

# Media Kit

## Earth's Imagined Corners

### by Tamara Linse

“Linse writes as if flexing her own ranch-toned muscles, creating intense, original characters and letting them loose. The result could fill a novel—or two. All bodes well for Linse’s future work.” —Kirkus

This media kit includes the following:

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Attached with this package are high-resolution photos of the book cover and author and a pdf version of the book.

## Press Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### **Big Questions Drive New Novel**

Tamara Linse's great grandfather Frank Wood was a horse thief.

"He had a rough life," Linse says. "It was just him and his mom moving across the country in the 1860s and 70s." Family stories say that he worked for an uncle for a year, but the uncle refused to pay him, and so he stole two horses. In the official deposition for the incident, Deputy Sheriff John Carstensen testified that Frank "claimed it was poverty that drove him to it."

For that, Frank served two and a half years in Iowa's Anamosa Additional Penitentiary and was released early for good behavior. He and Ellen Noble married shortly after, changed their last name to Strong, moved to Kansas City, and opened a grocery.

The life of Frank and Ellen forms the basis for Linse's new historical novel *Earth's Imagined Corners*.

Set in 1885 Iowa and Kansas City, the novel follows Sara Moore, a dutiful daughter whose father tries to force her to marry his younger partner. Sara must choose between the partner—a man who treats her like property—and James Youngblood—a kind man she hardly knows who has a troubled past. When she confronts her father, he beats her and turns her out of the house, breaking all ties, so she decides to elope with James to Kansas City with hardly a penny to their names.

"*Earth's Imagined Corners* is very much about making your way in the world when you have very little money," Linse says. "It's also about love. How do you cross those big divides to decide to get married, especially when your family is against it? And once you are married, how do you stay together despite losing your job, getting sick, and all the other things life throws at you."

Linse's family eventually settled in northern Wyoming and established a ranch, where they did things the old-fashioned way. Linse jokes that she was raised in the 1880s, and so it was natural for her to set a book there.

The novel is in the tradition of Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Linse is also the author of the short story collection *How to Be a Man* and the novel *Deep Down Things*. She earned her master's in English from the University of Wyoming, where she taught writing. Her work appears in the *Georgetown Review*, *South Dakota Review*, and *Talking River*, among others, and she was a finalist for an *Arts & Letters* and *Glimmer Train* contests, as well as the Black Lawrence Press Hudson Prize for a book of short stories. She works as an editor for a foundation and a freelancer.

The novel is available in paperback and ebook through Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and other online retailers and can be ordered through a bookstore near you.

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If you'd like more information or to schedule an interview, media appearance, or book-signing, contact Tamara Linse at 307.761.6865 or via email at [tamara@tamaralinse.com](mailto:tamara@tamaralinse.com).

## Book Information

### Genre

historical novel

### Series

Book 1 of the Round Earth Series

### Keywords

novel, historical fiction, women's fiction, literary fiction, psychological fiction, family life, book club fiction, 19th Century, the American Midwest, coming of age, racial themes, marriage, prison, poverty, series

### Logline

*Earth's Imagined Corners* is a novel that comprehends the great kindnesses and violences we do to each other. Like Willa Cather and Zora Neale Hurston.

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### Synopsis

In 1885 Iowa, Sara Moore is a dutiful daughter, but when her father tries to force her to marry his younger partner, she must choose between the partner—a man who treats her like property—and James Youngblood—a kind man she hardly knows who has a troubled past. When she confronts her father, he beats her and turns her out of the house, breaking all ties, so she decides to elope with James to Kansas City with hardly a penny to their names. In the

tradition of Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Earth's Imagined Corners* is a novel that comprehends the great kindnesses and violences we do to each other.

The author Tamara Linse jokes that she was raised in the 1880s, and so it was natural for her to set a book there. She is the author of the short story collection *How to Be a Man* and the novel *Deep Down Things* and earned her master's in English from the University of Wyoming, where she taught writing. Her work appears in the *Georgetown Review*, *South Dakota Review*, and *Talking River*, among others, and she was a finalist for an *Arts & Letters* and *Glimmer Train* contests, as well as the Black Lawrence Press Hudson Prize for a book of short stories. She works as an editor for a foundation and a freelancer. Find her online at [tamaralinse.com](http://tamaralinse.com) and her blog *Writer, Cogitator, Recovering Ranch Girl* at [tamaralinse.blogspot.com](http://tamaralinse.blogspot.com).

*Earth's Imagined Corners* is based on the lives of the author's great grandparents, Frank and Ellen Strong, and it is Book 1 in the Round Earth Series.

## Author Bio

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### Highlights

- *Earth's Imagined Corners* is based on the lives of the author's great grandparents Frank and Ellen Strong.
- Linse was born in 1969 and grew up on the Tillett Ranch north of Lovell, Wyoming.
- Graduated from Lovell High School in 1987.
- Earned a bachelor's (with honors, 2000) and master's (2002) in English from the University of Wyoming. Thesis on 1852–54 Overland Trail diaries, which received an Outstanding Thesis Award. Taught freshman composition and science and technical writing.
- Waitressed in high school and bartended and waitressed to put herself college.
- Worked for 16 years as a technical editor for an environmental consulting firm (TRC Mariah Associates Inc.), as well as a freelance journalist, editor, and writer.
- Currently works as an editor for a foundation (the University of Wyoming Foundation) for 6 years.
- Married with 8-year-old twins (a boy and a girl). The twins are her and her husband's genetic children but they were carried by a gestational carrier. Prior to that, they had five miscarriages.

- A semifinalist for the Black Lawrence Press Hudson Prize, a finalist for the *Glimmer Train* Short-Story Award for New Writers and the *Arts & Letters* Fiction Prize, and an honorable mention for the Neltje Blanchen Award, among others.
- Published stories in the *South Dakota Review*, *New West*, *Talking River*, the *Georgetown Review*, and others.
- Author of the short story collection *How to Be a Man* and novel *Deep Down Things*.

### **Short Bio**

Tamara Linse jokes that she was raised in the 1880s, and so it was natural for her to set a book there. She is the author of the short story collection *How to Be a Man* and the novel *Deep Down Things* and earned her master's in English from the University of Wyoming, where she taught writing. Her work appears in the *Georgetown Review*, *South Dakota Review*, and *Talking River*, among others, and she was a finalist for an *Arts & Letters* and *Glimmer Train* contests, as well as the Black Lawrence Press Hudson Prize for a book of short stories. She works as an editor for a foundation and a freelancer. Find her online at [tamaralinse.com](http://tamaralinse.com) and on her blog *Writer, Cogitator, Recovering Ranch Girl* at [tamara-linse.blogspot.com](http://tamara-linse.blogspot.com).

### **Long Bio**

Tamara Linse grew up on a ranch in northern Wyoming with her farmer/rancher rock-hound ex-GI father, her artistic musician mother from small-town middle America, and her four sisters and two brothers. She jokes that she was raised in the 1880s because they did things old-style—she learned how to bake bread, break horses, irrigate, change tires, and be alone, skills she's been thankful for ever since. The ranch was a partnership between her father and her uncle, and in the 80s and 90s the two families had a Hatfields and McCoys-style feud.

She worked her way through the University of Wyoming as a bartender, waitress, and editor. At UW, she was officially in almost every college on campus until she settled on English and after 15 years earned her bachelor's and master's in English. While there, she taught writing, including a course called *Literature and the Land*, where students read Wordsworth and Donner Party diaries during the week and hiked in the mountains on weekends. She also worked as a technical editor for an environmental consulting firm.

She still lives in Laramie, Wyoming, with her husband Steve and their twin son and daughter. She writes fiction around her job as an editor for a foundation. She is also a photographer, and when she can she posts a photo a day for a Project 365. Please stop by Tamara's website, [www.tamaralinse.com](http://www.tamaralinse.com), and her blog, *Writer, Cogitator, Recovering Ranch Girl*, at [tamara-linse.blogspot.com](http://tamara-linse.blogspot.com). You can find an extended bio there with lots of juicy details. Also friend her on Facebook and follow her on Twitter, and if you see her in person, please say hi.

## **Other Details**

An even more-detailed bio is also available at [http://www.tamaralinse.com/bio\\_bio.html](http://www.tamaralinse.com/bio_bio.html).

## Q&A

### **How do you pronounce your name?**

*tuh-MARE-uh LIN-zee*. Don't worry—hardly anyone gets it right the first time.

### ***What does the name of your blog, “writer, cogitator, recovering ranch girl,” mean?***

The real reason I tagged myself “writer, cogitator, recovering ranch girl” was that I needed a tagline for my blog, something that helped me to stand out. “Writer” was obvious. I love old-timey words, and I had been finishing up *Earth's Imagined Corners* at the time, and so “cogitator” popped into my mind. I have friends who are “recovering alcoholics” (and “recovering Catholics”) and I thought that that fit me well—the idea that my childhood was something I needed to recover from. As Maile Meloy wrote in her story “Ranch Girl,” you can't have much worse luck than being born a girl on a ranch.

