



living with jackie chan

JO KNOWLES

Chapter 1

When Caleb, Dave, and I pull up to my uncle's apartment building, a wave of sickness rolls up my throat and threatens to spew across Caleb's dashboard. I will it back down. Breathe. The car idles at the curb, waiting for me to get out. Caleb leans forward and peers up at the building as if it's the first time he's seen one taller than four stories.

"Which floor does he live on?" he finally asks.

"Second," I say.

We're quiet for a while, but I imagine what we're each thinking.

Caleb: *You're making a big mistake, man. You can't run away from your problems. They always know where you are.*

Dave: *This sucks. Who am I going to party with now? Damn, I'm hungry.*

Me: *What if Caleb's right?*

"Guess I better get this over with, huh?" I finally say.

Dave reaches forward from the backseat and squeezes my shoulder. "It's not too late to turn around," he says. "You can come back with us."

"Just say the word," Caleb agrees.

I shake my head before they can start trying to change my mind and tell me how things wouldn't be that bad if I stayed home. How our school is so big, it's easy to avoid people you don't want to see.

I can't really tell them that I don't want to see anyone. As bad as it sounds, I don't even want to see them, even though they are my best friends.

Everyone reminds me of me. Of who I was — *am*. Don't want to be.

"This sucks," Dave says. He is a master of the obvious. "We were supposed to graduate together, man."

Caleb turns around to give him a look, like, *Shut up, you idiot*. But Dave's right. We were supposed to leave our sorry excuse of a town together. No one was supposed to bail early.

Only, that was before.

When I start to open the door, one end of the armrest on the passenger door slips down. It's duct-taped together

from when I broke it last winter. The day my life changed forever.

“Sorry I never got around to fixing that,” I tell Caleb. “If you bring the car to my dad’s shop, he’ll take care of it.”

“No worries,” Caleb says.

We all sit there for a few more seconds.

“I’m serious, dude. You don’t have to do this,” Dave says.

But I do.

“OK, boys, it’s been real,” I say, opening the door. They both get out, and we pull my stuff from the back. We stand behind the car in our usual circle. Caleb holds out his hand to shake. As I reach for it, Dave puts his arms around the two of us and pulls us toward him into an awkward group hug. Despite my embarrassment, my throat hurts from trying not to cry like a wuss. I swallow the lump down and give Dave a punch in the arm, for old time’s sake. Goofy as Dave is, and as annoyingly perfect as Caleb can be, I know I’m going to miss these bozos. A lot.

They get back in the car and pull onto the street. Dave hangs out the passenger window, waving. I give them a salute, like we used to do when we were kids. As they turn the corner, Caleb honks the horn a few times. Then they make the turn and disappear.

Chapter 2

My uncle's apartment building towers over me. I stand here, looking at it. At my new life. No more people staring at me when I walk down the hall. No more whispers behind my back. No one knows me here. No one knows what happened. What I did. I just have to get through the year, get into college someplace far away, and leave for good.

Before I go in, I think about calling my parents to let them know I got here OK, like I promised. But I can't bring myself to pull out my phone.

My dad volunteered to take me and my stuff here in his van. But I was like, "What stuff?" Because honestly, I don't own much. So he suggested taking me out for our

last meal at least. But going out with my dad means going to the pub on the corner, sitting at the bar, and staring at the TV while I eat and he gets wasted, which is the same as being at home, so why bother?

My mom said she wanted to take me but she couldn't get the time off from work, which seems like a pretty lame excuse.

So we said good-bye at home. But it's not worth describing. Saying good-bye to them was like saying good-bye to some people who used to know me when I was a little kid. Like saying good-bye to zombies. Good-bye to a memory. Good-bye to dust. The real good-bye happened a long, long time ago.

Instead of calling them, I hike my duffel bag over my shoulder and open the door.

In the entryway, it's hot and airless. I scan the list of names on the panel and find number twelve and my last name. Someone's put a Hello Kitty sticker next to it. I hold my finger down on the buzzer and wait to get clicked in.

