

# THE DEATH OF MUNGO BLACKWELL

LAUREN H.  
BRANDENBURG

Illustrations by Sarah J. Coleman



LION FICTION

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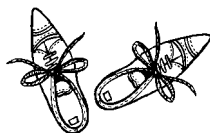
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## CHAPTER 1



Tofts were not welcome at the renowned Coraloo Flea Market. The Blackwells made certain of that. On the brick wall, the sign outside the once prosperous shoe factory proclaimed, NO DOGS OR TOFTS – GRANNY BITES! Reading these words, Charlie Price scratched his thinning blond hair, musing over the long-standing rivalry he had read about between the Tofts and the Blackwells. Today was Thursday; the market was closed, but there was nothing stopping Charlie from exploring. The scent of old leather and lavender lured him – as it did countless others – through the stone archway into the still, quiet building, carrying with it the promise of unearthing a hidden treasure or memorable trinket. Inside, the shops, each specific to their wares – antique books, hand-dyed ribbons, flowers, freshly pressed olive oils, leather goods, and an occasional antique dealer – lined the perimeter like tiny homes. These, Charlie knew, belonged to the Blackwells. The center, reserved for paying vendors and hungry shoppers dining on Granny’s delicacies at hand-hewn tables, was empty today.

He peered through one of the storefront windowpanes. In front of a faux mantel, two armchairs were arranged in such a way the shop almost looked livable. Charlie moved on. The next shop appeared promising – less orderly, no décor. He spotted a French horn, dented and in need of a polish. *Music is money* – a mantra he heeded when considering a purchase. He’d come back and make an offer in the morning, but he would have to arrive early if he wanted to turn a profit – especially at the Coraloo. Pickers arrive early.

Nestled at the top of a rolling green hill in a picturesque town with stone inlaid streets, overlooking curving rows of carefully maintained cedar-shingled rooftops not yet touched by the deluge of tourists or modern construction trends, sat the Coraloo Flea Market. *Wayfaring* magazine called the market one of the country's hidden wonders – known for its charm, history, food, and peculiar owners. The writer described it as a place where peace and simplicity dine with the eccentric – a trove for modern-day treasure hunters – keeping watch over a quaint commonality held together by deep ancestral roots and rivalries.

It's why Charlie entertained the thought of moving his family two hours and forty-one minutes southeast of the big city – to start over, to live simply, to shop the Coraloo. He shined his flashlight into the shop – an antique globe perched on a wooden pedestal caught his eye. He doubted they would take less than the asking price, but it was worth a try. Beside it, sitting on top of a pile of yellowing maps, a gold rimmed teacup sat chipped and out of place. It wasn't valuable anymore. Somebody had probably tossed it out during a spring clean, along with broken picture frames and melted candles. But regardless of its worth, it had a story. The cup once had an owner – possibly a fan of Ceylon orange pekoe or Earl Grey. Had the vessel been a gift or a souvenir from an unplanned road trip? Had the owner been forced to part with this fragment of everyday life to make room for simplicity?

No... that was his story. With his hands in the pockets of his slacks, Charlie slumped down on an old church pew outside the market shop. Had life really come to this? Had four years at university and a career with a six-figure income dwindled down to sorting through the discarded wares of others? He had been good at his job and never doubted his instincts. He was meticulous, thorough – except on the day the proposal landed on his desk.

A balmy August breeze crept into the brick edifice, bringing with it the sweet aroma of freshly hung tobacco from a farm on the other side of the hill. Charlie closed his eyes and inhaled distant days – memories of a life absorbed by legality and expectation, before the whirlwind of the past year wreaked devastation on his once predictable life.

He remembered the loan. How could he forget? An equipment loan three times what the proprietor needed. His university roommate and colleague, Carl Rogers, had pulled him aside. “This guy is a pal of mine. Everything’s here. Just sign and you’re done.” That should have been his first red flag – slow down, look closer. The plan seemed solid, the client a chef and former restaurant owner. It was a lapse in judgment. A missing document. He should have caught it. With the fragile state of the financial world, there was no room for error. On a wider scale, the newspapers swarmed with rumors of a crumbling economy in response to banks’ overlending to house-hungry newlyweds. Pair that with this class-action lawsuit of press-worthy proportions, and the bank would take a healthy loss, leading to some very unhappy shareholders.