### ***Earth's Imagined Corners is based on the life of your great grandparents. Who were they?***

They were just regular folks. Frank and Ellen weren't caught up in big events like the Civil War or the Stock Market Crash or anything. But that's what makes them so fascinating. The Ellen I heard about growing up ~ I never got to know her because she died years before I was born ~ was nicknamed Ma Strong. She was known for taking in strays and children. She was strong, as her name suggests ~ the story goes that she gave birth in the morning and then went back to cooking for the men in the afternoon. And she would have had to be, with Frank as her husband. The story goes that they met at the town pump in Anamosa, and she actually knew that he was in prison. Of course she did ~ he would have been wearing the black and white stripes. But then when he got out they married. Over the course of their marriage, he chased her with an ax while drunk, she fended off an angry mob of his employees when he couldn't pay them, and she stuck with him. But he had had a rough life. His mother, an elusive woman I would love to know more about, was rumored to have had five husbands as she moved across the country. She started in a large family in upstate New York, moved through Illinois where Frank was born and Iowa where he was incarcerated, and died in Red Willow County, Nebraska. Her name was Elizabeth Zenana Robinson Matteson Wood Howard Staats. She was rumored to have danced at Tom Thumb's wedding. And so it had to have been tough for him growing up. I have a lot of empathy for them both ~ obviously, having so fully imagined their lives.

### ***How do you know so much about your ancestors?***

I've been a genealogy nut for a long time, and Ancestry.com has made our lives so wonderfully easy. But it all started with my mom. She also was fascinated with family stories and collected the family histories of both her side and my dad's side. She had this huge piece of butcher paper on which she had outlined generations and generations of ancestors. And

she loved to tell family stories and embellish them. We were related to everyone from Alexander Graham Bell to Robert the Bruce to King Tut. I haven't verified all that ~ hehe ~ but a lot of those stories turned out to be true. And then I had a cousin one generation up named Gene Hetland who did an amazing amount of research back when you had to write a letter or visit the place. And then I got into it, and I inherited my mom's and Gene's research and added significantly to it. The real stories are so much more than you can ever imagine. And it's like a huge treasure hunt that never gets fully resolved.

***Could you talk about the process of converting a family story to fiction?***

*Earth's Imagined Corners* was inspired by Frank and Ellen, but it has since gone very far afield. Think about it. Think about what you know about your own ancestors. Very little. A fact here and there. A place they lived. A family story that may or may not be true. Those facts are like the nails along the eaves where you hang the Christmas light. The story ~ now that's the Christmas lights. You need to imagine and embellish and change things up whole cloth. What began as an inspiration has to fit within the logic of the story and the motivations of the characters and have to seem plausible. Life itself doesn't always seem plausible, so sometimes you have to "storify" it quite a bit. And there's a lot of mixed bits in the making of the sausage. I did a whole bunch of historical research ~ not only because I needed to learn about the time period. I also over-researched because I lacked confidence in my writing, and it was much easier to research than actually face the terrifying blank page. So I take other historical facts out of newspapers and other things and mash them in there too. Above all else, creating fiction from "fact" involves taking the story into you and living it within yourself, and so I've inhabited these characters in a way that many descendants never get to. Granted, they bear little relation to the originals, more than likely.

***Did you do much research to write Earth's Imagined Corners?***

See above. Yes, I did a heck of a lot of research. I had not been to either Anamosa nor Kansas City when I wrote the first draft, and so I went on the wonderful Library of Congress American Memory Site. I found so many amazing things there. Plus online research in newspapers and websites and family history sites. There's nothing like reading newspapers of the time. They give you reality in a way nothing else can, and they were the origin of a lot of the subplots. The past is another country, as they say, and so I wanted to get the details right.

***Earth's Imagined Corners is part of a series. Tell us about the series. Where do Sara and James go from here?***

Oh, they have all kinds of adventures, and these plots are loosely based on Frank's and Ellen's lives. In the next book, *Numberless Infinities*, Sara and James head out across Kansas and Nebraska. James heads up a crew who are working on railroads. Thomas, James's friend who's Native American, comes with them. James is so busy, Sara feels ignored and taken for granted, and Thomas is such a nice guy, well, things may or may not happen. And then Sara

is pregnant. She gives birth to a boy, Jake, and they take on two Japanese sisters to help, Sharp Crane and Plum. Meanwhile, James's men start giving him trouble, and the railroad quits paying, and so James is caught in the middle. All around them the Native community is getting swept up in the Ghost Dance religion, in which they think a man named Wovoca is the second coming of Jesus. The book ends near Wounded Knee Creek, where the 7th Cavalry come in with guns blazing. The final book in the series, *This Lowly Ground*, takes place in northern Wyoming. Sara and James settle down and build a town after their son Jake has his arm taken off in a gun accident. James comes together with the other men of the area and they build an irrigation system. But then a group of Mormons come straggling in in a storm and decide to settle. Tensions rise as the town goes in together on a brick and tile factory. Sara's little sister Maisie comes to live with them, and falls in love with the leader of the Mormons, Mahonri, but then his rascally brother Levi comes to town and she chooses Levi over Mahonri. Jake idolizes Levi, who leads Jake astray. And then, when the brick and tile factory burns, people are looking for someone to blame. I'm in the beginning stages of writing these, and I can't wait to spend more time with these great characters.

***Race plays a part in Earth's Imagined Corners. Were you nervous about this subject, which is fraught with danger for a writer?***

In a word, yes. Growing up on a ranch, I knew a lot about ranch life and horses and cowboys. When I was a teenager, I read *The Horse Whisperer*. It's a good book in many ways, but I couldn't get past the idea that a cowboy would be a vegetarian. A cowboy makes his livelihood from cows ~ cows that people eat, that they make their clothing from. What cowboy in his right mind would be a vegetarian? I know now that it was the author projecting his own values on this icon of manliness. He took it and made it his own. But as a Westerner, it made no sense to me. Writing someone from a background very different from you is challenging, but I also think it's a challenge worth accepting. Writing and reading is the ultimate act of empathy. It's the only technology in which you enter another person's consciousness. In that way, it's about connection and love. And you should connect with everyone, not just people who are just like you. Now, the writer has a responsibility not to stereotype, to try to make everyone as fully fledged as they can. I do this not by thinking of someone as African American or as Native American or as European American. I do this by thinking of them first as a full person with all the wide ranging emotions and experiences as anyone can have, and then I overlay their life experiences and their heritage. But I overlay someone whose great grandparents are from Czechoslovakia in the same way I would if someone's great grandparents are from Africa ~ it's one of many factors that contribute to who they are, and it's our common experience and humanity that actually is the overriding factor. I think long and hard about the implications of all my character choices.

***Earth's Imagined Corners is self-published. Why did you choose that route?***

I have to admit that I crave the legitimization that comes from traditional publishing, and that's why I resisted self-publishing for so long. It took me 11 years and almost 200 queries to get an agent. (Read more about [my journey to get an agent here](#).) I've written and rewritten

two novels that have gone out to publishers ~ one of which is *Earth's Imagined Corners*. Though I've gotten some very nice notes from editors, neither was picked up. Some might call me a slow study ~ I call myself pig-headed, and that's a good thing. I don't know if you've been reading much about this, but the squeeze that is being put on traditional publishing by disintermediation has brought about the rise of a new type of author: the hybrid author. (The great Chuck Wendig [has been talking a lot about this](#).) There's no longer just two tracks ~ traditional publishing and self-publishing. The tracks are becoming melded and diversified, and much more of the power is back in the hands of the author. Also much more of the responsibility for getting a book out and connecting with readers. That's where the hybrid author comes in. She or he is someone who, with the help of her agent, chooses the best route for the work at hand and then has to make it so. This is wonderful and terrifying ~ for everyone involved. Also, traditional publishers now consider the success of a self-published title in their decision to take book on. In other words, they will take on a book that's doing well under self-publishing (and I suspect that this will become the norm, rather than the exception). I'm also made for it. It's like all my various backgrounds come together in this one endeavor. Of course the writing part ~ I've been writing and improving my craft my whole life. But then also editing ~ I've been an editor in all different capacities. I've also been an artist and taken art classes for years, not to mention jobs as a document designer. I took classes in electrical engineering and computers for a number of years, and all that experience goes into making a website and working with digital publishing. And I'm in marketing and have done freelance marketing for years, which prepares me to be a promo-sapiens. And I love social media and tend to be a bit of an early adopter. Not to mention I'm a bit obsessive.

### ***Who did you read as a child?***

I loved all things British—Pooh and *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Secret Garden*. I also loved Joan Aiken and Frank L. Baum. I was glad to go from grade school to middle school because I'd exhausted the library. In middle school, I discovered the Newberry Award books. Later, I read a lot of westerns and loved them, particularly Louis L'Amour. He doesn't stand the test of time well, though. I went through a scifi/specfic phase as a teenager and still have a fondness for it. I haven't read much romance or mystery, and I'm not quite sure why. Literary fiction is and always has been my greatest love.

### ***Who are your favorite writers?***

My favorite writers. Well, it often feels like the writer of the last book I read because I fall in love almost every time. I fall in love with minds. But I'll take a run at it.

- My all-time favorites are Ernest Hemingway and Virginia Woolf.
- For novels, Douglas Adams, Julian Barnes, Michael Cunningham, E. L. Doctorow, William Faulkner, Charles Frasier, James Galvin, Kent Haruf, John Irving, Stephen King, Barbara Kingsolver, Cormac McCarthy, Ann Patchett, Jodi Picoult, Terry Pratchett, Anne Rice, J. K. Rowling, Anita Shreve, and Alexander McCall Smith.

- For short stories, Sherman Alexie, T. C. Boyle, Raymond Carver, Charles D'Ambrosio, Anthony Doerr, Aryn Kyle, Dennis Lehane, Maile Meloy, Alice Munro, Antonia Nelson, Tim O'Brien, Benjamin Percy, Donald Ray Pollock, Annie Proulx, Karen Russell, Jim Shepard, and Tobias Wolff.
- For nonfiction, Steve Almond, Judy Blunt, Augusten Burroughs, John D'Agata, James Herriot, and Mary Roach.
- There are lots of writers that I really want to like and I have their books but I haven't gotten around to reading them.

