin, Abe turned to see a tremendous flash of lightning followed almost immediately by a huge crash of thunder. Still curious, he stood there staring up at the sky as the downpour covered him, wondering why the thunder now came so quickly after the lightning. He might have stood there another hour if a big scarred hand hadn't reached out through the bearskin door and dragged him into the cabin.

“But I want to hear it again. I think I forgot some of it.”

As Abe and his father sat drying themselves in front of the big fireplace, Abe begged his father to tell a story. Typically, Abe liked the stories best that had something to do with him. Abe's older sister, Sarah, and his mother also sat near the fire, trying to get enough light to mend clothes. The only window in the cabin was a small square covered with a yellowish waxy paper, and because of the storm outside, it was quite dark inside the one-room cabin except for the area right in front of the fire.

“Abe, I think you know that story by heart,” Thomas said with a small smile. Despite his gruffness, Thomas loved to tell stories. He was known as one of the best storytellers in the small town of Knob Creek, Kentucky, where the Lincolns lived.

“All right, then,” Thomas said with a wink to his wife. “Let me tell you a story about my father, your Grandfather Lincoln.”

Abe’s father began by describing the village in Green River, Kentucky, where he and his parents and three older brothers had lived many years ago. The Lincolns had been friends with Daniel Boone, and Thomas’s father had heard many of Boone’s stories about the fertile land in Kentucky. The family moved to Kentucky from Virginia and before long owned more than 5,000 acres.

“We were mighty well off . . . for a little while,” Thomas said with sadness.

One morning, Thomas’s father and three brothers were working out in the cornfield while eight-year-old Thomas tended to chickens nearby. Suddenly, a loud shot rang out, and Thomas heard his brothers yell. Thomas ran toward the field and saw his father on the ground, not moving at all. As his three brothers ran to the house for help, Thomas knelt by his father’s side. He could see the blood pouring

out of a bullet wound. Hearing footsteps, Thomas turned to see an Indian running toward him with a rifle in his hands. The Indian had streaks of paint down his face and a bright silver medallion hanging from a cord around his neck. Thomas froze in fear.

Just as the Indian came up beside Thomas and reached down to pick him up, another shot rang out. A bullet had pierced the medallion and gone into the Indian's heart. Thomas's oldest brother, who could shoot a squirrel from fifty yards away, had saved his baby brother's life. But their father lay dead in the cornfield.

"After that, things were never the same," Thomas said. "Within a few years, we all drifted in different directions. I was on my own at twelve years old, only six years older than you, Abe."

Abe just nodded, waiting for the best part.

"Your grandfather was a great man, Abe. That's why we named you after him—Abraham. Maybe someday you'll have a farm as big as his was."

Young Abraham rarely got the chance to go to school. As an adult, Lincoln looked back on his childhood and said, "I went to school by littles." By this, he meant that he went to school only now and then, a week here and a

week there, but nothing that could be called a real education. Aside from the difficulty of the only school in Knob Creek being at the end of a three-mile walk through rough woods, Abe's father believed that education was a waste of time and made a boy soft and lazy.

"But he *wants* to learn," Nancy, Abe's mother, would gently argue. "It can't hurt to let him go to school for a while."

Thomas shook his head. "He can learn to read and write, but he don't need any more than that. Just so he can understand deeds to land and written agreements and such."

And so Abe walked along the creek to the schoolhouse whenever his father had no work for him to do, which was not very often. The school he attended consisted of one big room with dirt floors, rough wooden benches, and very few books or materials. In fact, there was rarely even a teacher. The students ranged in age from 6 to 18; those who knew more taught those who knew less. Now and then, an adult would show up and teach a lesson or two in between farming chores.

This kind of school was known as a "blab school" because everything was spoken or "blabbed" instead of written. There were no pencils, no paper, and no chalkboards. So when a child learned anything—from ABC's

to multiplication—it was done by speaking and memorizing what was spoken. A blab school, with a few dozen students all talking at the same time, often sounded from a distance like a noisy beehive. Immediately, Abe was deeply drawn to learning. Even when he was only seven or eight years old, his mind was full of a million questions.

However, Abe had attended the school in Knob Creek only a handful of times before big changes in his life took place.

“I don’t understand it, but they say this land isn’t mine.” One afternoon in 1817, Thomas Lincoln was holding up a piece of paper he couldn’t read. Nancy looked at it and shook her head. She couldn’t read it either, but she understood. Thomas was not the first man in this area to be told that the land he had paid for was not his. The laws of land ownership in Kentucky were vague and sketchy at best.

Thomas wadded up the paper and threw it angrily into the fire. “Don’t matter,” he said bitterly. “I hate this state anyway. I can’t see staying in a state that still allows slavery, and that’s for sure.”

Nancy nodded. Both she and Thomas despised slavery, believing it to be cruel and morally wrong. Most of the Southern states were slave states. However, just north of

Kentucky, in Indiana, slavery was not allowed. Almost immediately, Thomas rode off alone toward Indiana to look for land. He could travel quickly on horseback, and in only a few days he had returned with news.