He had called Velveteen. She had said she was mid-foil at the salon and could not meet him for another two hours. He had packed up his office and walked out the front doors of Heritage Financial without looking back. He had needed time to strategize, to carefully word how he was going to tell his wife of eleven years that he was unemployed – not just unemployed, but most likely blackballed from every bank, accounting firm, and food truck in the city.

*Stupid food trucks.* Charlie let his head fall into his hands, vowing to never eat at a food truck again. The fragmented events leading up to this moment entered his mind, overshadowing the potential of Coraloo.

His rear end was sore from sitting for so long, and he wasn’t sure he could swim in his own guilt and self-loathing much longer. He raised his eyes at the click clack of high heels.

Velveteen Price arrived with the latest Melba DuMont novel peeking cautiously over the edge of her handbag. He stood and kissed her – a quick peck on the lips. Whenever he kissed her in public, he pretended all of the other men around were jealous. He loved every inch of her, inside and out, and dreaded telling her their life would drastically change. He sensed she already knew something – regardless, Charlie had wanted her to hear it from him, so explained every detail, from how Carl, despite being a known idiot, had insisted his street food truck client was an easy underwrite to the fact that when it fell apart, Charlie took the fall. At this Velveteen informed him her friendship with Carl's wife, Mary Beth Rogers, was over.

"I'm done with that woman. I really am!"

Charlie had laughed – he used to laugh more.

*"But I'm proud of you, Charlie Price."*

*"For what? Losing my job?"*

*"No, for making it this far. It's not over, you know. You'll find something better. You were almost VP of the country's largest bank! Somebody will see the value in that... Somebody will see your value! What about Standard? I'm sure they would hire you. I'll call Rebecca, her husband is pres –"*

*"I've already started putting in applications." He held up two fingers.*

*"Two applications already! See! You're a fighter, Charlie!"*

*"Two rejections."*

*"Today?"*

*"I applied and they denied. Two, right after I left the office. Nobody's hiring in this economy. Homes, cars, anything financeable – banks are calling in notes left and right. They're losing money. There's not a chance they'll take a risk on a man deemed responsible for a hunk of the city's employees being forced to take sick leave."*

*“They can’t blame you for poor immune systems, Charlie. Besides, God never intended for us to eat from a truck.” She cringed.*

*He brushed a lock of hair away from her dark eyes. “What about the truffle truck or the cupcake truck on 7th?”*

*“Dessert is always an exception, Charlie.” She glanced down at her heels – most likely a recent purchase. Even with the added two inches, the top of her newly quaffed hair barely reached Charlie’s chin. “Charlie, are you trying to tell me we will lose everything?”*

*“Not everything. We have each other and Gideon. There’s enough in savings and a few side investments to get us by until I can find work, but we might need to cut back... to be safe.”*

*“Will we have to cancel the Christmas party? I think we should appear as if life is carrying on as normal, don’t you agree? If we cancel the party, everyone will start talking, and before long, Jennifer will be telling that gossip Mary Beth we are headed for the poor house. If we can swing it, we must have the party.”*

Velveteen started planning in July for their annual Christmas Party – lining up caterers, researching tree farms, and spending hours at the stationery shop on the corner of 9th and Canary picking out invitations. Hospitality was her gift, her art form. She studied it, practiced it, and paid so much attention to every detail of her craft he was quite sure she even prayed about it. The party was her event, her personal year-end final examination – a night culminating in the glitz, greenery, and glamour at the invitation of his best friend and wife, Velveteen Price. He couldn’t have denied her.

*“Only if we invite the Rogers,” he joked.*

He used to joke more too.