See what I mean? And this isn't all of them by a long stretch.

***What's the earliest memory you have of writing a story? When did you first call yourself a writer?***

I've always written. The first story I wrote a beginning, middle, and end to was called "The Silver Locket" and was the story of a girl who goes back in time to become her own great grandmother. It was inspired by a friend named Cami who was into a British YA mystery writer named Joan Aiken. Together we read everything of hers. Cami wrote a story that ended with a head rolling in a gutter. Prior to that, I had read all the time, but I hadn't realized that a person could actually BE a writer. When I actually called myself a writer is a different story. I think I was 30. I wrote all of my life, but no one I knew was a writer, and I thought of writers as someone who published a novel, and so when I began to imagine I might just be published is when I tentatively played around with the idea of calling myself one.

***Why do you write?***

That's a complicated question. Because it's my passion. Because as a child I felt I had no voice. Because I love to read, and writing is like reading only better. Because I have to stay sane—just ask my husband. Because I'm fascinated by people, and writing and reading is the closest you can get to another person's consciousness. But a deeper reason is that writing is all about desire. All people everywhere live in a constant state of desire. It is truly a human condition. Whether it's something as small as a snack or something materialistic or something as large as a mate for life, people want. People need. One reason that we are such good consumers and why advertising works so well is because we by our very nature have this endless hole within us that needs to be filled. Every religion is built on this. So, this is my deeper answer to why I write: Because I'm human. Because I desire. It's a way to take the world into myself and to make it part of me. It's a way to place myself into the world. It's a way to connect with the world and with other people and to imagine for one small moment that we are not alone and that we have the capacity to be full and content and meaningful.

***Where do you get your ideas?***

That's the wrong question. It should be: How do you recognize an idea when you see one? Ideas are all around you. Everything and anything can spark a story. Say, someone told you to write about *walls*. Thomas King, who's Native American, was given 24 hours' notice to write about walls, and he came up with a humdinger. (Sorry—I don't remember the name of it!) It's about a man wanting his walls painted white but the history of walls bleeds through, and then finally, when he has them torn out and new walls put in, the stark white walls makes him look brown. Virginia Woolf wrote a story about a blob on her bedroom wall, which turns out to be a snail or a slug, I think, but it's a great story. I'm sure there are more stories about walls. It's about what you put into the idea, what lights you up and interests you, and it can be as specific as something that happened to you as a child or as general as wanting to write about the color green. I also find that when my head is in my writing—in other words, I'm not blocked and avoiding—ideas come so fast and thick I can't keep up. Everything sparks an idea for a story. Then it's a problem of way too many ideas and feeling guilty about lost opportunity.

***What is your writing process? What is your least favorite part? Your most favorite part?***

I avoid. I feel awful. I inevitably read things and feel inspired, but still I avoid. Then I make myself sit at the computer and start. It's hard, really really hard. But then something magical happens. The real world goes away and the world I'm creating becomes more real than the real world. It's like the real world is in black and white, and the world I'm creating is in technicolor. Sure, sometimes it still comes slowly and painfully, but sometimes it comes like lightning from my brain. And then I'm in love. When I finish a story, revised and all, I'm in love with it. I can't see its flaws. I want to take it to dinner and then make out with it in the back seat. Then, like all affairs, after a while I start to see the story's strengths and weaknesses. Then I either revise some more or I write a new story or both. My least favorite part is the avoiding stage, and my most favorite part is when the writing is going well and the world I'm writing is more real than the real world.

***What are you reading?***

Boy, you ask difficult questions. The thing is, I could honestly say that I'm reading hundreds of books at one time. That's because I tend to "taste" books before I read them from beginning to end. I'll buy a new book and then read it for a half hour or hour before bed. Then I'll put the book aside and not pick it up again for years. Lately, I've been reading the books of my fellow Wyoming writers who are also great friends ~ Pembroke Sinclair, Nina McConigley, and Mary Beth Baptiste. I've also been reading a great biography called *The Brontes* by Juliet Barker. It's been very inspirational for me.

***Do you have an MFA?***

No—my master's is in literary studies and my thesis was on 1852–54 pioneer diaries. I've

taken a lot of workshops, however, in the classroom and online and at writers conferences. I highly recommend them. Be it an MFA or a local writers group, any time you can get others to look at your work and give you solid feedback is helpful. Solid feedback does not mean only “oh, you are so wonderful”—but you do need some of this for your ego or you won’t have the strength to go on. Neither does it mean brutal comments like “This isn’t working” with no further explanation or direction. It means detailed criticism of one reader’s reaction to what’s working and what’s not working—the more detailed and specific and articulate, the better. Still more important, volunteer to read your writer friends’ work. You’ll learn more from commenting on theirs than you will reading comments on your own. I am thinking about getting a low residency MFA, however, as I’m always trying to improve my writing.

***Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?***

Read a lot. Write a lot. Give yourself permission, which is another way of saying don’t undermine your own success. Write in the style of what you like to read. The best writing often comes from what obsesses you and makes you uncomfortable. Be brave. Persevere. Make a lot of writer friends.

***What’s next for you?***

To keep writing, always writing! I’m working on a young adult series called the Wyoming Chronicles, which are re-imaginings of classics set in contemporary Wyoming. The first, called *Pride*, is Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* set in present-day Jackson Hole, and I’m having a lot of fun with that. That’s on the girls’ side. On the boys’ side, my first part of that series will be *Moreau*, based on *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, which will be about genetic manipulation. And of course I have the two Round Earth Series books to finish too! I even have a children’s book or two in the works. I’ll be busy.

## Letter to the Reader

What should I say about *Earth's Imagined Corners*? There's so much to tell.

This is the first book I wrote, and the first novel. I had been writing my whole life, but it wasn't until 1999 that I claimed "writer" and began writing lots of fiction. I almost immediately tried to write a novel—this novel.

Very quickly, I realized fiction is one long resistance against writing the first thing that comes to mind, against cliché, and that I knew nothing about writing fiction, not really. And so I continued to work on the novel but then I also wrote loads of short stories. Short stories are so demanding, little diamonds that demand perfection, and that taught me so much about writing. These stories became the collection *How to Be a Man*.

I wrote on and off for years and finally achieved a first draft. Then I got feedback from some very patient writing friends, though the manuscript had a long way to go. They were insightful but very kind, as true writing friends are. Then I tried to get an agent, with minimal interest. When I say minimal, I really do mean minimal. And so I put it away and wrote another novel, which is *Deep Down Things*. After 11 years, I got my lovely agent, and then we queried publishers with both the novels. In the process, I majorly rewrote them both—again, from scratch, just keeping the plot. *Earth's Imagined Corners* almost turned into two novels, but I really felt the parts needed to remain together. Then, after feedback from my agent, *Earth's Imagined Corners* was shaped into final form.

The story is based on the lives of my great grandparents, Frank and Ellen Strong. Ellen Noble grew up in Iowa, while Frank grew up in Illinois under the name "Frank Wood" and moved across the country with his mother, Elizabeth Zenana Robinson Maettison Wood Strong Howard Staats. She was born in Virginia, and family legend says she danced at Tom Thumb's wedding, married five times, and died in Red Willow County, Nebraska. She's an elusive figure, and I had a heck of a time tracking her down through geneology. I still know very little about her.

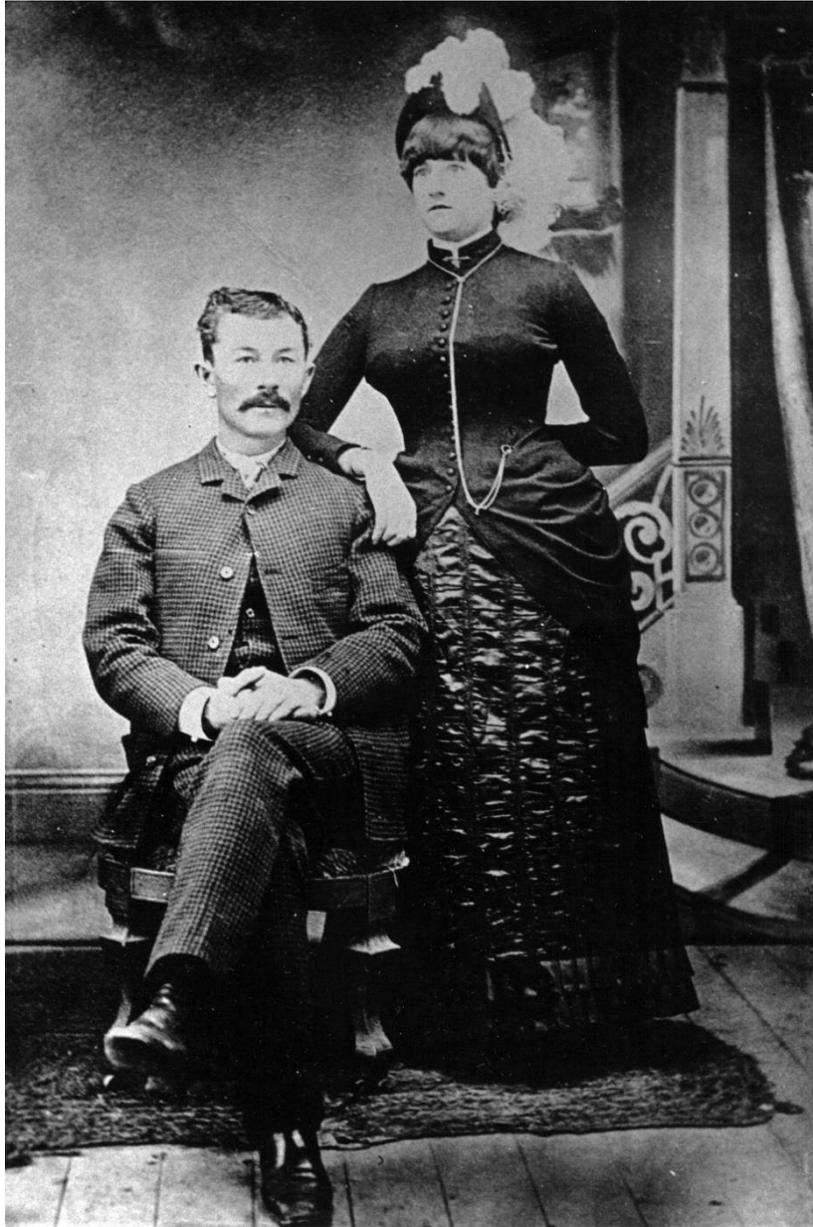
Legend also says that Frank worked for an uncle for a year and was not paid, and so that's why he stole two horses and was sentenced to the Additional Penitentiary in Anamosa. Family legend turned out to be true. This is from the records of the penitentiary.

