

AMOR  
TOWLES

*The*

LINCOLN  
HIGHWAY

A NOVEL

*from the New York Times bestselling author of*  
A GENTLEMAN IN MOSCOW



ALSO BY AMOR TOWLES

*A Gentleman in Moscow*

*Rules of Civility*

THE

LINCOLN  
HIGHWAY

—•—

*Amor Towles*

VIKING

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[Map](#) based on an original design by Alex Coulter.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Towles, Amor, author.

Title: The Lincoln highway / Amor Towles.

Description: [New York] : Viking, [2021]

Identifiers: LCCN 2021024465 (print) | LCCN 2021024466 (ebook) | ISBN 9780735222359 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780735222373 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593489338 (international edition)

Classification: LCC PS3620.O945 L56 2021 (print) | LCC PS3620.O945 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021024465>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021024466>

Cover design: Nayon Cho

Cover photograph: Elliott Erwitt / Magnum Photos

*Designed by Amanda Dewey, adapted for ebook by Cora Wigen*

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*For  
My brother Stokley  
And  
My sister Kimbrough*

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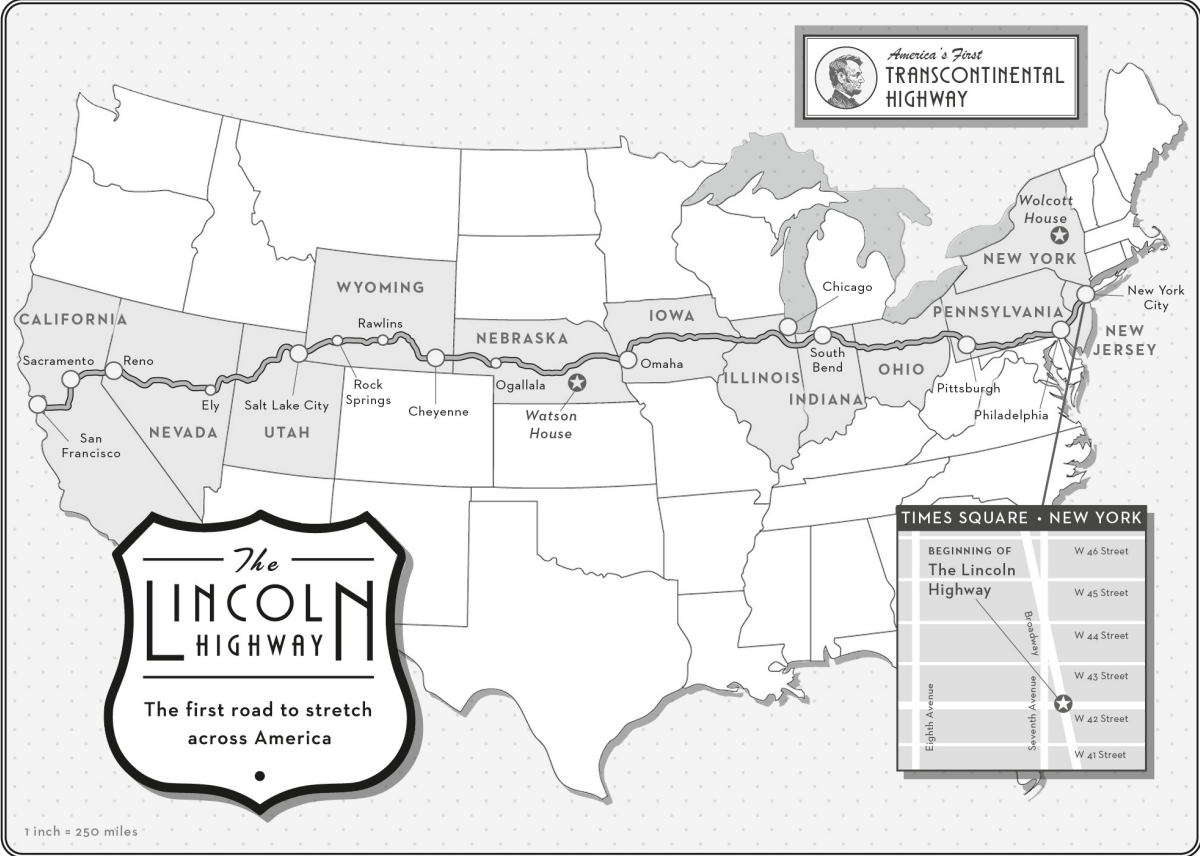
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1 inch = 250 miles

