

Call Me Oklahoma!

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Holiday House / New York



To the wonderful teachers I've been lucky
to have, beginning with my parents

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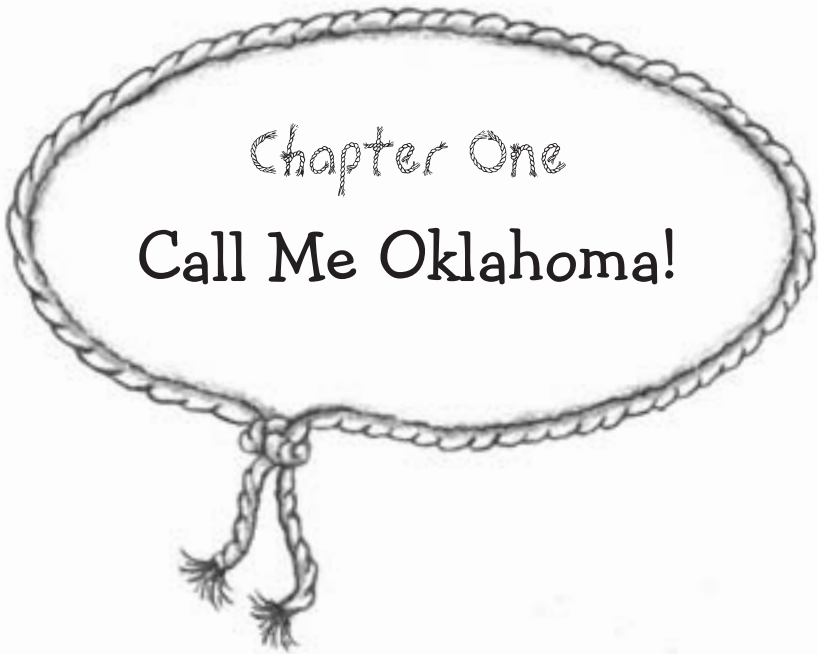
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Chapter One

Call Me Oklahoma!

On the first day of school, Paige Turner came down to breakfast and announced that she had changed her name. “From now on,” she said, “call me Oklahoma!”

Her mother looked up from her crossword puzzle, astonished, and the pencil in her hand dropped to the floor.

Her father looked up from pouring his coffee, and it dribbled all over his travel mug.

But her brother, Conrad, digging in a box of Corn Zappies for the free prize inside,



said, “Oklahoma? What kind of a *dumb* name is that?”

“It’s not dumb,” Paige replied, twisting the red bandanna around her neck. “It’s a *good* name.”

“Are you for real?” Conrad said, his hand crunching around the cereal. “You actually *want* to be named for the forty-sixth state, with more man-made lakes

than any other?” Paige’s older brother had a head stuffed with little-known facts.

He said it came from reading all the magazines in the waiting room at his orthodontist’s.

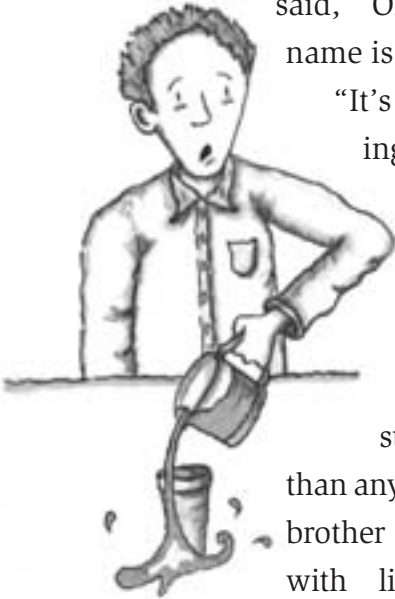
“Conrad does have a point there,” said Paige’s mother, picking up her pencil and erasing a long line of boxes.

“Besides, people don’t just pluck a new name out of the air on their way to breakfast.”

