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Opening Extract from...

Fremont

Written by Elizabeth Reeder

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FREMONT

Elizabeth Reeder

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For my mom

&

for ARTT

MANIFEST DESTINY

THAT DAMN MAP

In a Midwest state that will remain nameless, in a place offering up tipping cows and crackling cornfields, stands a small town, one man's ever hopeful claim to fame. Just a ways north and west of this town, originating from an unseen source, a thin creek breaks ground and gurgles a course past the only hill in this otherwise pancake-flat place. Now up on the hill, in a mock-antebellum house that is falling down around the moving mass of bodies they call family, live the Fremonts, and on the rather dull, scuffed wall of their entrance hall, is a map. This map, handmade and huge, has been and will always be, incomplete.

Secured to the wall and painted with care, this map represents the somewhat united states of the Fremont family. Each state, made up of carefully carved and painted plywood, is attached to the others and to the topographically detailed wall with superglue and is about the size of a dozen finger-painted hands. Texas, being slightly larger by nature, is the size of big men's hands.

And although the story lives here, above this moody creek, as Hal and Rachel and their kids go about the business of being a family, the story starts in the diner where Rachel Roanoke and Hal Fremont, in a fated moment, meet.

MANIFEST, DESTINY

Rachel has been husband-hunting for months. Across the street from the diner where she works, they're building an Opera House with its west side perched on a steep cliff that edges the Pacific Ocean. Each day she watches the builders come and go and she keeps an eye out for a man who will move her deep down where she needs to be sure, but no one has, so she flirts in a way that is good for business but never brushes their hands or shoulders, and lets proffered phone numbers fall to the floor to be snatched up by Caley, a low-maintenance bottle blond who isn't nearly so discerning.

At her breaks, Rachel stands where the diner's building turns the corner into an alley and she realigns herself with the movement of the tide; she remembers Menatauk, the island where she grew up. Cosseted between the mainland of a different coast and the barrier islands of the Carolinas, it's a place she's never seen on any map. As a kid she used to climb to the top of the hill that cleaved the island in half and from there she'd take in the view of the Island's secure heart-shaped coastline and the protective surrounding water that

would take her to the mainland when her father banished her into the waiting riptide.

Here, leaning against the roughcast of the diner, just a hint of coastal coolness to the hot air, a single strong gust of sea-wind makes Rachel blink. She lowers her head, a hand across her forehead like a visor to protect her face, and clears the lashes from her eyes.

When she looks up a slim figure walks along the scaffolding, his easy body stretching like a continent across the watery blue of the sky, each steady step finding the steel beam while he looks out to sea. She has to cross her legs to keep the riot under control.

This man, who she watches carefully from behind the counter at lunch, is hers and he'll have perfect skin when she strips him down.

At lunch he doesn't take his eyes off Caley but Rachel knows he'll notice her in time. His name is Hal Fremont and his dad built a town somewhere in the Midwest. His parents died in a car crash just a few weeks back, and him just past twenty, or so the crew said at lunch when she slipped in a question about the new guy who went back to work more promptly than the old-timers who sat drinking coffee and asking for refills.

'That one's looking for a wife,' says Bill the foreman. 'That's what I think.'

'Those virgin bones sure could use a seeing to,' says Caley, watching Hal's legs cut a fine line through his jeans as he crosses the street back to the site.

'Don't you dare, Caley. That one's mine.' Rachel blushes, but stands her ground.

The boys invite Hal for a lunch of chicken-fried steak, mashed potatoes and gravy at the diner across the street from the site and he notices the pretty, wispy blond waitress. But when he goes back for dinner it's the manager, a dark beauty, who catches him up.

Rachel has her sleeves rolled up and her long black hair is pulled back off her face. With arms like that he knows she'll be able to

handle an army of boys. Her body is strong and the slow red of her lips puts Hal in the mind to pursue her.

Luckily for them both, Rachel does the work for him. She doesn't wait to hear what Hal thinks of the world. She doesn't think about whether she'll be happy or content or whole. Instead she wears her sensible black flats so she won't fall head over heels before him.

Coffee pots in hand, one black-rimmed, one orange, she banters with the regulars, keeping her body neatly at a distance as she pours decaf or regular into basic cream-colored mugs. Leaving the weak-ass decaf behind she refills Hal's mug, cutting the distance between them. Her hand on his bare arm. When she falters, Hal steadies her; the whole room sees it, something rare, perfect. Men loosen their shirts at the collars, women fan themselves with the menus, and pat their faces with tissues which, when pulled from their purses, are white as doves.

He doesn't let go of her arm after she swoons. He stands, picks up his hat and puts it on his head. Then he takes both the bill and Rachel to the cash register. The room stretches around them, people lean in to hear the pace of their breath. It's steady but stronger than before.

In front of the cash register they manage to pry themselves apart. It's a force of will. They can't do the sorts of things they want to do, on the floor, in the middle of a packed diner. Or can they? Rachel slips behind the counter, smoothing her skirt and trying to find the earth beneath her and beneath that, the water.

He grins and this steadies her.

'Would you like to get married?' she asks when he hands over twenty bucks to pay for his dinner.

'That's the plan,' he says. 'Someday.'

'Does tomorrow suit?'

His smile isn't so much slow in coming, as luscious. 'Well yes, I suppose it does.'

Hal and Rachel exchange only phone numbers and, on the next day, on their first date, they go to the registry office. If they'd been different people they'd have had a satisfying screw in the long alley behind the restaurant and gone their separate ways. But they aren't different people, they're family people.

'Do you take this man?' asks the justice.

'Mmmmmm,' says Rachel.

'Excuse me miss, is that your answer?'