Evening and the flat land,  
Rich and somber and always silent;  
The miles of fresh-plowed soil,  
Heavy and black, full of strength and harshness;  
The growing wheat, the growing weeds,  
The toiling horses, the tired men;  
The long empty roads,  
Sullen fires of sunset, fading,  
The eternal, unresponsive sky.  
Against all this, Youth . . .

—*O Pioneers!*, Willa Cather

TEN

## *Emmett*

**J**UNE 12, 1954—The drive from Salina to Morgen was three hours, and for much of it, Emmett hadn't said a word. For the first sixty miles or so, Warden Williams had made an effort at friendly conversation. He had told a few stories about his childhood back East and asked a few questions about Emmett's on the farm. But this was the last they'd be together, and Emmett didn't see much sense in going into all of that now. So when they crossed the border from Kansas into Nebraska and the warden turned on the radio, Emmett stared out the window at the prairie, keeping his thoughts to himself.

When they were five miles south of town, Emmett pointed through the windshield.

—You take that next right. It'll be the white house about four miles down the road.

The warden slowed his car and took the turn. They drove past the McKusker place, then the Andersens' with its matching pair of large red barns. A few minutes later they could see Emmett's house standing beside a small grove of oak trees about thirty yards from the road.

To Emmett, all the houses in this part of the country looked like they'd been dropped from the sky. The Watson house just looked like it'd had a rougher landing. The roof line sagged on either side of the chimney and the window frames were slanted just enough that half the windows wouldn't quite open and the other half wouldn't quite shut. In another moment, they'd be able to see how the paint had been shaken right off the clapboard. But when they got within a hundred feet of the driveway, the warden pulled to the side of the road.

—Emmett, he said, with his hands on the wheel, before we drive in there's something I'd like to say.

That Warden Williams had something to say didn't come as much of a surprise. When Emmett had first arrived at Salina, the warden was a Hoosier

named Ackerly, who wasn't inclined to put into words a piece of advice that could be delivered more efficiently with a stick. But Warden Williams was a modern man with a master's degree and good intentions and a framed photograph of Franklin D. Roosevelt hanging behind his desk. He had notions that he'd gathered from books and experience, and he had plenty of words at his disposal to turn them into counsel.

—For some of the young men who come to Salina, he began, whatever series of events has brought them under our sphere of influence is just the beginning of a long journey through a life of trouble. They're boys who were never given much sense of right or wrong as children and who see little reason for learning it now. Whatever values or ambitions we try to instill in them will, in all likelihood, be cast aside the moment they walk out from under our gaze. Sadly, for these boys it is only a matter of time before they find themselves in the correctional facility at Topeka, or worse.

The warden turned to Emmett.

—What I'm getting at, Emmett, is that you are not one of them. We haven't known each other long, but from my time with you I can tell that that boy's death weighs heavily on your conscience. No one imagines what happened that night reflects either the spirit of malice or an expression of your character. It was the ugly side of chance. But as a civilized society, we ask that even those who have had an unintended hand in the misfortune of others pay some retribution. Of course, the payment of the retribution is in part to satisfy those who've suffered the brunt of the misfortune—like this boy's family. But we also require that it be paid for the benefit of the young man who was the *agent* of misfortune. So that by having the opportunity to pay his debt, he too can find some solace, some sense of atonement, and thus begin the process of renewal. Do you understand me, Emmett?

—I do, sir.

—I'm glad to hear it. I know you've got your brother to care for now and the immediate future may seem daunting; but you're a bright young man and you've got your whole life ahead of you. Having paid your debt in full, I just hope you'll make the most of your liberty.

—That's what I intend to do, Warden.

