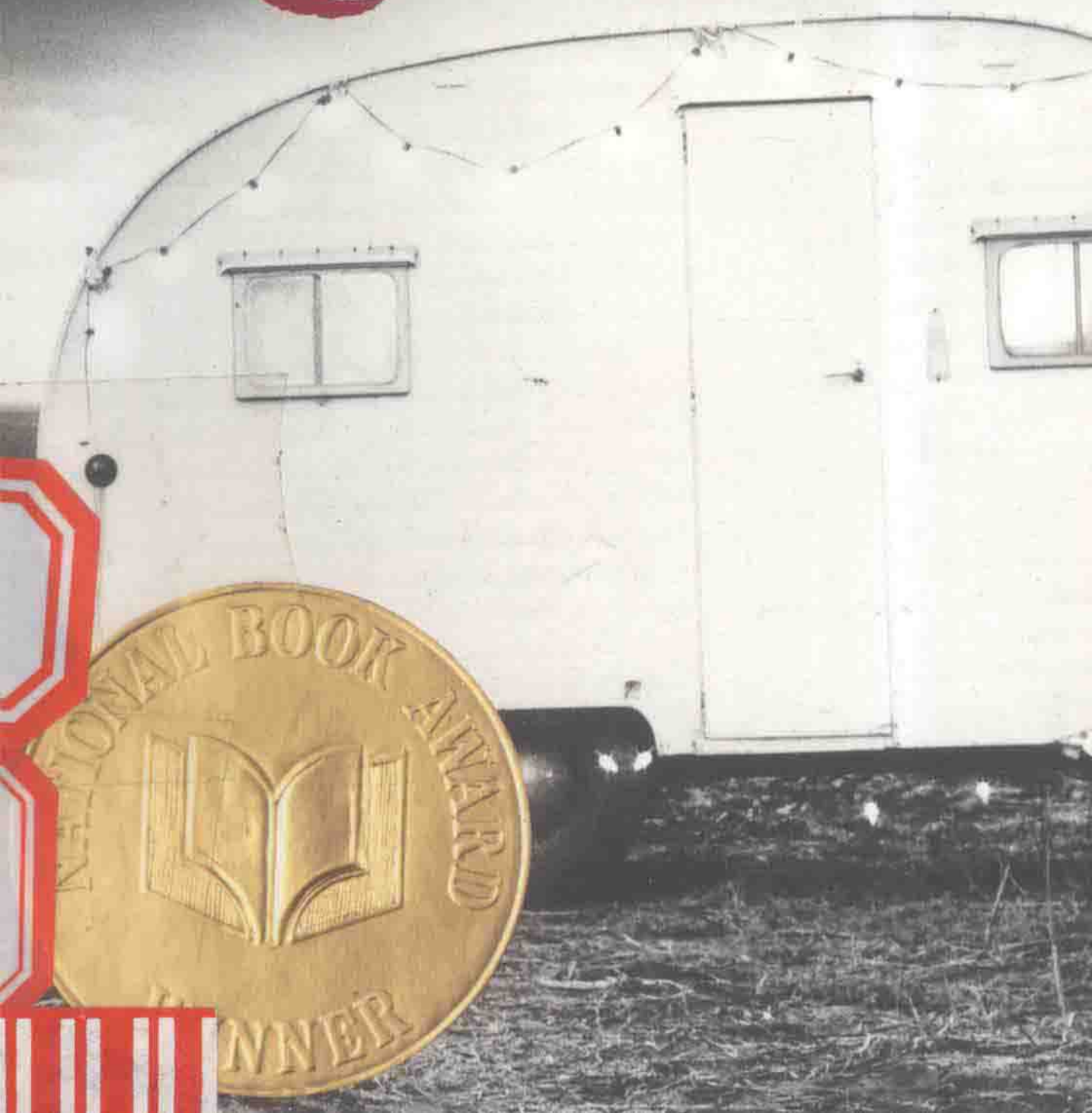


KIMBERLY WILLIS HOLT



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When  
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Came to Town





## Chapter One

Nothing ever happens in Antler, Texas. Nothing much at all. Until this afternoon, when an old blue Thunderbird pulls a trailer decorated with Christmas lights into the Dairy Maid parking lot. The red words painted on the trailer cause quite a buzz around town, and before an hour is up, half of Antler is standing in line with two dollars clutched in hand to see the fattest boy in the world.