*“You’ve got to be kidding, Charlie!”*

*“You were friends with her this morning.”*

*“Be serious! This is important. If we don’t have the party, I’ll need to work on our excuse, or our guests will think we’ve abandoned them! That would be horrible, Charlie! Maybe we can make up a story about an aunt who passed away or tell everyone the Duke of Such and Such has invited us to spend Christmas in Europe.”*

*“You’re related to a duke?”*

*“I wish!”*

*“We can have the party, if...”*

*“If what, Charlie?”*

*“If you invite your long-lost relative the duke.”*

That year was the last party in the townhouse. There was nothing he could have done to stop their downfall. Without his six-figure salary, their savings were quickly depleted, and with that, the lifestyle Charlie’s job had afforded them slowly slipped away as the funds disappeared from his bank account. He feared he might even lose his sanity. The word *failure* loomed over him, a dark cloud so heavy he no longer heard his wife sobbing in the closet.

Velveteen’s car had been repossessed on a Wednesday. As she very rarely drove the vehicle, it took them until Friday to realize it was gone. Their ten-year-old son, Gideon Price, had found his mother in the closet crying that day. Except for the loss of the car, however, Charlie took on any work he could find to make sure Velveteen’s life carried on as close to normal as finances would permit. And Velveteen did her part as well. She had her long brown tresses highlighted and trimmed every four weeks instead of two and learned to shop online using coupon codes. But her small sacrifices were not enough.

Charlie had cancelled his membership at the Gentleman’s Hall and the gym – working out twice a week did not appear



to help his middle-aged middle anyway. He had refused to buy a new suit even when Velveteen insisted he have one for an interview. And when his personal finder had called to tell him he had located the elusive 1894 leather-bound first edition of Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* that had occupied his every spare thought, Charlie had declined the purchase. Velveteen had nearly fainted with disbelief. He loved books and read often – at least until *The Rooning*, after which time seemed to speed up and a veil of debt collectors and fear masked the joys they tried to find in their everyday.

Charlie shook his head. Coraloo would not know what hit them when Velveteen Price graced the door. She could hold her own, of that he was certain.

Four months after the Christmas party, during Velveteen's Tuesday book club, the doorbell rang and she was served the foreclosure papers on her five thousand square foot dream home. Before the foreclosure agent exited, Velveteen had asked him if he would like a macaron. He had no idea that his answer – a baffled “Yes, please” – would incite such rage in his wife as to go down in Price family history as *The Rooning*. She had sauntered her petite frame back to the ladies, grabbed the sterling silver tray of brilliantly colored treats and began throwing the meringue confections at the man's forehead. The man scrambled for the door, fumbling to pull it open. But Velveteen didn't stop. Another one hit him on the back of the neck. He turned and faced her. “Crazy woman! I'll take your house and your stupid *macaroons*!”

At this, the fire already stoked in Velveteen turned into a full-on inferno. She gritted her teeth, arm cocked with the delight in hand. “They're *macarons*, not *macaroons*, you imbecile! One ‘o’, not two.” The man was gone before she had fully settled on throwing the tray. From that day forward, the family of three had nicknamed their financial misfortune *The Rooning*.

“Before *The Rooning*” became such a common phrase in their house they often forgot its dark implications. But Charlie knew the truth. It was just an easier way to say, “Before we lost everything.” Following *The Rooning* things had moved quickly.

On his way home from his seventh interview – desperate and knowing any day they would receive notice their home was going to auction – Charlie had spied a royal blue fountain pen – a Waterman – in the window of a pawnshop. He had two just like it at home and was certain he was reading the price incorrectly. He had stepped inside and confirmed the briarwood pen was rare and grossly under-priced. At that moment an idea took root. If it worked, he could double his money. If it didn’t, they would be eating bacon and eggs for dinner for the rest of the week. He purchased the pen, did a bit of research on selling over the Internet, listed the pen for a three-day auction or best offer, and waited.

Before the day was over, the interested party had offered him twice what he had paid for it. That night Charlie Price listed his collection of fountain pens and took the family out to dinner. The rush of the deal made him feel powerful and in control, like during his days working at the bank. The next day he had listed everything he could think of that might make an easy profit – gold cufflinks, a vintage telescope he had never used, calculators, three watches, and a pair of binoculars. Soon, almost every object in their home promised an easy dollar. But he wanted the thrill of the Waterman. He started spending his days scouring pawnshops and digging through donated goods at church rummage sales. In the evenings, he diligently researched asking prices and resale values before listing every purchased item on the online auction site.