A. Henry Zierjacks being sworn testified as follows, am 33 years of age, reside Franklin Twshp. Bremer Co., a farmer, have known Frank Wood 4 or 5 years. I worked for Harper R. Smith know that he Smith lost a horse about Jan. 12th, 1882 saw tracks going north from the stable, followed the tracks towards Henry Adams and found that Frank Wood had eaten supper at Adams that night and had left about 9 o'clock, the day after F. W. was arrested he told me in the Bremer Co. Jail at Waverly that he took the horses asked me to do what I could for him to get him off easy, he said he watched me the night he took the horse until I went to bed. I talked with him today he told me he took the horse.

John Carstensen sworn testified as follows, age 23 years, Residence Waverly, am Deputy Sheriff of Bremer Co., Ia. Know Frank Wood, first saw him about Jan. 14th, 1882 in custody of Sheriff of Floyd Co. in Chas. City I served a warrant on him and took him into my custody, he said it was all right commenced crying and said he had stolen the horses

and had sold them to Waller Bros. Charles City. On my way to Chas. City saw Louis Harper who told me he saw a man with two gray horses he was riding one and leading the other which had a harness on. The description he gave me both of the man and the horses agreed with the description of the horses and Frank Wood when I found them at Chas. City. Met several other men on my way to Chas City who gave me descriptions of a man with two gray horses in his possession going in the direction of Chas. City each description agreed exactly with the horses and Frank Wood when I arrested him. When I brought the horses back Mr. Stotts claimed one and A. Henry Zierjacks claimed the other for Harper R. Smith. I never heard F. W. deny the stealing of the horses but have heard him on several occasions admit to the stealing and claimed it was poverty that drove him to.

Frank and Ellen met at the town pump while Frank was still incarcerated—not, as I have them, after he gets out. Ellen, of course, knew that he was in prison. They married, changed their name to Strong, and then moved to Kansas City, as Sara and James do. Here is Frank and Ellen's wedding portrait, upon which I base the scene in the photography studio.



Frank and Ellen Strong

The Strongs had a grocery store, and we still have the advertisement that ran in a KC newspaper on July 16, 1889.

**Cast Your Eye on This!**

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**WE DON'T WANT THE WORLD!**  
BUT WE WANT ALL THE TRADE

**Our Price List Calls for:**

12 lbs Granul'd Sugar, \$1.00.	2 lb. Can Pumpkins .10
13 " Light Brown " 1.00.	Strawberries, 2 Cans. 25.
2 Pkgs Arbuckle's Coffee, 45.	Tea, per lb., from .90 to .25.
2 " Dillwith's " 45.	Fine Imperial Syrup
3 lbs. Extra Moca " 1.00.	p'r Gal. .50.
5 " " Rio " 1.00.	Cider Vinegar, " " .20.
4 " " Gov. Java, 1.00	5 to 8 Bars Soap for .25.
2 Cans Tomatoes, .25	Best Tobacco. per pound. .45.

27 Varieties of Candies.

Cig rettes. Cigars. Tobaccos. Lemons. Oranges, Pears.  
Pineapples, Peaches, Bread and Cake.

BUTTER EGGS AND COUNTRY PRODUCE A SPECIALTY.

**MEAT MARKET!**

Is supplied with the BEST FRESH and  
SALT MEATS.

**COAL, WOOD, HAY, FEED &c.**

At WHOLESALE and RETAIL.

Goods delivered anywhere in or outside of the Consolidated Cities.

**FRANK STRONG,**  
**S. 5TH ST., ARMSTRONG, KAS.**

Reproduction of advertisement for the Frank Strong  
Grocery in a July 16, 1889 newspaper

Their daughters, including my Grandma Bessie, were born in Missouri and Kansas. They eventually move west across Nebraska supplying ties for the railroad, and they are in the vicinity of the Wounded Knee Massacre. At one point, Frank chased Ellen with an ax, and at another point Ellen went out to confront an angry mob of Frank's employees while Frank hid under the bed. Ellen cooked for the crews, and the story goes that she cooked breakfast one day, gave birth to my Grandmother Bessie, and then went back and cooked the evening meal. At least that's the story. This part of their lives is the subject of the second book in the series, *Numberless Infinities*.

Finally, they settled in northern Wyoming and started a hotel and livery in what was initially called Strong but is now Lovell. The Mormon community moved in and looked askance at what went on there. I don't know if it was a brothel, but I don't think so. The liquor was probably enough to be looked down on. The Strongs went in partners with other townfolk to start a brick and tile factory, which eventually burned down, and there was much finger pointing. At one point, the whole town was moved two blocks south in one night.

These events are the basis for the third part in the trilogy called *This Lowly Ground*. After the brick and tile kerfluffle, my family moved 25 miles north to the base of the Pryor Mountains. This is the ranch on which I and my six siblings grew up. Frank passed away in 1914, and Ellen, who was known to everyone as Ma Strong, lived until 1950.

I came across this entry in the book *Progressive Men of the State of Wyoming* (A.W. Bowen & Co., Chicago, Ill., 1903).

Strongly endowed by nature with clearness of vision, quickness of apprehension and alertness in action, so that the opportunity presented for advancement have neither escaped his knowledge or been neglected in use, Frank S. Strong has made steady progress in the race for supremacy among men and the acquisition of this world's good from time to time, when, at the age of twenty, he lifted the gage of battle in life's contest for himself, until now when, at but little over twice that age, he is comfortably provided with a competence, being well-established in his chosen line of business and secure in the respect and esteem of his fellow men. Mr. Strong's interesting and adventurous life began in the state of Illinois on February 8, 1861. His parents, John and Elizabeth (Robinson) Strong, were natives of New York and early settlers of Illinois. When he was ten years old they moved to Iowa, and there he completed his minority, lacking one year, and received a common school education. In 1881 he started out in life for himself, coming to Nebraska and locating in Red Willow county, where for a number of years he was actively engaged in farming. From there he went to Fort Scott, Kan., and was engaged in railroad work for a number of years, and then in Kansas City he opened a merchandising establishment. In 1889 he left the comforts and allurements of city life and went to the wild country of the Black Hills, casting in his lot with its rush of fortune seekers; but, instead of following the almost universal occupation of mining, he engaged in railroad work and found it profitable until 1892, when he came to Wyoming for the purpose of joining the great army of enterprising and hardy men who were engaged in the stock industry. For three years he prospected for a suitable location for his enterprise, working at various useful occupations, and in 1895 took up land on the border of which the town of Lovell has since grown up. He owns 720 acres adjoining the townsite, and in the town itself he owns and conducts a hotel, livery barn and saloon. He also owns 320 acres of land in Montana and has on it 150 fine cattle and fifty well-bred horses in addition to the stock he owns in this state. He was united in marriage with Miss Ellen J. Noble, a native of Wisconsin, but reared in Iowa, at the time of marriage a resident of Denver, Colo., where the ceremony was performed on October 19, 1885. They have two children, their winsome daughters, Lulie E. and Bessie F. Mr. Strong is not only a prosperous and enterprising man who pushes his own business with vigor and success, but he is a broad-minded, far-seeing and public spirited citizen, whose interest in the welfare of his country and state, and in the town in which he lives, is manifested by continual activity in behalf of all means of advancement and improvement for them and the benefit of his people. He is well-esteemed as a leading and useful citizen, whose services are of high value and whose example is an inspiration to others in the line of every good work.

I wish I could have met Ma Strong. She was a strong and amazing and kind woman, and she was always adopting strays and helping people. We named my daughter Elizabeth after

her—Elizabeth's middle name is "Strong."

The lives of my great grandparents aren't the only things that I fictionalized. I did a tremendous amount of research for this book. After all, it's much easier to research than to write the damn thing.

The American Memory Site of the National Archives is an amazing resource for researchers, and much of their material is online, and so I didn't have to travel to Washington D.C. to access it. Fortunately, there are birds-eye views of downtown Kansas City from 1879 and 1895, perfectly framing my time period. I could have gone so far as to tell you which streets Sara and James walked down.