Since it's too late in the summer for firecrackers and too early for the Ladybug Waltz, Cal and I join Miss Myrtie Mae and the First Baptist Quilting Bee at the back of the line.

Miss Myrtie Mae wears a wide-brimmed straw hat. She claims that she's never exposed her skin to sun. Even so, wrinkles fold into her face like an unironed shirt. She takes her job as town historian and librarian

seriously, and as usual, her camera hangs around her neck. "Toby, how's your mom?"

"Fine," I say.

"That will really be something if she wins."

"Yes, ma'am, it will." My mouth says the words, but my mind is not wanting to settle on a picture of her winning. Mom dreams of following in the footsteps of her favorite singer, Tammy Wynette. Last month she entered a singing contest in Amarillo and won first place. She got a trophy and an all-expense-paid trip to Nashville for a week to enter the National Amateurs' Country Music Competition at the Grand Ole Opry. The winner gets to cut a record album.

Cars and pickups pull into the Dairy Maid parking lot. Some people make no bones about it. They just get in line to see him. Others try to act like they don't know anything about the buzz. They enter the Dairy Maid, place their orders, and exit with Coke floats, chocolate-dipped cones, or curlicue fries, then wander to the back of the line. They don't fool me.

The line isn't moving because the big event hasn't started. Some skinny guy wearing a tuxedo, smoking a pipe, is taking the money and giving out green tickets. Cal could stand in line forever to relieve his curiosity. He knows more gossip than any old biddy in Antler

because he gathers it down at the cotton gin, where his dad and the other farmers drink coffee.

"I got better things to do than this," I tell Cal. Like eat. My stomach's been growling all the time now because I haven't had a decent meal since Mom left a few days ago. Not that she cooked much lately since she was getting ready for that stupid contest. But I miss the fried catfish and barbecue dinners she brought home from the Bowl-a-Rama Cafe, where she works.

"Oh, come on, Toby," Cal begs. "He'll probably move out tomorrow and we'll never get another chance."

"He's just some fat kid. Heck, Malcolm Clifton probably has him beat hands down." Malcolm's mom claims he's big boned, not fat, but we've seen him pack away six jumbo burgers. I sigh real big like my dad does when he looks at my report card filled with Cs. "Okay," I say. "But I'm only waiting ten more minutes. After that, I'm splitting."

Cal grins that stupid grin with his black tooth showing. He likes to brag that he got his black tooth playing football, but I know the real story. His sister, Kate, socked him good when he scratched up her Carole King album. Cal says he was sick of hearing "You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman" every stinking day of his life.

Scarlett Stalling walks toward the line, holding her bratty sister Tara's hand. Scarlett looks cool wearing a bikini top underneath an open white blouse and hip huggers that hit right below her belly button. With her golden tan and long, silky blond hair, she could do a commercial for Coppertone.

Scarlett doesn't go to the back of the line. She walks over to me. *To me*. Smiling, flashing that Ultra Brite sex appeal smile and the tiny gap between her two front teeth. Cal grins, giving her the tooth, but I lower my eyelids half-mast and jerk my head back a little as if to say, "Hey."

Then she speaks. "Hey, Toby, would y'all do me a favor?"

"Sure," I squeak, killing my cool act in one split second.

Scarlett flutters her eyelashes, and I suck in my breath. "Take Tara in for me." She passes her little sister's sticky hand like she's handing over a dog's leash. Then she squeezes her fingers into her pocket and pulls out two crumpled dollar bills. I would give anything to be one of those lucky dollar bills tucked into her pocket.

She flips back her blond mane. "I've got to get back home and get ready. Juan's dropping by soon."

The skin on my chest prickles. Mom is right. Scarlett Stalling is a flirt. Mom always told me, "You better stay a spittin' distance from that girl. Her mother had a bad reputation when I went to school, and the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Cal punches my shoulder. "Great going, ladies' man!"