Gideon had been the first to jump into the project. Seeing his father’s excitement and fearful *The Rooning* had squashed his chances of owning the latest edition of *Pirates of the Cosmos*, he had plopped a stack of old comic books down on his father’s desk and said, “Dad, I’ll split the profit with you fifty-fifty.”

It took Velveteen a little longer. Charlie would never forget the look on her face the day she walked into his home office to find his latest pickings.

*She gasped and slapped her hand over her pink lips – eyes wide, shaking her head in disbelief. “Oh, Charlie! Are these truly our belongings? It all looks like piles of cheap junk!”*

*“Funny, isn’t it? I guess we can be thankful we have enough junk to sell.”*

*“I have to hand it to you, Charlie Price. You’re keeping the lights on.” She shot a glance down at her chipping Flamingo Fiesta nail polish.*

*He saw her.*

*“How much longer do you think we have?”*

*“Before we starve?” He tried to make a joke.*

*She frowned.*

*Charlie took a deep breath. “We have at least three months before the house goes to auction.”*

*“I see.”*

Charlie had nearly been hit in the face by a flying Lucetta Vacher clutch after a series of thuds sent him sprinting to their bedroom. Just outside her closet lay four purses, a pair of boots, two pairs of designer blue jeans, and a mink shrug Charlie had given her on their tenth anniversary.

*“Outdated! Out of style, and useless! I won’t wear a piece of it. It’s closet filler. All of it! Sell it all, Charlie.”*

Charlie had listed her “useless” items, covering their groceries for the next month, and insisted Velveteen have her nails done. He had created this lifestyle for her, given her more than her modest

upbringing had ever allowed her to dream, and no matter what, he was going to take care of his family.

It wasn't long before the Price family had become reclusive – avoiding social events and close encounters with country club companions. Velvetten had sent word to the ladies that she would not be hosting book club the following month as their Maltese, Barnaby, was ill. Fortunately the ladies were too wrapped up in their own concerns to recall that the Prices didn't own a Maltese.

They sold everything that had resale value – even stripping the walls and cleaning out the cupboards – and did quite a number on Velvetten's jewelry boxes as Charlie continued to unearth bargains in the darker corners of the city.

What came next was the hardest.

Charlie had received word their house was going to auction mid-June, the day before his birthday. They would barely have two months to move out. He had dreaded the conversation with Velvetten – he purposefully put it off – partly because of her prior antics with the foreclosure agent. The idea of being whacked in the head with a macaron – or worse – haunted him. He had known she hoped their days of picking up random objects for resale would produce enough income to save the house, but it wasn't enough. He had planned to tell her, suggest they lease a modest house in a nearby suburb. He could continue looking for work in the city. So many times he had wanted to suggest she join one of those home-based network-marketing companies – sell plant-based facial products or imported jewelry. But she hadn't worked since Gideon was born – he didn't want to ask her. He couldn't ask her. It was not the life he promised her, no matter how bad things had gotten.

He had prepared his speech, researched affordable properties in the suburbs, and practiced ways to embellish them by calling the pantry “the butler's closet” and the family room “the hearth

room". He jotted down words like "charming", "quaint", and "chef's kitchen". But the conversation had never happened.

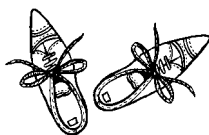
On his way back from his weekly Friday pawnshop visit, the cover of *Wayfaring* magazine had caught his eye. In brilliant blue letters it read: "Shop the Coraloo". Charlie had heard of Coraloo. Not too far from the city. He had thumbed quickly through the article – hidden wonders... treasure hunters – and used what little gas he had in his car to make the trip to find out for himself what the place had to offer.