And I also have the tremendous good fortune—for me, not for the residents of KC West Bottoms—of having a vast photographic evidence to draw from. That's because the Bottoms flood regularly, and people take lots of photos during these natural disasters.

There are many other things based on fact.

Work began on the "Additional Penitentiary" in Anamosa, Iowa, in 1873. In 1884, the name was changed to the "State Penitentiary." In 1885, it held 281 inmates. Electric lights were actually at the prison when James would have been there—they were first used in December of 1882. Fictional purposes—sorry. The inmates wore the broad horizontal black and white stripes and built their own prison, first in wood and then in stone.

The cookbook *The Compleat Housewife* by Eliza Smith is fact. First published in 1727 in London, the cookbook was republished almost verbatim in 1742 by the Virginia printer William Parks. It was the first cookbook published in the Colonies. The description of the book and its title page is real.

"The Patch" was a 4.5-acre area in the West Bottoms north of James Street and west of Ohio Avenue. It lay west of the Armour Packing Factory. If anything, I built it up a bit. The *Kansas City Journal* reported in 1910: "On this little spot of land fifty-nine houses have been built, of every kind of building material from pieces of driftwood to scraps of asphalt paving. The little shacks are built up against each other, and many front doors in the settlement look out on some neighbor's cow lot." Citizens of the Patch were evicted in April of 1910 and the land was sold for \$200.

In 1900, *The 18th Annual Report of the U.S. Commissioner of Labor* reported the following prices in Chicago: a one pound loaf of bread \$0.05, a quart of milk \$0.06, a pound of flour \$0.02, and a one-pound rib roast \$0.13. Small, dark, two- to three-room apartments rented for \$4-10 a month, while better housing could cost \$100 per month. Men worked an average of 290 days a year and made \$553.52, while women worked an average of 295 days a year and made \$313.42. I extrapolated backwards to estimate wages and prices.

Inventions such as electricity were making their way across the continent. Electrical infrastructure began reaching Iowa, Missouri, and Kansas in 1882. Kansas City had mule-drawn cable cars in 1881, but by 1885, they were powered by electricity. If you remember, the Transcontinental Railroad was completed in just 1869.

In 1881, an African American man named Levi Harrington, 23, was lynched—hung and shot—from the Bluff Bridge for killing a policeman named Jones, a crime Harrington did not commit. It got little coverage in the papers because it happened the same day that Jesse James was shot in Saint Joseph. The lynching that Moses and Auntie refer to previously is that of Joseph Lawrence, a black man from Girard, Crawford County, Kansas, for the charge of rape.

It happened on July 6, 1885.

I moved the flood from 1881 to 1885. There was a great flood in 1844 that came through the West Bottoms with a deafening roar and filled it bluff to bluff. It was reported that, during the night of the flood, cries were heard but the flood was too overwhelming to attempt rescue. The next day, rescuers found Louis Tromley perched in a tree, his wife in a tree a hundred yards farther on, and his son sitting on the peak of the swaying house. Later that day, onlookers saw Tromley's house floating with the current, with Tromley's favorite dog perched on its top. Tromley yelled out the dog's name, and the dog let out a mournful wail. Tromley almost plunged into the water to save it. And then, in 1881, the spring was cold and wet, and sleighs were seen in the city as late as March 19. The 1881 flood peaked on April 29. There were more large floods in 1903 and 1951.

Little things. President Cleveland did have a mistress. Sara's paste opal jewel exists, and in 2003, it was for sale by The Three Graces, Houston, Texas, for \$1,380. The description of passengers getting cozy during a train wreck that is told by Moses is from Bill Nye's 1882 *Forty Lies and Other Liars*. I based the rats at the river on an account given by a man who grew up in Kansas City in the twentieth century—the 1960s, I think. The description of the packing factories owes a lot to Sinclair Lewis's *The Jungle*. On September 15, 1885, Jumbo the elephant was crushed by a train in Saint Thomas, Ontario, Canada. Thomas's Tsististas are the Cheyenne, and the words from the Cheyenne language is from the Dull Knife College web site, but their spelling is my own.

I thought a lot about the story's dialog. Who knows how people talked in 1885? The past is another country. Just like today, what was written was probably much different than what was said. But I also wanted it to sound to the reader like real people talking. To compromise, I wrote the dialog as I would any other, and then I tweaked it and took out the words that either weren't contemporary or don't "feel" historical and then put in words that do feel historical. For me, communication and clarity rank above "truth" (as if there is only one truth).

In a few places, I tip my hat to particular images or turns of phrase from writers I admire. I think of them as grace notes. When James first goes into the bowels of the packing factory, Joseph says hello to Jurgis—Jurgis is the main character in Sinclair Lewis's *The Jungle*. When the moon rises in KC "like a fired pine knot," it's a small homage to Jean Toomer and "Blood Burning Moon." There were many more, but they were taken out in revision. Imitation as the sincerest form of flattery.

When I wrote the first draft of *Earth's Imagined Corners*, I had not visited Kansas City. And so it was a surreal experience to drive through the West Bottoms for the first time after I had so fully imagined it. It was the same but not the same. Today, overpasses lace between buildings that Sara and James would have seen out the cable car window. A wastewater treatment plant and a Fedex warehouse lie next to narrow empty streets crowded with abandoned nineteenth century buildings, their lower windows shattered and their elaborately painted signs still visible behind graffiti. Driving through them, even in broad daylight, feels a little like one of those horror movies where no one's around and you're just waiting for something nasty to pop out from an alley.

To this day, I can't help thinking of all those people who lived and worked in those giant husks, people who felt itchy in wool and got sunburned and loved that early morning splash

of water on the face. People like Sara and James, like Frank and Ellen Strong. I look forward to continuing their journey in the next book.

## The Round Earth Series

### **Book 1 – *Earth's Imagined Corners***

In 1885 Iowa, Sara Moore is a dutiful daughter, but when her father tries to force her to marry his younger partner, she must choose between the partner—a man who treats her like property—and James Youngblood—a kind man she hardly knows who has a troubled past. When she confronts her father, he beats her and turns her out of the house, breaking all ties, so she decides to elope with James to Kansas City with hardly a penny to their names. In the tradition of Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Earth's Imagined Corners* is a novel that comprehends the great kindnesses and violences we do to each other.

### **Book 2 – *Numberless Infinities***

*Coming in January 2016*

In 1890 Kansas City, Sara and James Youngblood have built a life for themselves, but then James's yearning for the West gets the better of him. He accepts a contract to supply ties for the burgeoning railroad, and off they go across Nebraska and the Dakotas. Life on the road is hard, and Sara cooks for the crew, but then she discovers she's pregnant—she lost a baby before and almost died. The crooked railroad boss refuses to pay, and James's crew revolts, and so they are stranded on Indian lands with the rising tide of the Ghost Dance religion. *Numberless Infinities* may remind you of Jane Kirkpatrick's *All Together in One Place* and Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man*.

### **Book 3 – *This Lowly Ground***

*Coming in January 2017*

In 1894, Sara and James Youngblood are exhausted by life on the wagon road, and so when their son Jake has his hand taken off in a gun accident, they decide to homestead in northern Wyoming. James teams with a local rancher to build an irrigation system, and soon a town grows up—one that all agree should be called Youngblood. Years pass. A straggling band of Mormons pushing handcarts from Salt Lake City show up in the middle of a snow storm, and the town pulls together to help them settle. Soon, though, conflicts erupt in the running of the town, and when the town's livelihood, a brick and tile factory, mysteriously burns down, Sara and James's son Jake is blamed. *This Lowly Ground* is in the tradition of Willa Cather and Carson McCullers.

## Excerpt

### *Chapter I*

*Anamosa, Iowa, 1885*

Sara Moore should have nothing to fear this week. She had been meticulous in her entering into the ledger the amounts that Minnie the cook requested she spend on groceries. She had remembered, just, to include her brother Ed's purchase of materials to mend sister Maisie's doll house and to subtract the pickling salt that she had purchased for sister Esther but for which Esther's husband Gerald had reimbursed her. She stood at her father's shoulder as he went over the weekly household accounts, and even though her father owned Moore Grocer & Sundries from which she ordered the family's groceries, he still insisted she account for the full price in the ledger. "No daughter of mine," he often said, though sometimes he would finish the thought and sometimes his neatly trimmed eyebrows would merely bristle.

Despite the buttressing of her corset, Sara hunched forward, somewhat reducing her tall frame. She intertwined her fingers so that she would not fiddle with the gathers of soft navy wool in her overskirt, and she tried not to breathe too loudly, so as not to bother him, nor to breathe too deeply, in order to take in little of the cigar smoke curling up from his elephant-ivory ashtray on the hulking plantation desk.

As always, the heavy brocade curtains armored Colonel Moore's study against the Iowa day, so the coal oil lamps flickered in their brackets. Per instructions, Sipsy the maid lit them early every morning, snuffed them when he left for the grocery, lit them again in anticipation of his return at seven, and then snuffed them again after he retired. It was an expense, surely, but one that Sara knew better than to question. The walls of the study were lined with volumes of military history and maps of Virginia and Georgia covered in lines, symbols, and labels carefully inked in Colonel Moore's hand. In its glass case on the bureau rested Colonel Moore's 1851, an intricately engraved pistol awarded to him during the War of Northern Aggression. Sipsy dusted daily, under stern directive that not a speck should gather upon any surface in the room.

