

BETH ANN FENNELLY

## Excerpt from *The Titled World*

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### Six

The whole first day, she was skittish with the baby. She didn't even realize she was expecting someone to whisk him away—the baby's dead mother, risen from her grave, or even the cowboy who brought him—until she decided to trim the baby's long fingernails, bendy but so sharp they'd scratched his cheeks. She put her curved scissors to his inch-long finger and had to make herself squeeze. Holding her breath. One, two, three, four nails done, then his pinky twitched and she pinched it and a tiny smile of blood appeared and immediately she glanced at the door. But no one came to take him, leave her orphaned. The child was squalling so she picked him up and sucked his little finger and shushed him, holding him against her shoulder and patting him as she executed her loose-legged bouncy walk, the one which had worked on Jacob.

The bouncy walk came right back. The baby calmed. Later, when she needed to trim the rest of his nails, she put his fingers one by one in her mouth and nibbled them smooth.

And so she grew to know him through her mouth. Through her nose and ears and fingers. He dirtied his diddie and the mess got all up his back and she bathed him, worked her wet cloth into his wrinkles and crevices, lifted up his chin to suds out the grimy beads. He didn't like the bath, she could tell the sensation was new, and he fastened desperate eyes on her so she sang to him about arms as she swirled the washrag over his arms, sang to him about toes as she flossed between his toes. He fell asleep afterwards and she had the strange experience of missing him, though he was right there. She hovered over the nest of blankets she'd made on her bed, and at one point he was so

still she held a finger beneath his nose to make sure he was breathing. She wanted to study him from every angle. When have I had this feeling before? Oh yes—falling in love.... She didn't mind the rain which she wore like a cloak pulled tight around them both.

She named him Willy, for her father; Jacob had been named Julius Jacob Holver, for Jesse's father. She wished her father could meet Willy soon, though Jesse had never allowed her to go home to visit. She didn't want to think about Jesse now, worried he wouldn't like her having a baby. But she couldn't give him back. Wouldn't even know how to. It was too late.

Each hour brought her discoveries. The first was that he was happiest on the move. He'd woken squalling from his nap and kept squalling and she knew he was hungry. The strange-talking cowboy (where do you come from if you talk like that? Not Alabama or Mississippi, that's for sure) had given her some strained peas and oatmeal, and she offered them, but the baby didn't seem interested. She thought maybe he was thirsty. The cowboy had also said the baby liked Nehi soda, but that was crazy, and besides, she didn't have any. She made him a bottle of Pet milk with a bit of blackstrap molasses, but he wouldn't take it. He cried when she held him and cried when she pinned on a fresh diddie and cried when she put him down on a pallet. She picked him up and he paused to burp and kept crying. As the wind outside deepened from a whimper to a howl, he met it and raised it, opening his mouth impossibly wide (Dixie Clay thought of a snake she and Lucius had once surprised in the corn crib, disengaging its jaw to swallow a rat). The baby was good and angry by then, his eyes squinched, face a red fist, arms flailing, his tongue vibrating like the clapper of a bell. Dixie Clay decided to fetch him some cow's milk from the nearest neighbor, Old Man Marvin, so loyal of a customer that his teeth had about rotted. Marvin could be counted on not to gossip, and her instinct was to preserve the secret of Willy for a while. Certainly Jesse should learn about the baby from her.

But first she had to check the still, so she bundled Willy against the rain and ran with him pressed against her chest. She tried not to jostle him. He stopped crying, though the way was rough and rooty.

When she got to the still, the mash was bubbling and she needed both hands free, to lift the heavy lid and stir the wooden paddle. She rested the baby on the thumper keg while deciding what to do. She didn't want to lay Willy on the floor because she'd seen a coach whip there a few weeks ago. Her feeling was that if snakes got in her house, well, she had no choice but to kill them, but when she was in the woods, she was in their home, and she let them be. But now she was uneasy about the coach whip, its black body tapering off into grey and then creamy white at the tail. She remembered stories from her

girlhood about the coach whip chasing children by putting its tail in its mouth and rolling like a hoop. It would loop their feet, trip them, and then whip them bloody with its tail. She knew all this was hogwash then and knew it more so now, but still she hesitated. And that's when she realized Willy'd been lulled to sleep on the rumbling, hiccupping thumper keg.

Which is how William Clay Lucius Holliver became a moonshiner. A moonshiner, six months old on that very day of April 19 (she had declared this to be the case when she realized he couldn't have a birthday if she didn't choose one).

Dixie Clay did buy milk from Old Man Marvin and then on second thought rode back and bought the cow outright. The cow was named Millie and Dixie Clay put her in the stall next to Chester and he sniffed at the partition and pawed his hoof. Five years back, when she'd begun to shine, she'd let all the farm animals go, first the cow then the sheep and chickens, no time to tend them, no need for what they could give. But Chester—this she'd never tell Jesse, he'd laugh at her, but was true nevertheless—had grown melancholy. She scratched his withers and then leaned her forehead on his shoulder. "We both have some company now, Chet," she whispered.