Charlie Price raised his head, looked out upon the historic market, and tried to replace the memories of a regret-filled past with hope of life in the town at the bottom of the hill. They would find a new house. It would be the adventure of a lifetime. It was a long shot, but what other choice did he have? Living in the city was not an option. The Prices would make this work. *Unless... What if...? Another Rooning? Failure.*

He breathed in the cool air of the open market and listened to the gentle silence – the peace of Coraloo settled him, replacing doubt with possibility. *This could be it – our fresh start. What was it Velveteen had said they needed? A "quelque chose de nouveau"?*

A something new.

## CHAPTER 2



Velveteen Price gazed out the window at the passing homes – sprawling manor-style estates bordered by rolling green hills and limestone walls. Last month's issue of *Country Life* magazine lay open in her lap, flaunting images of brilliantly colored canned fruits sitting on a table with auburn vials of homemade oils surrounded by shiplap-covered walls and freshly picked flowers. She sighed.

Charlie had visited Coraloo once more before he'd sat her down and proposed the drastic move.

*"Vee, I want to be completely honest with you about Coraloo. No surprises. I didn't see a salon, and I think the hardware store might be the grocery. But I've done some research, and if what the articles say is true, their market is going to turn that little town into the country's next hot spot. They'll line the streets to draw in tourists – high-end stores, those retro barbershops that are popping up all over the place, and most likely a restaurant or two. We'll have to wait for it, but it will come."*

Velveteen watched her husband's eyes dart from one magazine to the next. He held up images of the picturesque town, pointing out the stone church and rows of historic brick homes with gated courtyards. She could envision it.

*"There is one restaurant already... it's more of a tavern."* He pointed to a two-story building with red shutters and a heavy wooden door. *"The locals call it The Beaver's Beard. And get this, their specialty – deer meat nachos, but only*

*if it's deer season." He chuckled. She gagged. "See here – it's surrounded by farmland and woods. And on the hill, that's the market. I'll pick there. I've seen it in action, Vee. The place is packed. I could find something to flip every weekend if I wanted. Those people don't know how much money they have sitting right in front of their noses, but I do."*

She hated it when he used those words: *pick* and *flip*. Velveteen had no intention of digging through piles of junk and had already informed Charlie she would rather not partake in his financial dealings at the Coraloo. If her mother were alive, she would have forbidden it, saying, "I worked too hard cleaning Mrs Vanderschmidt's toilets for you to go rifling through rubbish. That woman made you a debutant!" Velveteen missed her mother, but was thankful she wasn't around to witness their *Rooning*.

*They sat in silence, Charlie watching her every breath, Velveteen's mind whirring as she tried to absorb Charlie's excitement – deer meat nachos, tavern, old, vintage... his grandmother's Christmas ornaments...*

*"Vee, are you okay? Tell me what you're thinking."*

*Velveteen pulled from her musings. "I'm thinking about Christmas, Charlie."*

*"Christmas?"*

*"Wouldn't a vintage Christmas be absolutely lovely?"*

*"What's Christmas have to do with Coraloo?"*

*"Surely we will still celebrate Christmas in Coraloo, won't we Charlie?"*

*Charlie shot up from the upholstered wingback chair and nearly slid into the marble fireplace. "So you're okay with it?"*

*"Of course! Oh, Charlie! Don't you know? It's absolutely fabulous. It will be an adventure. Just like Melba DuMont!"*

*"You mean Melba from your book?"*

*"Of course, Charlie. Who else?" She took pride in the fact she had read The Countess of DuMont more than sixteen times. "Are there sheep, Charlie?"*

*"Are you looking for your shepherd?" he joked.*

*"Charlie Price, you know you are my one and only. Besides, Melba only ran off with him because of what that evil Count Horace did to her. Oh, Charlie! This is it. You found our quelque chose de nouveau." She threw her arms around his neck. "But Charlie, I'd rather not..." – she chose her words carefully – "go to the market. It's just that..."*

*"But it's so much more –"*

*"No thank you, Charlie. I've tried my hand at it. You know I have, but there's something so... Oh I don't know, what if those items belonged to a dead person?"*