Sara's father let out a sound between an outlet of breath and a groan. This was not good. He was not pleased. Sara straightened her shoulders and took a breath and held it but let her shoulders slump forward once more.

"My dear," he said, his drawl at a minimum, "your figures, once again, are disproportionate top to bottom. And there is too much slant, as always, in their curvatures. I urge you to practice your penmanship." His tone was one of indulgence.

Inaudibly, Sara let out her breath. If he was criticizing her chirography, then he had found nothing amiss in the numbers. The accounts were sound for another week. Later, when he checked the numbers against the accounts at the grocery, there was less of a chance that she had missed something.

He closed the ledger, turned his chair, and with both hands held the ledger out to her. She received it palms up and said, "I will do better, Father."

“You would not want to disappoint to your mother.” His drawl was more pronounced.

So he had regretted his indulgence and was not satisfied to let her go unchecked. His wife, Sara’s mother, had been dead these five years, and since then Sara had grown to take her place, running the household, directing the servants, and caring for six year-old Maisie. Ed needed little looking after, as he was older than Sara, though unmarried, and Esther, the oldest, was married with two daughters and farm of her own.

Sara straightened her shoulders again and hugged the ledger to her chest. “Yes, Father,” she said and turned and left the room, trying to keep her pace tranquil and unhurried. She went to the kitchen, where Minnie had a cup of coffee doused with cream and sugar awaiting her. Minnie gave her an encouraging smile, and though Sara did not acknowledge what went unsaid between them—one must shun familiarity with the servants—she lifted her shoulders slightly and said, “Thank you, Minnie.” Minnie, with the round figure and dark eyes of a Bohemian, understood English well, though she still talked with a pronounced accent, and Sara had only heard her speak the round vowels and chipped consonants of her native tongue once, when a delivery man indigenous to her country of origin walked into the kitchen with mud on his boots. Sara tucked the ledger in its place on a high shelf and then allowed herself five minutes of sipping coffee amid the wonderful smells of Minnie’s pompion tart. Then she rose, rinsed her cup, and applied herself to her day.

The driver had Father’s horse and gig waiting, as always, at twenty minutes to nine. As Father stretched his fingers into his gloves, pulling them tight by the wrist leather, he told Sara, “When you come at noon, I have something unusual to show you.”

“Yes, Father,” she said.

It seemed odd that he would concern her with anything to do with business. He left her to the household. He had long tried to coerce Ed into the business, but Ed’s abilities trended more toward the physical. He was a skilled carpenter, though Father kept a close rein on where he took jobs and whom he worked for. All talk of renaming the business Moore & Son had been dropped when Father had recently promoted the young man who was his assistant, Chester O’Hanlin, to partner. Mr. O’Hanlin had droopy red muttonchops and a body so long and thin he looked a hand-span taller than he really was, which was actually a bit shorter than Sara. Mr. O’Hanlin didn’t talk much, either, and he seemed always to be listening. He held himself oddly, cocking his head to one side, first one way and then the other, his small dark eyes focusing off to the left or right of the speaker. His nose, long and wedge-shaped, seemed to take up half his face. “Chester, the Chinaman,” Maisie called him outside of his presence because of the way he stooped and bobbed whenever their father entered the room.

The subject dispatched, Father nodded and then strode out, mounted the gig, and nodded to his driver, who urged the horse to a brisk trot.

The rest of Sara’s morning was spent as it always was, planning menus with Mini and ordering the necessaries for them, overseeing Sipsy the maid and the cleaning of the house, double-checking that the laundry was done to satisfaction and sufficiently pressed, planning the construction of new clothing for the family, arranging the at-least weekly supper parties of Father’s, and many other things, all the while keeping a watchful eye on Maisie so that Father never felt the need to punish her. This morning, because the nursemaid Clara had her day off, Maisie was in the kitchen attempting to help Minnie, which meant that she picked up tasks, soon became bored with them, and put them aside as quickly as Minnie could invent

them, so Sara soon diverted her to a chair near the stove with the thread and needle of her sampler.

At twenty minutes to noon, the groom had Sara's bay mare, Miss Bailey, saddled and waiting for her. Father had suggested to Sara that she use the smaller trap pulled by Old Methuselah, the swayback blue roan gelding, but Sara preferred the singularity of riding sidesaddle on Miss Bailey. Although the elderly groom still prepared the mare and helped Sara to mount, he didn't have to do the heavy work of harnessing, which made Sara feel slightly better about the effort, and once she reached her destination, she didn't have the worry about where to park or Old Methuselah's habit of working his rein from the post and wandering off to find a bit of grass to graze.

Sara checked that Sipsy the maid was looking after Maisie and picked up the packet of Father's lunch from Minnie in the kitchen and tucked it into the saddlebags. She scratched Miss Bailey's withers near the pommel of her saddle, so that the horse leaned toward her a bit. "Feel good, Bails?" she said. With the groom's help, Sara mounted and settled her legs into the pommels, intent on riding the couple of miles down the hill into the heart of Anamosa and to the grocery.

The Moore house sat on a hill overlooking the village of Anamosa, the name of which meant "white fawn," so dubbed for a sweet Indian child. The name had recently been changed from Lexington, to avoid confusion with the plenitude of other post stops so named. The Moore house overlooked the house of Colonel William T. Shaw—Father made sure of that. Colonel Shaw had been for the North, and the story goes that when Father came to settle he made sure his house, though of plantation style rather than the gothic turreted style of the house of "that scoundrel from Iowa," as Father called him, rested above his. Sara did not remember the move, as she was very young at the time. Nowadays, when Father met the prosperous colonel during the course of his daily business, he would sometimes extol the virtues of southern cooking, as Colonel Shaw preferred the cuisine of New England, having grown up in Maine. Colonel Shaw, in his turn, would sometimes assert the filthiness of the habit of cigar smoking.

As Sara rode into town, the midday heat of the May sunshine was relieved by the breeze down the valley and the fluttering shade of the stately oaks. She could smell the mud of the Wapsipinicon River, named for Indian lovers who leapt to their deaths from the bluffs, and, faintly, the smokestack of the industries at the Additional Penitentiary on the far side of the settlement. The leaves rustled, a faraway train gave a low series of hoots, and birds sang madly and gaily in the trees. Miss Bailey's smooth-but-fast Tennessee Walker gait was as gentle as a drift in a canoe. Sara passed the modest house of the widow who had taught her her letters, next door to a large German family whose garden took up most of their plot and whose plentiful blonde children played in the road and waved to her as she passed. She joined the main road behind the long freight wagon with its team of six, heads bent in duty, and then turned off the side street to her father's store.

Sara rode around to the back alley. The way was partially blocked by a tall cart pulled by mules, which was being unloaded into the grocery by a group of men. Three of the men, including the one obviously the foreman, were brown-skinned and spoke to each other in an undulating language full of stops and starts, but the fourth was a light-skinned man about Sara's height in worn and dusty clothes. Something about him caught Sara's attention and

held it. Besides obvious differences of origin and skin tone, something otherwise set him apart from the other three, working alongside them though he was. The man was tall and stout, with a broad chest and barrel legs. Sara couldn't tell how old he was. His shoulders sloped like an old man who had carried heaviness for a long time, but his face was unlined and youthful about the jaw. He had light-colored eyes, a mustache, and brown hair under his hat that was just long enough to curl around his ears, which stuck out a little.

Sara dismounted at the end of the alley—why challenge the fates and have the horse spook at the men's comings and goings—and led Miss Bailey past the cart to the back of the store and wrapped the rein around the hitch rail. Out of habit, though, Sara did not think to knot the rein but rather just flipped it around the pole, as Miss Bailey had never run off once in all the time she'd ridden her. She murmured and patted Miss Bailey and retrieved the packet of lunch from the saddlebag and took it inside, leaving the horse to slump her hind end into resting position, one back leg bent with its hoof resting on tiptoe. When Sara entered her father's office, he was bent to his books, but he immediately stood. His stance, normally ramrod straight at right angles to God's green earth, today canted a bit forward onto the balls of his feet.

"Ah, Sara," he said, "I've been wondering when you would arrive."

Sara glanced at the case clock on the shelf, which read three minutes to twelve. She was even a bit early, just a bit. "I'm here, Father," she said. She hesitated, glanced at her father, and went to the sideboard and began to unpack his lunch, as she always did.

"No, now," he said, "leave that to me. I would like you to search out Chester. He has that commodity we spoke of earlier."

Her father never said, "Leave that to me." He expected her to perform her duties efficiently and up to inspection. Father believed everyone earned their place in this world with an array of duties and few rights. He also took as granted that his place in the world included the unquestioning obedience of his family and staff. With the discipline of a well-run army, they took care of him so that his energies could focus on his ventures.

Despite her surprise, Sara said, "Yes, Father," and left the packet on the sideboard.

"Now go find Chester." He smiled and nodded.

"Oh, yes. Yes sir," she said and turned and left his office. Almost immediately, she met Mr. O'Hanlin, as if he had been listening at the door, though she knew that that was something Father would not have tolerated. Mr. O'Hanlin wore a wine-red cravat and an ornate vest of green under his gray flannel coat. Now, he bowed to her and smiled so widely Sara thought his lips would crack.

"My dear Miss Moore," Mr. O'Hanlin said, his Irish lilt a bit broader than usual. He said it again, as if trying it on: "My dear Miss Moore. What a pleasure it is to see you this fine day."