I watch Scarlett's tight jeans sway toward her house so she can get ready for the only Mexican guy in Antler Junior High. Juan already shaves. He's a head taller than the rest of the guys (two heads taller than me). That gives him an instant ticket to play first string on our basketball team, even though he's slow footed and a lousy shot. Whenever I see him around town, a number-five-iron golf club swings at his side. I don't plan to ever give him a reason to use it.

"Fatty, fatty, two by four," Tara chimes as she stares at the trailer. "Can't get through the kitchen door."

"Shut up, squirt," I mutter.

Miss Myrtie Mae frowns at me.

Tara yanks on my arm. "Uummmm!" she hollers. "You said shut up. Scarlett!" She rises on her toes as if that makes her louder. "Toby said shut up to me!"

But it's too late. Scarlett has already disappeared across the street. She's probably home smearing gloss on those pouty lips while I hold her whiny sister's lollipop fingers, standing next to my black-toothed best friend, waiting to see the fattest boy in the world.

## Chapter Two

There's not a cloud in the sky, and it's boiling hot. Wylie Womack's snow cone stand is across the parking lot, under the giant elm tree, and the idea is real tempting to let go of Tara's hand and bolt for it. But that would kill any chance I would ever have with Scarlett.

Sheriff Levi Fetterman drives by, making his afternoon rounds. He slows down and looks our way. His riding dog, Duke, sits in the passenger seat. Duke is Sheriff Levi's favorite adoptee. Anytime someone in Antler finds a stray cat or dog, they call the sheriff to pick up the animal and take it to the pound. Sheriff Levi can't bear to dump a dog, and because of that he has a couple dozen living on his one-acre place a mile out of town. However, cats are a different story. They go straight to the pound.

Sheriff Levi waves at us, then heads on his way. He drives all the way down Main Street and turns toward the highway.

Finally the skinny guy selling tickets moves to the top step in front of the trailer door. Even though he smokes a pipe, his baby face, braces, and tux make him look like he's ready for the eighth-grade formal. From the front his hair looks short, but he turns and I notice a ponytail hangs down his back.

"Welcome, fine folks," he yells like a carnival barker. His voice is older than his face—deep and clear like a DJ's. "Step this way to see Zachary Beaver, the fattest boy in the world. Six hundred and forty-three pounds. You don't have to rush, but keep in mind others behind you want a look too. My name is Paulie Rankin, and I'll be happy to take your questions."

"And your money too," Cal says out of the corner of his mouth. "By the way, can you loan me two bucks?" I nod and peel two dollars from my wallet.

Tara jumps and jumps. "I can't wait! I can't wait! Do you think he's fatter than Santa?"

"How would I know?" I grumble.

Cal kneels next to her. "I'll bet he's three times fatter than Santa."

Her eyes grow big. "Oooh! That's *real* fat."

Cal likes little kids, but then, he sometimes acts



like one. Maybe because he's the youngest in the family. He has two brothers and one sister. His oldest brother, Wayne, is in the army, serving in Vietnam. He's the kind of big brother I wish I had.

Wayne writes to Cal every week. But Cal is so lazy, he hardly ever writes him back. If I had a brother in Vietnam that wrote me letters saying what a neat brother I was, I'd always write him back.

Cal reads every letter to me. Wayne never says anything about the kind of stuff we see on the news—no blood and guts. He writes about home. How he misses lying in bed, listening to Casey Kasem and Wolfman Jack on the radio. How he wishes he could eat a Bahama Mama snow cone from Wylie Womack's stand and let the syrup run down his fingers. And how the worst day of his life, before he got drafted, was the day he missed catching that fly ball during the Bucks-Cardinals game because he was too busy watching some girl walk up the stands in her pink hot pants. He says he'd live that day over a hundred times if it meant he could come back home. Wayne makes Antler sound like the best place on the face of the earth. Sometimes he even adds: *P.S. Tell your buddy Toby I said hey.*

The line moves slowly, and when people exit the trailer, some come out all quiet like they've been