“I’ve found a place! Not more than a hundred miles up in Indiana in a little area called Pigeon Creek.” Thomas was already packing as he spoke. Nancy, a quiet and often sad woman, only nodded again. When Thomas set his mind on something, she had no say in the matter. *One hundred miles, though!* she thought wearily. *That will take a week just to get there.*

But Nancy Lincoln was wrong. It took *two* weeks. Traveling through dense woods in a cart piled with all their belongings along a narrow, often unclear trail took an immense amount of time. Sarah and Nancy sat in the oxen-pulled cart while Abe and his father walked alongside it. At night, the family camped in the forest, wild animals snorting and howling in the woods around them. Abe was often in charge of making sure that the campfire did not go out. Fire would keep the bears and wildcats at a distance. More than once, eight-year-old Abe would awaken with a start, fearing that he had let the fire die, allowing hungry bears to surround the camp.

After two grueling weeks of travel, the Lincolns finally reached the new land that

Thomas had purchased. He had bought 160 acres, marked only by piles of brush and branches that he had left in the four corners of his land. It was no easy task locating a pile of sticks in the vast miles of open land, but Thomas eventually spotted one of his markers.

“This is it!” he shouted excitedly as he ran to the marker. He gestured toward the land in a wide sweep of his arm. “This is your new home.”

Abe and Sarah looked around doubtfully. There were no other cabins in sight, no town, not even a road. It seemed very lonely.

“We’ll build the cabin forty acres to the north of this marker, over near the woods,” Thomas continued, walking quickly in that direction. “I found the perfect spot up on a hill.”

The first thing Abe and his father did when the family reached the cabin site was to build what was known as a “half-face” camp. This was a simple shelter made from leaning two poles against a heavy tree branch and covering one side with bark and sticks. The other side of the shelter was completely open. Beds were made of leaves, and the floor was dirt. Small animals and any number of bugs wandered in and out of the shelter at all hours, but a fire built on the open side kept larger, dangerous animals at a distance.

As Abe and his father built the shelter, Sarah and Nancy began to unpack. The first item out of the wagon was a heavy water bucket. Suddenly, Nancy stood very still as though listening for something. Then her brow wrinkled with worry.

“Thomas! Where’s the water? I don’t hear a creek.”

“I’ll dig a well tomorrow. Folks say there’s plenty of water in the land,” Thomas called back. “The creek’s just down the hill.”

But “just down the hill” turned out to be more than a mile away. And the water that Thomas thought would be in the land could never be found, even after digging numerous holes. So, for the next ten years, one of Abe’s many daily chores would be walking the long trail to Pigeon Creek to fill the heavy water bucket.

That winter of 1817 was terribly cold. Life in the half-face shelter was almost unbearable. Bitter winds and drifts of snow blew right in and on top of the family as they tried to sleep at night. Nonetheless, Abe and his father were up very early every morning, working on the family’s cabin. Looking back on that year, Lincoln later wrote: “Though very young, I was large for my age, and had an axe put into

my hands at once. And from that until within my twenty-third year, I was almost constantly handling that most useful instrument.”

Spring finally came to the Pigeon Creek area, and along with it came Abe’s aunt and uncle, Betsy and Tom Sparrow. Best of all, Abe’s cousin, Dennis, was with them. Although Dennis was ten years older than Abe, the two boys became close friends, exploring the surrounding woods and sharing their fears and joys of growing up on the frontier. The Sparrows moved into the half-face shelter that spring as the Lincolns finally moved into their cabin. It was a spring and summer of more backbreaking work, clearing the land for crops and building another cabin for the Sparrows. However, both families were excited about their new lives in this new and fertile land. There was certainly more joy than sorrow—until the autumn of 1818.

“Aunt Nancy! Uncle Thomas! I don’t know what it is. Something’s wrong with Ma and Pa!” Nineteen-year-old Dennis came running into the Lincolns’ cabin one beautiful October morning. His hands shook, and his usually rosy face was pale.

Without a word, Nancy jumped up to check on her sister and her brother-in-law. They were still living in the open-face shelter while the

final touches to their cabin were being finished. Nancy knelt next to her sister on her bed of leaves.

“Betsy, tell me what hurts,” Nancy said, reaching out to touch her sister’s forehead. Both Betsy and Tom were burning up, nearly delirious with fever. They had been sick all night, and now just lay in the leaves, trembling and pressing their hands against the pain in their stomachs.

“Stomach. Like burning,” was all Betsy could say. And then, “Doctor.”

But the nearest doctor was fifty miles away. It would be days before he would be able to reach the homestead at Pigeon Creek. Betsy and Tom needed help right away.

For two days, Nancy Lincoln barely left the open-face shelter. But nothing she did seemed to help the Sparrows. On the third day, both Betsy and Tom died.

“It was God’s will,” Thomas Lincoln said again and again as he, Abe, and Dennis chopped down trees for the two coffins. He tried to comfort himself and the others with his calmness, but deep inside, he was terrified. Sickness was rarely understood and even more rarely treated with any kind of success. Thomas knew that a contagious disease could wipe out the entire family very quickly.

“Will we get sick too?” Abe asked his mother quietly the night after the Sparrows were buried. “Will we die?”

“No. We’ll be fine,” she said with a sad smile as she tucked him and Sarah into bed. “No one has gotten sick yet. I don’t think it’s something we can catch, or I would have already caught it.”

The Lincolns and Dennis held their breath for nearly a week, waiting to see if they all would, in fact, be fine. Ten days passed, and life went on. A full harvest moon rose above the first crops one night, and though everyone was sad, hope began to return.

“Our prayers have been answered,” Thomas Lincoln said at the dinner table that evening. But much later that night, he awoke to a strange sound. It was Nancy crying.

“My stomach,” she said. “Like it’s on fire.”