“I disagree,” said Mr. Turner, tightening the lid on his travel mug. “If Paige wants to be Oklahoma, why not? In fourth grade, I was Mortimer.”

“Mortimer?” gasped Mrs. Turner. Paige and Conrad looked equally horrified.

“Well . . . only for about a month. And there’s a chance this might last just as long,” their father said, winking at



their mother. He picked up his briefcase and travel mug and kissed Paige on the top of her head. “This certainly is a dinger!” he told her. “But you have yourself a great first day . . . Oklahoma.”

“What’s a dinger?” asked Paige.

“A surprise,” said Mr. Turner, and put his hand out to give Conrad’s hair a farewell scruffle. But just before making contact with Conrad’s head, he noticed the hair gel and jerked his hand back. “New look, eh?” said Mr. Turner, patting Conrad’s shoulder instead.

Paige wished her father didn’t have to leave so soon. She needed someone around who understood her goal. Because of course the moment the garage door shut, Conrad started in on her.

“So why’d ya pick a dumb name like Oklahoma?”

“*Because,*” said Paige, and that was all. But as she tipped the heavy carton of orange juice over the edge of her glass, the voice inside kept going. *Because I’m starting fourth grade. And I’m different now.* Unfortunately, even the voice inside squeaked on the word *different*. Still, Paige was determined that this year *would* be different. *She* would be different. More like her cousin Cordelia!

Cousin Cordelia lived across the country in Berkeley, California, and during the summer, the Turner family had visited Aunt Joni and Cordelia. Paige thought her cousin was amazing. For one thing, Cordelia cartwheeled everywhere—even in the living room. *Even* after her

mother yelled at her to cut it out. Cordelia also climbed up open doorways like a human spider and ate artichokes, which she called ogre tongues. And when the mean boys on the street teased her, Cordelia pinched her nose and said, “*Eww*, what’s that stink? Oh, the neighbors must’ve put out their garbage!”

Paige wished she could be more like that. And on the long plane ride home, she decided she not only *could*, but *would*. The first thing she’d need, however, to become a more Cordelia-ish kind of person was a different name. A name with guts.

Oklahoma was a name with guts. It reminded Paige of the cowboys shouting “*Yee-haw!*” in the musical they’d seen during their visit. The show was called *Oklahoma!* and it was full of cowboys and spunky women twirling around. The music had Paige bouncing in her seat, and at the end of the show, when all the people onstage waved their hats and yelled “*Yee-haw!*” Paige felt so full of joy, tears sprang to her eyes. She longed to be the kind of person who yelled “*Yee-haw!*”

“I like the name Oklahoma,” said Paige quietly. “It has . . . guts.”

“Yeah, right,” laughed Conrad. “Like you could pull off a name with guts. You still run into closets during thunderstorms!”

“Do not!” snapped Paige, and began blowing angry juice bubbles in her glass, pretending each popping bubble was Conrad disappearing into thin air. *Pop!*

Unfortunately, he was still there, pulverizing their new box of cereal into Zappie dust, all for some stupid, junky prize.

“That’s enough, you two,” said Mrs. Turner. She got up from the table and set down two bowls and a carton of milk. “Let’s get this show on the road. You don’t want to be late for the first day.”

Paige grabbed the cereal box from Conrad and scowled at him. *She* knew she’d be different this year. She already felt different in her bright-blue T-shirt and

brand-new cargo shorts. The shorts had a million Velcro pockets that made a satisfying

zwip! whenever she ripped them open.

And her grandma had sent her a pair of bright-red clogs that drummed out a joyful, clompy sound as she walked. Like tap shoes, only better. Paige couldn’t wait to clomp loudly down the shiny tile floors at school. Everyone would know when Oklahoma was coming!



Paige adjusted the bandanna around her neck and dug into her cereal. Not only did she have a new look, she had a new outlook. With every loud crunch of cereal, she felt more determined to be a different person. So different, even Viveca Frye wouldn’t tease her.