And in that moment, Emmett meant it. Because he agreed with most of what the warden said. He knew in the strongest of terms that his whole life was ahead of him and he knew that he needed to care for his brother. He knew too that he had been an agent of misfortune rather than its author. But he didn't agree that his debt had been paid in full. For no matter how much chance has played a role, when by your hands you have brought another man's time on earth to its end, to prove to the Almighty that you are worthy of his mercy, that shouldn't take any less than the rest of your life.

The warden put the car in gear and turned into the Watsons'. In the clearing by the front porch were two cars—a sedan and a pickup. The warden parked beside the pickup. When he and Emmett got out of the car, a tall man with a cowboy hat in his hand came out the front door and off the porch.

—Hey there, Emmett.

—Hey, Mr. Ransom.

The warden extended his hand to the rancher.

—I'm Warden Williams. It was nice of you to take the trouble to meet us.

—It was no trouble, Warden.

—I gather you've known Emmett a long time.

—Since the day he was born.

The warden put a hand on Emmett's shoulder.

—Then I don't need to explain to you what a fine young man he is. I was just telling him in the car that having paid his debt to society, he's got his whole life ahead of him.

—He does at that, agreed Mr. Ransom.

The three men stood without speaking.

The warden had lived in the Midwest for less than a year now, but he knew from standing at the foot of other farmhouse porches that at this point in a conversation you were likely to be invited inside and offered something cool to drink; and when you received the invitation, you should be ready to accept because it would be taken as rude if you were to decline, even if you did have a three-hour drive ahead of you. But neither Emmett nor Mr. Ransom made any indication of asking the warden in.

—Well, he said after a moment, I guess I should be heading back.

Emmett and Mr. Ransom offered a final thanks to the warden, shook his hand, then watched as he climbed in his car and drove away. The warden was a quarter mile down the road when Emmett nodded toward the sedan.

—Mr. Obermeyer's?

—He's waiting in the kitchen.

—And Billy?

—I told Sally to bring him over a little later, so you and Tom can get your business done.

Emmett nodded.

—You ready to go in? asked Mr. Ransom.

—The sooner the better, said Emmett.

• • •

They found Tom Obermeyer seated at the small kitchen table. He was wearing a white shirt with short sleeves and a tie. If he was also wearing a suit coat, he must have left it in his car because it wasn't hanging on the back of the chair.

When Emmett and Mr. Ransom came through the door, they seemed to catch the banker off his guard, because he abruptly scraped back the chair, stood up, and stuck out his hand all in a single motion.

—Well, hey now, Emmett. It's good to see you.

Emmett shook the banker's hand without a reply.

Taking a look around, Emmett noted that the floor was swept, the counter clear, the sink empty, the cabinets closed. The kitchen looked cleaner than at any point in Emmett's memory.

—Here, Mr. Obermeyer said, gesturing to the table. Why don't we all sit down.

Emmett took the chair opposite the banker. Mr. Ransom remained standing, leaning his shoulder against the doorframe. On the table was a brown folder thick with papers. It was sitting just out of the banker's reach, as if it had been left there by somebody else. Mr. Obermeyer cleared his throat.

—First of all, Emmett, let me say how sorry I am about your father. He was a fine man and too young to be taken by illness.

—Thank you.

—I gather when you came for the funeral that Walter Eberstadt had a chance to sit down with you and discuss your father's estate.

—He did, said Emmett.

The banker nodded with a look of sympathetic understanding.

—Then I suspect Walter explained that three years ago your father took out a new loan on top of the old mortgage. At the time, he said it was to upgrade his equipment. In actuality, I suspect a good portion of that loan went to pay some older debts since the only new piece of farm equipment we could find on the property was the John Deere in the barn. Though I suppose that's neither here nor there.

Emmett and Mr. Ransom seemed to agree that this was neither here nor there because neither made any effort to respond. The banker cleared his throat again.

—The point I'm getting to is that in the last few years the harvest wasn't what your father had hoped; and this year, what with your father's passing, there isn't going to be a harvest at all. So we had no choice but to call in the loan. It's an unpleasant bit of business, I know, Emmett, but I want you to understand that it was not an easy decision for the bank to make.

