

# 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.

“Can we first ask—”

“And here are your keys,” Karen continued, handing a ring with two large, silver keys on it to Mom. “Oh, and Mr. Iglesias has also written up a handy list of instructions to help you out,” she added, pulling out one more envelope and passing it to Dad.

“Instructions?” he repeated, lifting the flap and peeking inside.

“Yes. Care and maintenance and such.”

“Okay, well since you brought up the subject of maintenance,” Dad said, closing the flap, “I’m not sure we expected the house to be so . . .” His voice trailed off as he searched for a polite word.

Cole jumped in to help. “Trashed?”

I jabbed him with my elbow. “Don’t be rude.”

“I’m just being honest,” he shot back.

Karen peered at us over the rim of her glasses. “I promise, there’s nothing in this house that a bit of tender loving care can’t fix.”

“Are you sure about that?” Mom mumbled under her breath. I reached for her hand and gave it a “hurry up” tug. I was curious to see inside. It had to be in better shape than the outside . . . right?

“It’s okay,” I said, hoping to rush this part along. “Winners can’t be choosers. Right, Mom?”

Mom closed her eyes and let out an exhausted sigh, like she was ready to crawl into the nearest bed

and pull the blankets over her head. “Right,” she said meekly.

Karen flashed me a grateful smile.

“Right,” she said, closing the folder and tucking it back under her arm. “The house has been sitting empty for several months now. Iggy will be very happy to have a family living here again.” She clapped her hands. “I’ll leave you all to it.”

“Wait.” Dad held up a hand to stop her. “Just . . . ah, I think we’d like to speak with Iggy, please.”

Karen shot a quick glance over her shoulder. “Iggy’s, um . . . indisposed at the moment.”

“Well, can you get him on the phone? Before you leave? I’d really like to speak with the previous owner myself.”

Karen let out a surprised chuckle. “I’m sorry, but there’s been some confusion. Iggy’s not the name of the previous owner.”

My parents stared at her like she was suddenly speaking in a foreign language.

“Sorry. Then who exactly is Iggy?” Mom demanded.

Karen turned around and whistled. The giant dog on the porch peeled open one droopy eye but didn’t budge. With a sigh, Karen marched over to the steps, picked up the end of the leash, and gave it a tug.

“Iggy? Come. Meet your new family.”

With a grunt, the dog heaved itself up onto its paws

and plodded over to where we were standing. I ducked behind Mom as it approached. This dog was bigger than me, Cole and Bee all rolled together.

Dad's jaw dropped so wide I could count the fillings in his molars. "*This* is Iggy?" he gasped.

Karen handed him the leash and nodded grimly.

"The one and only."