"It is a fine day, Mister O'Hanlin," was all Sara could think to return. Something bothered her about the way he looked at her. His usual gaze fell to the left or to the right or skittered around the edges, but today he looked under his short red eyelashes right into her face—upwards, as it happened, since he was a bit shorter than she. Well, not exactly into her face, but rather as if he were looking through her, looking at an idea of her instead of the flesh and blood woman that she was. She was tempted to glance behind to see what he was peering at.

"My father said something about a commodity?" Her shortness bordered on rudeness, but

she felt the need to find out whatever it was Father wanted from her.

“Ah, yes, the commodity.” His focus shifted to the wall. “You will not believe the sumptuousness of it. We recently contracted with a supplier who contracted with a broker out west who contracted with a ship from the ocean isles.”

Mr. O’Hanlin stepped back and indicated she should precede him out the back door. As they circled round outside and down the back steps that led to the basement storeroom, Sara caught sight of that man, that dusty light-skinned man from the street, who was hefting a huge carton, his broad back quivering with effort. She glanced from him back to Mr. O’Hanlin, whose lavish clothing contrasted so sharply with that man’s tattered coat, its blunt sleeves coming well short of the man’s wrists and the shoulder seams yearning to part.

In Sara’s mind, the comparison did not bode well in Mr. O’Hanlin’s favor. Though she knew nothing of character of the man on the street, she noted his determination at the job of hefting this carton, the contradiction held in the question of his age, his strength, which at this moment seemed pure and unadulterated and uncomplicated. Even the shabbiness of his clothing seemed less disingenuous, more honest and more forthright—dare she say kind?—and even the smell of that man’s perspiration, which Sara could only imagine, was sweet in her mind. Mr. O’Hanlin, on the other hand, did not perspire. He was clean and well-kempt. Surely, he was intelligent as well, as Father would not otherwise have taken him on, much less made him partner. Mr. O’Hanlin took pride in his appearance, even though he was slightly pigeon-chested and also shorter than she. He was well off and well provided for, as he was a partner to Father. However, in this spur-of-the-moment comparison, something deep within her tipped the scales in favor of the unknown man. The idea held for a moment. It was as if the clear tone of a bell sounded, separating this moment from the past and the future.

Sara and Mr. O’Hanlin descended the steps and entered the storeroom, and as they steered around a precarious pile of crates, Mr. O’Hanlin put one hand upon her arm and the other around her waist to guide her. She drew back sharply, almost tipping the crates, and left him standing with his arms outstretched, fingers twitching. She felt a strong urge to run back up the steps, away from that moment, and she would have, but there was something that Father wanted from her, so she must see this through. Besides, Mr. O’Hanlin was just looking out for her welfare. The pile of crates was precarious, and he simply was performing the duties required of any man. She tried to smile in his direction, as if it were her clumsiness that led them to that difficult situation. Still, she was grateful when Mr. O’Hanlin dropped his arms and walked to a counter along the wall.

On one corner of the counter was a small crate. With the tips of his long fingers, Mr. O’Hanlin lifted off the crate’s top, which had previously been pried up, and set it on the counter. Packed within the crate were large oblong newspaper-wrapped parcels. Up wafted a faint sweetness with an earthy undertone. Mr. O’Hanlin held out his hand, indicating she should inspect them. She took off her gloves, finger by finger, and placed them on the lid. She pulled one of the parcels from the crate and unwrapped the newspaper, a *San Francisco Examiner* dated April 17, 1885. As she did, the ends of the long narrow green leaves sprang from the parcel and pricked her right index finger, drawing blood. She shifted the fruit to her left hand and stuck the pad of her finger in her mouth, sucking the sting from it, tasting the salt of it.

She glanced at Mr. O’Hanlin. He was watching her, his jaw slack. His red tongue darted

out of his mouth and wet his top lip. When he saw her glance, he pulled back his tongue, and his jaw shut and clenched.

Inside the newspaper was a strange-looking fruit. The top half bushed into long narrow spiky leaves, and the bottom oblong globe had a roughly textured skin in brown, green, and yellow. The odor was stronger.

“It is a pine-apple,” Mr. O’Hanlin said. “It originates in the Kingdom of King Kalakaua, within the expanse of the Pacific.”

Sara stroked the golden green diamonds of the patterned skin with her fingertips. Then, using both hands, oozing index finger held straight so as not to touch the fruit, Sara pulled it to her face and inhaled deeply. What had been faint and sweet before now became thick and pungent. The smell reminded Sara of apple cider mash—full and wet and ripe, but with a dark, decaying undertone. It quickly overwhelmed her. It seemed to enter her and make her body quicken and fill her mind with strange yearnings. If only she could ... what? She didn’t know. But she would settle for a taste to complete the smell. She held the fruit out to Mr. O’Hanlin. “I’ve never tasted—what is it?—a pine-apple before. Shall we cut a slice from this?”

Mr. O’Hanlin froze. “No,” he said, “no.” He reached out his hands, insistent, until she placed the fruit into them. He began deftly covering the fruit with newspaper and then wrapping it back up. “I mean, your father expects to sell them for a tidy profit. He would be disappointed if we, if you ...” He glanced back at the stairway. He then tucked the wrapped fruit back into the crate and scooped up her gloves, which she plucked from his hands, and then he picked up the lid and replaced it. He talked over his shoulder: “What I mean to say is, if we partook of the fruit before it’s time, I mean, before all the proper arrangements were made, it would not be right. It would go against, um, all that was proper. We must advertise, we must, must, as it were, tantalize the public, it is an expensive investment, this type of thing, and we must see it through to its proper outcome, in its proper, um, time.” He looked at her, his lips pressed together but twitching.

Sara did not know what to think. Was he talking about a piece of fruit? Surely Father would allow her, if she ventured a portion of the household budget, to taste this fruit? Mr. O’Hanlin’s reaction was all out of proportion to the thing at hand. What was Father aiming for her to gain from this transaction, this viewing of a fruit that she could not even taste? She shook her head in bewilderment.

Then Mr. O’Hanlin’s face opened up. He seemed to calm. He took a step closer to her and put his hands on her shoulders. They were damp and very warm through the cotton of her shirtwaist. He said, “My dear Sara, you will see, in due course, it is for the best.” His eyes looked up into her eyes, and then he removed his right hand with its long fingers from her shoulder and lifted it as if to touch her face but then left it suspended so that she could sense the heat of it on her cheek.

At first, all Sara registered was his physicality, the hand that encompassed her shoulder, the heat of him on her face, the shattering of her personal space, but then she registered his familiar usage of her name. He had used her given name, without invitation nor cause. It was her name, hers, not to be passed about like an unembroidered handkerchief. This seemed the worst of all violations. A shock went through her so totally that her mind blanked, and she stumbled back and turned and pushed up the stairs into the open air.

## Chapter 2

**I**t seemed on purpose, the way the backs of the businesses hulked over the narrow alley and blocked the May noonday sun. Each time James Youngblood returned to the cart with that pat-thief Ricci to heft another crate, he focused on the light at the end of the alley, just as he had on the light that came through crisscross of bars at the end of his bed. If he let himself dwell on the enveloping shadows, the walls closed in upon him, and his pulse began to race. Focusing on the light, however, kept those particular wolves at bay.

This alley light was reflected light, much like that that had emanated from the heavens, had streaked gloriously to the earth unimpeded, had touched the open air, the curl of green leaves, the cool of water sliding over rocks, before its misfortune of bouncing through those small panes of glass into that tall dead space near the elevated walkways and then through the riveted iron flats of the cell door. For those irretrievable months, months that had added into years, it had helped James to think about what that light had touched, just as it helped him now.

James pulled his eyes back from the end of the alley to where he was hefting his end of a small barrel that smelled of apples, but he was plunged in darkness as his eyes adjusted. Still, Ricci pulled on his end of the barrel, and James stumbled, nearly dropping his end. They set the barrel down and breathed. Ricci's mouth was set in a line, and he seemed on the verge of saying something, but then the man glanced down the alley, and his face opened up in surprise as the light dimmed and they were caught in shadow. "The Colonel's daughter," Ricci hissed at James. "Make like beavers." He turned to the other two and bent his head toward the cart, indicating that they should get to work, industriously. And then he bent to pick up his end of the barrel, and so did James.

As they toted the barrel, James glanced toward the end of the alley, and out of the penumbra of light came the figure of a woman leading a horse. At first, the woman loomed large, and James blinked to clear his vision, but then she shrank to human proportion. James's heart gave a leap: it was his mother, there in the street! For that split second, a feeling welled up inside him and closed his throat. It was a conflicted feeling, one of love and relief and joy but also of constriction and gravity and panic. It was the feeling his mother invariably brought forth during their long association, moving about from place to place, just scraping by, never knowing if the next day brought light-headed soul-wrenching hunger or the sting of a step-father's hand.

But, no, this wasn't his mother. That was not possible—his mother was two months' dead, brought down by consumption. Physically, this woman was dissimilar. She was much taller, almost as tall as James. Her dress with its lush green skirts was richly laced and gusseted and tucked, and her heavily embroidered riding cape was of deep brown wool—more expensive than anything his mother had ever worn. This woman's black hair was swept back in the more modern style, with the curls cascading from the back crown of the head instead of around the ears like his mother's. She had a long nose with an *ess* curve in profile, well-proportioned gray eyes, a small mouth, and a narrow jaw that at present she had set in

concentration. Instead of a large bonnet, this woman's hat was small and perched somewhat to the side, and her stride was different than his mother's. His mother's walk had been both proud and sensual, and even as she aged men noticed her entering a room, for which James invariably felt apprehension for what that might bring. This woman, however, even in stride, seemed to be tucking in on herself, her head bobbing low, as if she wanted to make herself smaller. James understood that feeling.