*"Then I guess they won't mind me selling them, will they?" He laughed at his cleverness.*

*Velveteen did not.*

*She said yes to Coraloo. She'd warm up to the market when she was ready.*

*"Okay, no market."*

*She squealed. "I can't wait to tell the ladies! Mary Beth will be absolutely green over it. Who would have thought it, Charlie? The Prices are moving to the country!"*

In that moment, the quest for the light of simplicity brightened the darkness surrounding *The Rooning*. Velveteen embraced their oncoming move like it was her new life mission. The feelings of defeat and fear surrounding Charlie in the days after the food truck debacle were now replaced by a sense of purpose – a mission – and a new family motto: "Simplicity." They would start over, this time living with much less. Not just because they had to, but because they wanted to. They would drastically downsize



their lifestyle – living on what Coraloo could provide without looking back on life in the city. And they would be happy.

Velveteen twirled a string of pearls around her pointer finger, pulling them closer to her neck, and glanced back down at the staged scene gracing the glossy pages. *Simplicity*. She could live like this; surely it wouldn't be that hard. She and the book club had talked about it often. The ladies were entertained by her obsession with the tragic life of Melba DuMont – the heiress driven to servitude who falls madly in love with the prince disguised as a shepherd. For Velveteen Melba's misfortunes represented a blissful escape from the constraints of their upper society life – though, she had to admit, she already missed the gourmet pastries from Francine's on 5th.

*Maybe Coraloo will be good for all of us.* She passed a glance back at Gideon whose head was jammed inside another one of his comic books. Maybe he would make some friends. Maybe *she* would make some friends. She hardly called the ladies in the city "friends" – "acquaintances" was a more suitable word.

As Charlie drove, Velveteen flipped through the pages of fresh white minimally decorated kitchens, herb-filled gardens, and articles on repurposing tool shed finds into home accessories. She imagined herself with her dark hair pulled neatly into a ponytail and a monogrammed linen apron wrapped around her waist as she waited for the homemade vanilla to ferment so she could use it to make her own bread. Her daydream was briefly interrupted as she tried to recall whether or not one would put vanilla into dough.

The warm sunlight wooed her back into thoughts of hand-painting her own greeting cards, drying herbs for homemade teas, and decorating their new home in Charlie's flea market finds – at one time she had liked doing her own decorating; she could do it again. And the all-natural cleaning products she would make – it would be much more affordable to make their own. She could see herself flitting across the pages. It would be lovely.

The car bumped. A gorgeous image of a rhubarb tarte Tatin with accompanying recipe scowled at her. She glared back, stuck out her tongue, and tossed the magazine onto the floorboard. Who was she kidding? She had not cleaned her own home in ten years, and the closest she had come to baking a pastry was opening the box from Francine's. And flea market finds? She would have to pass on those. There was no way Charlie could convince her to step foot in the flea market. She'd gone with him on one of his adventures before, and by the grace of God, narrowly escaped the flapping tongues and horde of phone calls that would have followed if Mary Beth Rogers figured out why she was really at the church rummage sale.

"Are you okay?" Charlie reached over and placed his hand on top of hers.

Velveteen forced a smile.

They had spent weeks sorting out the order of their new life – deciding what to sell and what to keep and scouring online real estate sites in search of a home that would not only fit their budget but would fit inside Velveteen's *workable* parameters.

Workable arrived on a Tuesday from a Coraloo real estate agent who referred to himself solely as "a Toft". The online image revealed a brick cottage nestled among other similar homes on a winding side street in Coraloo. Delicate vines grew around the front doorway, and a picket fence outlined the front flower garden. The description said, "Gilded by the morning sun, the historic cottage beckons lovers of simplicity with its Highland charm."

*"Well... what do you think of the place?" It was their only option. The realtor had assured Charlie there were no other available residences in Coraloo.*

Velveteen squealed. *Destiny*. Charlie signed the lease.

She glanced at the time on the dashboard and tried to re-enact a series of breathing techniques she had once learned in

a yoga class. She laid her head against the headrest and closed her eyes. Despite her fears and self-doubt, Velveteen was giddy to enter a world she had only read about in her novels. She had even taken comfort in bragging about their new residence to the acquaintances.

