

KIMBERLY WILLIS HOLT

When  
Zachary Beaver  
Came to Town



BY THE AUTHOR OF *My Louisiana Sky*

## 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.

**N**othing ever happens in Toby's small Texas town. Nothing much, that is, until this summer.

This summer, everyone seems to be leaving. Toby's mother leaves home to be a country singer. His best friend Cal's older brother goes off to fight in Vietnam. But their sleepy town is about to get a jolt with the arrival of Zachary Beaver, billed as the fattest boy in the world. Toby is enthralled with him and his tales of the people and places he's known. In fact, Toby realizes, there's more to Zachary than the stories he tells, and he wants to know the boy behind the billing. Toby is in for a summer unlike any other, a summer sure to change his life.

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