

Book 1 of the Round Earth Series

Earth's Imagined



Corners

Tamara Linse

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Tamara Linse

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Earth's Imagined Corners

Book 1 of the Round Earth Series

Tamara Linse



willow
words

For Ma Strong, who loved him despite everything

Also by Tamara Linse

How to Be a Man (stories)

Deep Down Things

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Published in the United States by Willow Words

<http://www.willowwords.com>

This is a work of fiction—names, characters, places, and events are the products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously

Cover design by Tamara Linse, illustration from “The Family Friend” published by S.W. Partridge & Co. (London, 1880)

Print

ISBN: 0990953327

ISBN-13: 978-0-9909533-2-6

Epub

ISBN: 0990953335

ISBN-13: 978-0-9909533-3-3

Print (Amazon)

ISBN: 0990953319

ISBN-13: 978-0-9909533-1-9

Kindle

ISBN: 0990953300

ISBN-13: 978-0-9909533-0-2

Edition 1.1

Holy Sonnet VII

At the round earth's imagined corners blow
Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise
From death, you numberless infinities
Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go;
All whom the flood did, and fire shall o'erthrow,
All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
Despair, law, chance hath slain, and you, whose eyes
Shall behold God, and never taste death's woe.
But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space;
For, if above all these my sins abound,
'Tis late to ask abundance of Thy grace,
When we are there. Here on this lowly ground
Teach me how to repent; for that's as good
As if Thou hadst seal'd my pardon with Thy blood.

John Donne (1572–1631)

Part I

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

It 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.

End of Sample

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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.

About the Author



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, and her blog, *Writer, Cogitator, Recovering Ranch Girl*, at 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.

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