James took in this woman and felt his desire for her rising. It came upon him fast and strong. His limbs weakened and his male member swelled. He wanted to touch her, to see her without her hat, her hair splayed down her shoulders, her bare legs peeking from underneath her chemise. But he turned his eyes away and quelled the thought as best he could. It could only make him feel worse. It had been so long.

The woman led the horse around the cart to the hitching rail and flipped her rein around the wood. The other three men stopped and watched her. James glanced at the expression of hunger on Ricci's face, and suddenly James felt protective over this woman whom he'd never met. He wanted these men to avert their eyes. They had no right. These men were ex-convicts and immigrants without a penny to their names. What right had they to ogle this woman? They should limit their desires—and their eyes—to women of their own race. But, then, he was an ex-convict and penniless too—well, except for the lucky nickel tucked into his left shoe—what right had he? The thought brought shame rising within him mixing with the strong desire and jealousy of the moment before, and surely he turned red to the ears.

After wrapping the rein, the woman retrieved something from her saddlebags, and before she turned to make her way to the back door of the store, with her free hand she caressed the horse and whispered to the animal. It was such an intimate gesture, so private and tender, that a new feeling arose in James. Though it was desire, it was much larger than mere lust and swept through James and left him unmanned for a moment. This particular brand of feeling was something he had never felt in his twenty-nine years. It made him want both to curl into a ball and to spread his arms, to whisper to someone and to shout to the world.

The woman disappeared into the back of the store, and the walls once again closed in. James took a deep breath and gathered himself. He turned to find Ricci waiting for him. "Cut your lollygagging," Ricci said and then called James something in his native tongue. James could not understand it, but the meaning was clear: Ricci held James in low regard. His body was turned toward the other two men, and he looked over his shoulder at James. The other two nodded with wry smiles. Then they began working again.

Bergamasco and Lottardi were the other men's names. James remembered because names have power. The two men were fresh off the boat and had not spoken a word of English in James's hearing, though Ricci had been in the country long enough to make it from Halifax to Cedar Rapids and get caught with his hand in a gentleman's pocket and thrown in Anamosa for a stretch. James had known Ricci by sight only when they were both incarcerated. Ricci had worked to shape the limestone used in the turrets and bastions of the new penitentiary's buildings, which were steadily transforming from wood to rock, and rumor had it he'd carved one of the lions near the flower beds in front of the administration building. James had had his stint at stonework, too, which left his hands vibrating and his body sore to the bone for months. Fortunately, a crotchety draft horse had illuminated James's equine talents, bringing him to the attention of the man in charge of the farm, and James had spent most of his time

among the horses in the barns and in the saddlery. The head man took it at face value and treated James well, even though James's crime was that of horse thievery, something some persons responded to a bit overzealously. Ricci was released months before James, but then James sat across the rooming house breakfast table from him and he had eyed James for a while before offering him a job. Pitiful wages even for an ex-convict, James knew it and Ricci knew it, but there was nothing to be done. It was sustenance for another week. James had no other opportunities in view.

Ricci glanced at Bergamasco and Lottardi and then at James. Then Ricci said, "That's all right." His smile didn't reach his eyes. "You're my half-centesimo man." He said it in English, and then he turned to the other two and said it again in his native tongue. He smiled and they chuckled. Lottardi then said something that made Bergamasco snort and Ricci's broad chest push forward and his head rest higher on his neck. It was all part of that thing men did, something the male of the species had been doing to James his whole life, and James knew that he would have to act in some way. It would continue until something happened, until he was somehow crushed or it came to blows. Ricci needed to prove something to these men.

James looked Ricci square in the face and said, "I'll complete this job, but then I believe our contract should be terminated, as I sense it is mutual."

Ricci's eyes narrowed as he looked into James's face. His mind worked behind the eyes. "You gave me the week, and I mean to keep you to it," he said in a loud voice. So he wasn't going to let James off that easily. The hope of a facile solution faded. But then it came to James's mind that he was a free man, no longer a convict. The feeling swelled, as did the anger.

Once before, he'd been trapped in the employ of his uncle, and that is what had led to his incarceration in the first place. Shortly after Mam's last husband died, they had been in desperate straits, hardly making it. A step-uncle, the brother of Mam's last husband, agreed to take James on as a stable hand. He had worked for a month, and come payday, the uncle said he was expecting a large payment the next week and that he would pay him then. James and his mother had a roof over their heads and food on the table, so James had not complained. But then a week turned into a month, and at the next payday, the uncle said again that the payment had not come in but it certainly would soon. James had had his misgivings, but Mam had urged him to stay on. "The man means to pay us, Son," she said. "And by the time he does, we will be owed a small fortune. Be patient." And so he was. Three months turned into four, which turned into six, and James became more and more agitated as the months went on. The uncle if anything became more domineering. Finally, James confronted the man, who said that beggars cannot be choosers and they were lucky to have him. They could leave if they did not like it. Mam was cowed by the man's argument and tried to calm her son, but it so enraged James that he went to the stable, saddled a fine gelding, and took off, leaving his mother behind. He had meant to leave her for good, as she had so obviously chosen against him, and he had long been wanting escape. However, the sheriff and his men caught up with him two days later in a town in the next county, and that's how he ended up in Anamosa Additional Penitentiary.

This was different, though. There was no cause for him to be trapped, no woman hanging on him. Anger rose further. Yes, there were three of them and they were more than willing to

take their knuckles to him, but damn it to hell, he'd had enough of it. The nectar coursed through his veins, and it felt good, right.

He stepped forward and said, "My job description did not entail me as your whipping boy, you little tin god on wheels." Then he braced. This breached the line of caution.

The anger built on Ricci's face as he registered James's insult. The other two men did not understand what James had said, but they must have sensed his tone and Ricci's body language, as they began to circle around behind James. James started backing away, slowly at first, but then they quickened their pace, and he scrambled as he tried to protect his back. He had to find a wall, a fence, something to keep them from grabbing him from behind, or he needed a weapon of some kind, a stick, a rock. It was his only hope. Desperately, he pushed backwards, keeping his eye on the three men.

In his haste his shoulder bumped something soft, with a slight give, something warm and alive, and he turned and saw it was the woman's horse, he'd bumped its back haunches, and the surprised horse was curling, tail tucked, bunching under to kick with both back legs—what any horse would do when surprised from behind. James dove to the side as the hooves whipped past him, missing him by less than a handspan. As soon as the hooves landed, the mare pushed off with her front feet, her body listing heavily to the left. She jerked her head, snapping the rein, and bolted down the alley, just as the woman who owned the horse pushed through the door at the back of the store. She ran to the hitching post, skirts held high, and looked up, bewildered by the missing horse. She looked both ways just in time to glimpse it as it disappeared out onto the street at the end of the alley. She looked to the men, who had stopped advancing on James and stood with their hands at their sides.

Ricci took one glance at James and stepped to the woman's side. "This man," he said, "this man just spooked your horse. He ran her off. He's the one."

James shook his head but then nodded and gave a short bow. "I did, ma'am," he said. "My deepest apologies. I did not mean to. Let me assure you, it was accidental. Let me corral her for you." Before she could respond, he turned and trotted down the alley after the horse. He glanced back to make sure the men weren't following him. They weren't—for now.

He had seen which way the mare had turned, so he followed her onto the street. A horse's first instinct is for the herd, but if the woman had gone to the trouble to ride, rather than walk, this mare's herd most likely would not be too close. James hoped, though, with nought chasing her and such a gentle nature, the mare's panic would ease quickly and she had not gone far. The street he turned on was bordered by small houses with yards enclosed by fences. Nothing to draw a horse to stop there. She would be looking for a spot of green—and there it was. An undeveloped lot with trees and grass. Sure enough, there was the bay mare, head down and grazing, calming herself, one long rein trailing. From a distance, he inspected her nose to tail to make sure she hadn't hurt herself in her panic. No signs of injury. That was good.

James walked up and stopped, not too close, giving her room, and turning his body to the side so he wasn't confronting her, and then began murmuring low. "That's a girl. You're a good girl, aren't you? Not a wild bone in your body. Tame as an old kitty cat, aren't you? Nothing to be frightened of here. Just little old me, and all I want is to scratch your withers a bit, now don't I? Won't that feel good?" He kept on murmuring as he worked his way closer. The mare ignored him at first and kept grazing but then raise her head and eyed him. When

he got close enough, he stopped and held out his hand. Horses were curious creatures and social by nature, but they were also looking after their safety. If they were decently broke and hadn't been ruined and you approach them quietly and with respect, they most likely would take you up on an offer of friendship. That's one of the many things James loved about horses. They were understandable, and unless they'd been maltreated their hearts were as good as gold.

Sure enough, the mare took a tentative step forward. James waited with his hand out. She took another step. He had nothing to offer her, but that didn't matter. She sniffed his hand and then his face, doing that thing that horses do in greeting, exchanging breath. James blew in and out, letting the horse smell his breath and taking in the warm green grass scent of hers, all the while slowly reaching and gathering in her rein. Then she relaxed. "Whew," she was saying, "it was scary out here all by myself. I'm sure glad you happened along." He didn't reach for her head—a mistake many people made—but instead sidled along to reach her withers and scratched them a bit, not too much. Then he patted her gently on the shoulder and turned back toward the store. "You're a good girl, aren't you?" he said and sighed. Just standing next to the horse made him feel better.