—I should think it would be a pretty easy decision for you to make by now, said Mr. Ransom, given how much practice you get at making it.

The banker looked to the rancher.

—Now, Ed, you know that's not fair. No bank makes a loan in hopes of foreclosing.

The banker turned back to Emmett.

—The nature of a loan is that it requires the repayment of interest and principal on a timely basis. Even so, when a client in good standing falls behind, we do what we can to make concessions. To extend terms and defer collections. Your father is a perfect example. When he began falling behind, we gave him some extra time. And when he got sick, we gave him some more. But sometimes a man's bad luck becomes too great to surmount, no matter how much time you give him.

The banker reached out his arm to lay a hand on the brown folder, finally claiming it as his own.

—We could have cleared out the property and put it up for sale a month ago, Emmett. It was well within our rights to do so. But we didn't. We waited so that



you could complete your term at Salina and come home to sleep in your own bed. We wanted you to have a chance to go through the house with your brother in an unhurried fashion, to organize your personal effects. Hell, we even had the power company leave on the gas and electricity at our own expense.

—That was right kind of you, said Emmett.

Mr. Ransom grunted.

—But now that you are home, continued the banker, it's probably best for everyone involved if we see this process through to its conclusion. As the executor of your father's estate, we'll need you to sign a few papers. And within a few weeks, I'm sorry to say, we'll need you to make arrangements for you and your brother to move out.

—If you've got something that needs signing, let's sign it.

Mr. Obermeyer took a few documents from the folder. He turned them around so that they were facing Emmett and peeled back pages, explaining the purpose of individual sections and subsections, translating the terminology, pointing to where the documents should be signed and where initialed.

—You got a pen?

Mr. Obermeyer handed Emmett his pen. Emmett signed and initialed the papers without consideration, then slid them back across the table.

—That it?

—There is one other thing, said the banker, after returning the documents safely to their folder. The car in the barn. When we did the routine inventory of the house, we couldn't find the registration or the keys.

—What do you need them for?

—The second loan your father took out wasn't for specific pieces of agricultural machinery. It was against any new piece of capital equipment purchased for the farm, and I'm afraid that extends to personal vehicles.

—Not to that car it doesn't.

—Now, Emmett . . .

—It doesn't because that piece of capital equipment isn't my father's. It's mine.

Mr. Obermeyer looked to Emmett with a mixture of skepticism and sympathy—two emotions that in Emmett's view had no business being on the same face at

the same time. Emmett took his wallet from his pocket, withdrew the registration, and put it on the table.

The banker picked it up and reviewed it.

—I see that the car is in your name, Emmett, but I'm afraid that if it was purchased by your father on your behalf . . .

—It was not.

The banker looked to Mr. Ransom for support. Finding none, he turned back to Emmett.

—For two summers, said Emmett, I worked for Mr. Schulte to earn the money to buy that car. I framed houses. Shingled roofs. Repaired porches. As a matter of fact, I even helped install those new cabinets in your kitchen. If you don't believe me, you're welcome to go ask Mr. Schulte. But either way, you're not touching that car.

Mr. Obermeyer frowned. But when Emmett held out his hand for the registration, the banker returned it without protest. And when he left with his folder, he wasn't particularly surprised that neither Emmett nor Mr. Ransom bothered seeing him to the door.

. . .

When the banker was gone, Mr. Ransom went outside to wait for Sally and Billy, leaving Emmett to walk the house on his own.

Like the kitchen, Emmett found the front room tidier than usual—with the pillows propped in the corners of the couch, the magazines in a neat little stack on the coffee table, and the top of his father's desk rolled down. Upstairs in Billy's room, the bed was made, the collections of bottle caps and bird feathers were neatly arranged on their shelves, and one of the windows had been opened to let in some air. A window must have been opened on the other side of the hall too because there was enough of a draft to stir the fighter planes hanging over Billy's bed: replicas of a Spitfire, a Warhawk, and a Thunderbolt.