*“In Coraloo? My decorator says the place is a riot!” The acquaintance had gone on: “I think it is absolutely fabulous! How on earth did you convince Charlie to move?”*

*“Simplicity,” Velveteen had told the woman over the phone, knowing full well this one call would spread faster to the acquaintances than if she had phoned them herself. “I told him we needed simplicity.”*

*“Just like Melba! Oh, Velveteen, I am entirely jealous! Who are you having do the remodel? Let me give you the name of my...”*

*Velveteen didn’t listen. The woman on the other end of the phone had visions of a charming estate surrounded by gardens of lavish green grass and a handsome sheepherder at her beck and call. Velveteen purposely withheld explaining that their two bedroom, single toilet home in Coraloo was no bigger than the quarters occupied by most of their nannies.*

“This is it!” Charlie Price pulled the car to a stop.

Velveteen sat up straight. *I can do this. This is what we want.* She slowly opened the car door and stepped into the presence of her new home. “Are you certain this is the right place, Charlie? I’m not quite sure this is correct because... well... it’s yellow, Charlie.”

“Yes, it is a tad yellow, isn’t it?” Charlie laughed. “Not quite gilded.”

“It looks like a baby puked on it,” Gideon added.

“The realtor said the owners had made a few upgrades.”

"It's yellow." Velveteen fought the emotion birthed by the bold color.

"You like yellow?"

"I like Lemon Chiffon, Pineapple a la Mode, Meyer Spritz, and Optimistic Yellow," she muttered, reciting the paint swatch samples from memory. "This is –"

"Puke yellow." Gideon pushed past her.

"Puke yellow," she repeated.

The cottage that stood in front of the Price family was a far stretch from the Internet image. Not only was the brick structure painted a garish yellow, falling somewhere between brown and orange, but the mossy mold growing up the side appeared to have eaten and spit out what plant life had once accented the doorway and paned windows. The small front garden was overgrown with a stalky wheat-like plant and smelled as if someone's cat had relieved itself near the dying hydrangeas on more than one occasion.

Charlie reached for her hand and kissed her on the cheek. She had willingly agreed to start over in Coraloo – all for him – all so they could have a second chance at life, so he could have a second chance – a do over, an opportunity to live a different, less complicated life than the one they had led in the city.

"This cannot be it." She coughed. "Oh... the smell. It's horrid!"

Charlie let go of his breath and exhaled. "The mailbox says, '31 Odenbon'. This is definitely it. Let's go inside. You can't judge a book by its cover, right?"

"What about the smell?"

"I like the way books smell."

"You like books that smell like vinegar and death, Charlie?"

Velveteen crossed the threshold and took a look around. No sooner had her petal pink pump landed on the orange shag pile carpet, than a small, involuntary gasp escaped her and she fainted. Hitting her head on the doorframe, Velveteen landed

face first on the mercifully fluffy, vertigo-inducing carpet.

The next thing she knew, she was waking up in the Coraloo County Hospital with two magnified eyeballs looking over her. She pulled the crunchy one-hundred thread count sheet up around her neck and yelled, "Charlie!"

A pair of nurses appeared at her side, followed by Charlie and Gideon – his nose in his fifty-third read through of *Pirates of the Cosmos*.

"It's okay, Vee. The car ride, dehydration, stress... nothing serious. It's just a bump." Charlie gently squeezed and then kissed the hand he was holding.

Velveteen reached up and felt the mass of taped gauze on the side of her head. "Flowers," she mumbled. "There were so many flowers."

"She'll be all right," the owner of the alarming eyeballs informed Mr Price. "Could have been worse."

"I know. She's a tough one." Charlie held his wife's hand.

Velveteen pulled her hair carefully to one side. "Charlie, how do I look?"

He kissed her on the forehead. "As beautiful as the day we met, but with less paint on you."

On the day they'd met he had backed into her while she was working on a display for the university's college of design. She loved the memory even if he had ruined her painting.