'I do,' Rachel says, the three daisies in her bouquet, bright yellow with ruby centers, doing nothing to distract her from her man. His dark eyes, a hint of tight curl to his buzzed black hair. The smell of him, her knees aren't joints but rivers. He looks at her, but quickly. She can't see the slim fine lines of his hips and thighs but she knows, knows, how it will feel to place her hand, just there, in the small of his back and pull him to her.

The distance between them sears with heat and her dress, a cheap, light cotton sundress borrowed from Caley, ripples in the ocean breeze which tries to cool what might ignite.

Hal stands, hat in hand, and is still. The breeze lifts his hair and he licks his hand to smooth it down. It's too much, what he sees of her, and she smells like rain coming on and making everything dance.

They don't touch. They'll falter if they do. They both know it.

'I do,' Hal says. 'For better, worse, richer, poorer.'

The smartest, most ridiculous thing he's ever done: he's going to bring the most beautiful woman in the world home and they're going to build things.

'You may kiss the bride,' says the justice.

Hal and Rachel don't move. The room bends in, they're pulling the water from the air, loosening the wooden joists of the beams which stretch across the ceiling.

'You may kiss the bride,' repeats the justice of the peace, taking a step back.

But they don't kiss. Rachel places her hand on her cheek to cool the flush. Hal reaches back into his wallet and pulls out two twenties to tip the justice and the organ player.

'Thank you, ma'am,' he says, first to the justice, and then again to Rachel when they climb into their car.

'The pleasure will be all mine, I'm sure,' she says. 'Well, maybe not all mine.'

And it's Hal's turn to blush.

Out of the city soon enough and Rachel sits in the passenger seat and looks ahead, out the side window. She loosens her hair, rolls down the window. Hal turns on the radio, moves his hands over the wheel. He's a good driver, quick, of course he's quick. They need to get where they're going. But he's never reckless. Rachel likes this.

They don't talk. There's no need. She could tell him about how her family, the Roanokes, tolerated her until she came of age and then they didn't care if she survived or the water took her; she could tell him about her time in the water. He could tell her about his childhood, the death of his parents, how loneliness had driven him to the coast in search of a wife. Sure. But what good would it do?

She is going to have girls, a boatload of girls, and that's not been done before. What they are doing, going to do, hasn't been done before.

Hal drives. Everything fades behind him, already myth. When operas are sung in the new opera house that overlooks the sea, no one but them will know why it was really built. It was built to bring them together. He carries everything he needs right beside him in this car and if they touch too soon, the wrong land will be consecrated. He has to be able to tell his first born, his son, when they stand one day in the magnificent hall shoulder to shoulder: 'You were conceived here, right here.' And with his son he'll gaze out through the open door at the town beyond and he'll say, 'All this is yours.'

The newlyweds drive on through the mountains with the full moon rising, and when the sun takes up its journey in the east, they drive towards that and the land starts to stretch with its palm open. The landscape changes from arid to desert to mountainous and becomes rolling prairie settling into flatness.

Rachel's heart races as she sees, imagines, what is before her. 'It's such a vast country,' and she dares to reach over and kiss the spot where his jaw meets his neck.

'Yes,' he says and puts his foot on the gas.

Hal and Rachel drive on, talking about the songs playing on the radio, but mostly staying silent, the car swirling up dust and storms that the horizon rising up behind them hides from their view.

At the end of the next day, Hal crosses a rickety bridge over a creek, drives up a small hill, swings the car into the drive, and parks so Rachel can admire the house and the landscape beyond. Unfolding herself from the car, she leans back against it and takes everything in. Hal stands beside her, a tentative hand on her bare arm. She tries to stay in the moment, but oh how she wants the moment to be more naked.

The house looks like it belongs on a cotton plantation and she half expects to see slave quarters out back, unmarked graves across the road. Columns support a dark roof and two porches, open to the elements, hang off the house like a fringe. In need of a new coat of paint, even now the white of it shocks against the blue of the endless sky pancaked to the sunken earth, which stretches out as far as the eye can see. Behind them lies a neat cemetery rowed with granite tombstones and then the hill falls down past sixteen houses, only to end, rather anti-climactically, at the gas station at the low end. The house lies so far inland it makes Rachel dizzy and she searches for signs of the water she can just about hear beyond the pounding of blood in her ears.

'My dad built most of those houses,' Hal says and his eyes go slightly distant. He shakes his head, shakes himself free of something bound. 'Well missus, let's see if we can't make some trouble,' and he slides his hand down his wife's arm, around her waist and picks her up, like the bride she is. He jiggles her a bit when he has to unlock and open the door, but he is all suave and knows it.

He places her on her new homeground and they stand side by side in the massive hall. 'Just think, soon this house will be filled with our children and everyone in this town and beyond, will know the Fremonts.' His open hand slaps the wall, bang on center—Midwest, here, home—and a few pieces of crumbling plaster fall to the floor.

'Come here, Hal.' Rachel wraps her legs around his narrow waist, forcing his hands away from the wall so they can support her hips, and without knowing a thing they start to build a map. This blessed, this hopeful, this damn map.

drawing a line under chick-lit …

Kohl was born in a bar in Edinburgh in 2010. We, Lesley-Ann Dickson and Leila Cruickshank, often had difficulty finding books that were good reads, combining beautiful writing with thought-provoking ideas, and as we worked in publishing that was a shocking state of affairs. We wanted to help people who, like us, are always looking out for the next good book but are often disappointed in the quest.

If you like great women's literature, are tired of chick-lit, and want something that captures your imagination, then you'll like Kohl. We only publish books we love, so you can rely on our choices. We believe in supporting new writers, creating outstanding books, and listening to our readers. Visit www.kohlpublishing.com for exclusive deals, insightful discussions, and inspiring authors.

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