

IGGY INCLUDED

DEBORAH KERBEL

Cover illustration by Trevor Keen

Scholastic Canada Ltd.

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604 King Street West, Toronto, Ontario M5V 1E1, Canada

Scholastic Inc.
557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012, USA

Scholastic Australia Pty Limited
PO Box 579, Gosford, NSW 2250, Australia

Scholastic New Zealand Limited
Private Bag 94407, Botany, Manukau 2163, New Zealand

Scholastic Children's Books
1 London Bridge, London SE1 9BG, UK

www.scholastic.ca

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Iggy included / Deborah Kerbel ; cover illustration by Trevor Keen.

Names: Kerbel, Deborah, author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20230490816 | Canadiana (ebook) 20230490824 |
ISBN 9781443197069

(softcover) | ISBN 9781443197076 (EPUB)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS8621.E75 I34 2024 | DDC jC813/.6—dc23

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CHAPTER 2

One by one we snapped off our seat belts and stepped out of the car. Dad unbuckled Bee and gathered her into his arms. None of us said a word for the longest time. After what felt like the Grand Canyon of silence, Mom finally spoke.

“This must be a mistake, Shawn. This . . . this can’t be ‘Iggy’s Manor.’”

Dad passed Bee over to her, then clutched his forehead.

“It’s . . . ah, I think . . . there must be . . . um . . .”

Balancing Bee on her hip, Mom dug around in her purse, then pulled out a piece of paper. She unfolded it and held it up. I recognized it immediately — it was the photo of “Iggy’s Manor” from the original contest page Mom had printed. If you squinted hard, you could see they were the same house. Except the real-life version standing in front of us looked like it had recently lost an argument with a wrecking ball. The paint was peeling, some windows were cracked, and others were boarded up. Weeds and moss were growing on the roof, and a chunk of the red brick

chimney had completely fallen down.

“Is this a prank? Or some kind of wild reality show?” Cole asked, glancing around, like maybe there was a hidden camera.

“Maybe the inside is better?” I suggested, trying hard to stay positive.

Just then, the front door opened with a loud creak, and a woman stepped out onto the sagging porch. She wore large, square-shaped glasses and a navy-blue business suit. She was carrying a file folder in one hand and tugging on what looked to be a leash with the other.

“Oh, thank goodness you’re here,” she said, spotting us across the lawn. “It’s so late, I was getting worried you’d changed your mind. Come, let me get you all settled up.”

Our family picked our way across the weedy yard in stunned silence while the lady wrestled with whatever was on the other end of the leash.

“Please, please be good. And no farting, for once. Okay?” I could hear her begging as we neared the house.

A moment later, with a woof of protest, the biggest dog I’d ever seen sauntered through the doorway and plopped down onto the dusty porch. Its black coat was shaggy and streaked with grey and it had glistening ropes of slobber hanging down from its mouth. With

an explosive fart, the beast closed its eyes, flopped onto its side, and started to snore.

The lady placed the other end of the leash down gently and backed away, like she was afraid to wake it up. Once she seemed sure her dog was actually asleep, she tiptoed down the steps and reached out to shake Mom and Dad's hands.

"Hello Mr. and Mrs. Coopersmith. I'm Karen Johnson, legal advisor for Mr. Iglesias's estate."

"Nice to meet you," Mom said with a weary smile. "These are our children, Paige, Cole and Beatrice. Sorry we're late. We had to make a few unscheduled rest stops," she added, tipping her head subtly in Cole's direction.

My brother had a temperamental digestive system. Car rides were always full of drama.

"No worries," Karen said with a wave of her hand. "And congratulations again on your big win. I was on the essay selection committee. Your entry was far and away the most impressive."

"Aw. Well, thanks," Dad said, beaming proudly.

"Ah-gah!" added Bee.

Karen smiled.

"Mr. Iglesias used to teach English back in the day, so he was very picky about these essays. That poem you included at the end?" She clasped a palm over her heart. "Oh, the feels!"

Cole tugged at Mom's sleeve. "That dog looks like a bear. Can I go pet it?"

"No! Let it sleep," I said, watching the sleeping animal nervously. A puddle of drool was starting to form under its mouth. Ick.

"Excuse me, Karen?" Mom shook Cole's hand from her sleeve and opened her purse. "But this house looks a bit . . . um, different. You know? From the photo we saw online?" She held up the contest page and waggled it for emphasis. "Are you sure they're the same?"

Karen smiled brightly.

"Yes, of course. Although that photo was taken many years ago. It's from Mr. Iglesias's personal archive. Didn't you read the caption?" She pointed to the date listed in tiny print below the image. "See? It's right there."

Mom pulled her reading glasses out of her purse and peered at the numbers.

"So it is," she said softly.

Karen opened the file folder and took out a large brown envelope.

"I'm afraid we won't have enough time for me to show you around. So, let's get down to business. Here's your deed to the property along with your official copy of the signed contract."

She handed the envelope to Dad. Maybe I was imagining things, but he looked almost reluctant to accept it.