"Just a few papers to sign, and you will be on your way back to Mother's house." The doctor wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead while shining a light into her left eye.

"Mother's house? You mean *my* house." Velveteen pushed her hair behind her ears and wiped dripping mascara from underneath her eyes.

"Mother was alone when she passed there. Not real sure what had been cooking on the stove when she went. We got the smell out of the house for the most part. Don't worry – she won't haunt you."

The team of nurses giggled. Velveteen asked for a Valium.

The doctor laughed, those big eyeballs bouncing with each chuckle. Was he, Dr Whatever, laughing at her? She couldn't remember his name. Had he told them? She had a name for him: Doctor Eyeballs. That was a good fit.

"It's a sweet place," Doctor Eyeballs said. "Lots of memories. Any who, welcome to Coraloo, Price family."

On the car ride home, her insides shook and her head ached. She tried to close her eyes and imagine herself pulling a freshly baked pie from the oven, but when she did, all she could see was flowers – big orange dahlias and hot pink mums, covering every inch of the walls.

"I really think I should have stayed in the hospital a few more days... or weeks. Maybe a month."

Five minutes later they were back. "Let's try this again." Charlie helped Velveteen from the car.

She hooked her arm in his, hoping the gaudy wallpaper had been a nightmare, but one foot into the doorway and her knees went wobbly. The longhaired tangerine carpet seemed to pull the saucer-sized dahlias right off of the walls.

"It's not so bad." Charlie escorted her into the room that was no bigger than the laundry space in their townhouse. "Okay... it's bad. I don't think I've ever seen a room so ugly in my entire life. But at least it doesn't smell, right?"

Then they walked into the kitchen. The pea green cabinets and matching linoleum floor covering were nearly camouflaged by the coordinating green walls. Above the porcelain sink, a giant stained-glass bumblebee with illuminated wings swung back and forth casting eerie shadows across the ceiling. Velveteen surveyed the room, pulling open drawers and rubbing her hand down the Formica countertop.

Charlie was disappointed; so was she. How could she not be? He would have a talk with the realtor in the morning – who

strangely enough had a profile picture very similar in appearance to the man Velveteen had them all calling Doctor Eyeballs. Charlie had no words of apology for his wife. He had said his fair share before *The Rooning*, but she wouldn't accept it – reminding him that if he truly were responsible for the claimed salmonella outbreak among the professionals of the city, the Price household would have been infected, and they were not.

Velveteen gasped as they stepped through the door of the master bedroom. It was black – black carpet, black walls, and what had possibly at one time been a black, but was now worn to a threadbare gray, cushion on the window seat. Charlie rushed to her side and tried again. “I’ll call first thing in the morning. We’ll find a new place –”

She walked to the window and looked out. Lamppost lighting illuminated the quiet, empty street and row of facing houses. “No. It’s perfect. I can work with black.” Then she laughed. She laughed so hard Charlie nearly took his turn at passing out. He did not know why she was laughing, but nonetheless, she was laughing, and it reminded him of the twenty-something interior design student he had fallen in love with.

Soon they were both laughing, lying on the black carpet, eyes glued to the rhinestone-bedazzled ceiling fan. Velveteen sat up and smiled at her husband. “Old lady Toft died in this room, you know.”

Charlie pulled her back down to the ground and kissed her.

“I found my room!” Gideon called from the second floor. “My bed’s built into the wall, and I have bookshelves. My carpet’s all red and there are cowboys riding hippos all over the walls, but I can deal with it!”

With that, Charlie and Velveteen burst into another round of laughter. “Sweetheart... ” He could barely get the words out, and his sides hurt. “I think the doctor might be our realtor.”

Velveteen fashioned her fingers into circles over her eyes. “Mr Price, I’d like to sell you a house, not exactly a house, more like a

shoebox. It's a lovely fixer-upper. But first, we must remove your appendix!"

Charlie brushed a loose strand of hair away from her face and kissed her again. If every night in Coraloo was to be like this one, then maybe, just maybe, *The Rooning* was worth it. Tomorrow he would go to the market.