Emmett smiled softly to see them.

He had built those planes when he was about Billy's age. His mother had given him the kits back in 1943 when all Emmett or his friends could talk about were the battles unfolding in the European and Pacific theaters, about Patton at

the head of the Seventh Army storming the beaches of Sicily, and Pappy Boyington's Black Sheep Squadron taunting the enemy over the Solomon Sea. Emmett had assembled the models on the kitchen table with all the precision of an engineer. He had painted the insignias and serial numbers on the fuselages with four tiny bottles of enamel paint and a fine-haired brush. When they were done, Emmett had lined them up on his bureau in a diagonal row just like they would have been on the deck of a carrier.

From the age of four, Billy had admired them. Sometimes when Emmett would come home from school, he would find Billy standing on a chair beside the bureau talking to himself in the language of a fighter pilot. So when Billy turned six, Emmett and his father hung the planes from the ceiling over Billy's bed as a birthday surprise.

Emmett continued down the hall to his father's room, where he found the same evidence of tidiness: the bed made, the photographs on the bureau dusted, the curtains tied back with a bow. Emmett approached one of the windows and looked out across his father's land. After being plowed and planted for twenty years, the fields had been left untended for just one season and you could already see the tireless advance of nature—the sagebrush and ragwort and ironweed establishing themselves among the prairie grasses. If left untended for another few years, you wouldn't be able to tell that anyone had ever farmed these acres at all.

Emmett shook his head.

*Bad luck . . .*

That's what Mr. Obermeyer had called it. A bad luck that was too great to surmount. And the banker was right, up to a point. When it came to bad luck, Emmett's father always had plenty to spare. But Emmett knew that wasn't the extent of the matter. For when it came to bad judgment, Charlie Watson had plenty of that to spare too.

Emmett's father had come to Nebraska from Boston in 1933 with his new wife and a dream of working the land. Over the next two decades, he had tried to grow wheat, corn, soy, even alfalfa, and had been thwarted at every turn. If the crop he chose to grow one year needed plenty of water, there were two years of drought. When he switched to a crop that needed plenty of sun, thunderclouds gathered in the west. Nature is merciless, you might counter. It's indifferent and

unpredictable. But a farmer who changes the crop he's growing every two or three years? Even as a boy, Emmett knew that was a sign of a man who didn't know what he was doing.

Out behind the barn was a special piece of equipment imported from Germany for the harvesting of sorghum. At one point deemed essential, it was soon unnecessary, and now no longer of use—because his father hadn't had the good sense to resell it once he'd stopped growing sorghum. He just let it sit in the clearing behind the barn exposed to the rain and snow. When Emmett was Billy's age and his friends would come over from the neighboring farms to play—boys who, at the height of the war, were eager to climb on any piece of machinery and pretend it was a tank—they wouldn't even set foot on the harvester, sensing instinctively that it was some kind of ill omen, that within its rusting hulk was a legacy of failure that one should steer clear of whether from politeness or self-preservation.

So one evening when Emmett was fifteen and the school year nearly over, he had ridden his bike into town, knocked on Mr. Schulte's door, and asked for a job. Mr. Schulte was so bemused by Emmett's request that he sat him down at the dinner table and had him brought a slice of pie. Then he asked Emmett why on earth a boy who was raised on a farm would want to spend his summer pounding nails.

It wasn't because Emmett knew Mr. Schulte to be a friendly man, or because he lived in one of the nicest houses in town. Emmett went to Mr. Schulte because he figured that no matter what happened, a carpenter would always have work. No matter how well you build them, houses run down. Hinges loosen, floorboards wear, roof seams separate. All you had to do was stroll through the Watson house to witness the myriad ways in which time can take its toll on a homestead.

In the months of summer, there were nights marked by the roll of thunder or the whistle of an arid wind on which Emmett could hear his father stirring in the next room, unable to sleep—and not without reason. Because a farmer with a mortgage was like a man walking on the railing of a bridge with his arms outstretched and his eyes closed. It was a way of life in which the difference between abundance and ruin could be measured by a few inches of rain or a few nights of frost.