Viveca Frye thought she was the boss of everyone because she could kick the ball farther than anyone in the

grade. She also had a way of saying “whatever” that had most of the girls following her around as if she was the Mayor of Cool. But acting like the boss of everyone wasn’t the worst thing about Viveca. The worst thing was how she’d made Paige feel after last year’s spring assembly.

The entire third grade had been onstage for the annual Third-Grade Poetry Slam. Paige’s poem was about squirmy snakes that “squiggled like a silent S in the woods.” But the moment she opened her mouth, all her words squirmed away! She couldn’t remember a single line. She could barely remember what her poem was about. So she did the only thing that made sense. Just like the snakes in her poem, Paige squiggled “like a silent S” as fast as she could off the stage. She was such a nervous wreck that as soon she got backstage, she threw up—right onto her teacher’s shoes.

She could still hear the chorus of “*Eww, gross!*” from the other kids as they jumped away. It was absolutely the worst moment of Paige’s whole, entire life.

For the rest of third grade, Viveca never let her forget it. “Wow, look at how fast Paige runs!” she’d shout at recess when they played kickball. “Almost as fast as she did when she ran offstage and went *blaaaaagh* all over the teacher’s shoes!”

But this year would be different. This year, Paige would be the kind of person who wouldn’t get teased, who wouldn’t be afraid of being onstage, or thunderstorms, or *anything*.

“Well, I’m not calling you Oklahoma,” Conrad said, his hand diving back into the cereal. “It’s stupid.”

“But that’s not fair! You got new sneakers! Why shouldn’t I have a new name?”

“You can’t compare sneakers with a name!”

“Besides,” said their mother, silently counting letters with her pencil point and then writing them into her puzzle, “Paige is a beautiful name. And,” she added, looking up, “it’s a family name. There’s always been a Paige in the Turner family.”

“Eureka! I’ve found it!” Conrad shouted. “It’s a glow-in-the-dark compass yo-yo!” His face lit up as he pulled a small package from the cereal box and tore it open. “Lookit!” he said, and holding the compass yo-yo in the palm of his hand, turned himself east, west, north, and south. “Hey, it really works!” Then he stood on his chair and pressed the yo-yo against the light over the table. “Let’s see if it glows!”

“Conrad Turner, you’ll burn yourself!” snapped Mrs. Turner, swatting her son’s hand away from the lightbulb. “And don’t let your father hear you getting so excited over a cereal box yo-yo.” Mr. Turner was the director of small toys development at the Whoopee-Yahoo Toy Company.

“But, Ma,” whined Conrad, “this one has a real compass. None of Dad’s has that.”

“Conrad Turner,” his mother said with a fiery spark in her eye, “that is a cheap, gimmicky yo-yo with an infe-

rior string. If your father sees you spinning that thing around here, well, you know he's bound to get all wound up. Now, c'mon, you two. Eat up! We're not on a summer schedule anymore." She smiled down at her puzzle. "Hey, here's one for you, Paige: a six-letter word meaning 'metamorphosis.'"

Paige tapped the tip of her spoon against her teeth and thought for a moment. She remembered last year when her class had done a big unit on metamorphosis. They'd learned about things in nature that changed—like caterpillars into butterflies. "Change?" she said.

"Bingo!" said Mrs. Turner, writing in the word. "Good work, Bug."

"Oklahoma."

Mrs. Turner ignored her and, looking up from her puzzle, studied Conrad's hair. "Conrad, did a brush actually make contact with your head this morning? Or did you just wave it in the vicinity?"

"Maaa," he whined, "it's gelled! You don't brush gelled hair!" Paige giggled as she poured some more cereal. So she wasn't the only one who wanted to make some changes.

"Paige, do you have your emergency house key?" her mother asked.

"In my backpack!" Paige replied. "But I'm not Paige anymore. I'm *Oklahoma*. Okay?"

Conrad rolled his eyes. "What're you going to do when the teacher takes attendance? If you don't answer