



## Chapter 1

# Change on the Horizon

August 3, 1925

IN THE THICK, DAMP air of late afternoon, a girl and her horse stood atop a hill behind her home; a palace, built smack dab in the middle of an Oklahoma prairie. She shielded her eyes against the blazing sun to peer at the plume of dust rising in the distance. Cora Frances Burns Noland—twelve on her next birthday, but that wasn't for ages—watched change coming her way at thirty miles an hour.

“Pestilence and calamity! It can't be August!” She laced her fingers through Ali Baba's mane.

He whinnied his uncertainty.

Within thirty minutes, an hour tops, she would be expected to pack everything she loved in a box labeled “Childhood” and say goodbye.

“I'm not ready.”

Ali Baba swiveled his head to nibble her shoulder, but she couldn't muster so much as a giggle. A mosquito buzzed around her sweat-sticky neck. She slapped it and missed. It was definitely August. All signs pointed to it.

And so, here came Father, home to make good on his promise to ruin her life.

“He's going to put me on that train, boy.” She moaned. The journey to the Boston Academy for Admirable Young Ladies might not be

tonight, and might not be tomorrow, but it would certainly be within the week.

Too soon.

“I won’t stand for it.” Cora put her foot in the stirrup and hoisted herself into the saddle. “It’s not fair. One minute you’re playing Joan of Arc storming a fortress, and the next minute you’re expected to become a boring lady of quality. It’s enough to make my head spin.”

Ali Baba squealed and stamped the ground with his foreleg. He tossed his chestnut-colored head. He agreed, it was outrageous.

The high-pitched sound disturbed a furtive fox. It bolted into the clearing. Cora pursed her lips. The fox was familiar. It winked at her, then disappeared into the underbrush with a flick of its white-tipped tail. It was unusual to see a fox out and about on a Monday afternoon, especially one bold enough to wink.

She turned her back on the speeding doom-mobile and scanned the grounds of her home, taking it in, wondering if it’d be her last view of it. A young Robin with a chubby red breast flapped past, a worm in its beak. Was it the same one she’d nursed this spring? If so, she wished it good luck. There’d be no one around next spring to help its babies if they fell from the nest.

The bird’s flight led Cora’s eyes to a feathery flutter of white-blond hair near the edge of the lake. A plan struck her. A clever and devious one. Those were the best. “Don’t count me out yet, Ali Baba. Let’s ride.”

With a tap of her heels on her horse’s sides, she pointed his nose down the hill, held the reins loosely, and let him break into a trot on the familiar path. After they jumped the creek at the bottom, she let him gallop. He reached the stable yard in record time. Cora dismounted in the yard and then walked him inside.

“I’m sorry, Ali Baba, but I’ve got to hurry.” She loosened the cinch on his saddle and called for the stable master. “He’ll take good care of you while I find Freddie.”