"You're here!" Larry's voice on the intercom amplifies the tiny entryway. The inner door clicks, and I push it open. When I step inside, I'm overwhelmed by the smell of carpet cleaner. I start for the stairs just as a door clicks open and a familiar voice calls, "Sammy?"

A head peers over the railing above.

My uncle grins down at me. He doesn't have a shirt on. "Sam, my man!" he yells.

Really?

I look up and give him a smile.

"Get up here!" He actually jumps up and down.

When I reach the second-floor landing, he bounds over to me and gives me a huge bear hug. His hair is wet and he stinks of recently applied deodorant, which he probably just rubbed all over me. I step away from him, and he checks me out from top to bottom.

"Samurai Sam! I didn't expect you to be taller than me."

"Guess it's been a while," I say. *And please tell me you're not going to call me that all the time.*

Larry has called me Sam since I was eight and spent the summer with him while my parents went on my dad's last "tour" with his band. Larry didn't really know what the hell to do with me, so we played this online ninja game called Samurai Sam practically the whole time. I was so good at it, Larry decided to change my name.

"You're so *big*," he says, shaking his head like I'm some kind of miracle. "When did you get so big?"

How is someone supposed to answer a question like that?

"How long's it been, anyway? Two years? Jeez. How did that happen?"

I don't tell him what he already knows. That my parents are in a non-marriage and would never survive the four-hour drive to his place, being stuck in the same car together that long. And I don't remind him that he probably hasn't visited us because the last time he came my dad got drunk and passed out, and my mom "got a call" saying she had to go in to work because of an emergency, which we all knew was a lie, and Larry and I ended up spending the whole miserable time walking around the neighborhood in the cold, pretending my family wasn't completely screwed up.

I just shrug. And he sighs. And I see in his eyes that he remembers. It seems our reunions only occur during desperate or last-resort circumstances.

"Where are your parents? Didn't they bring you?" he asks.

"Nah, my friends dropped me off."

"Aw, that's nice. You should have invited them up!"

"They had to get back," I say. *And thank God, because if they'd heard you call me Samurai Sam, I would never live it down.*

"They must be pretty good friends to drive you all this way and then just turn around and drive back."

"Yeah," I say. They are. The best. "They love road trips. They jump on any excuse to get out of town."

Larry carries my bag to his apartment, and I follow

him inside. There's a stick of incense burning on the coffee table in the living room. A huge, furry gray cat walks over to us and rubs against my leg.

"Wow," Larry says. "There's something you don't see every day."

"What?"

"Clover doesn't like other people. She usually hides."

The cat looks up at me.

"Hey," I say. "How's it goin'?"

"Clover, meet the infamous Samurai Sam," Larry says. "He's your new — uh — cousin."

She rubs against my leg again.

"Come on, we'll put your stuff in your room."

I follow him down a short hallway to a tiny room with a foldout couch. I loved staying here when I was little. It was a huge treat because Larry was only, like, twenty-one, fresh out of college, and had no clue about taking care of kids. We'd stay up late watching movies and eating so many Fudgsicles I'd throw up. Then Larry would fold out the couch and let me crash in my clothes. Back then he had this little dog named George who liked to sleep next to me. I loved that dog, even though he had that pukey smell only small dogs have. There was something about how he leaned against you that made you feel — I don't know — important.

Clover jumps up on the bed.

“Are you hungry?” Larry asks. “Want me to make you something? I already ate, cuz I’ve got a hot date. Sorry to leave you on your first night and all, but my girlfriend got tickets to this concert way before we knew you were coming and —”

“No worries,” I say. To be honest, it’s kind of a relief.

He punches my arm. “This is gonna be great. It really is.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Thanks for letting me stay with you.”

“Of course! You’re my nephew!” He ruffles my hair as if I’m still the little kid he remembers.

“OK, I gotta go finish getting ready. You make yourself at home. Tomorrow we’ll spend the whole day together.”

“Cool,” I say. He drops my duffel bag on the floor and leaves.

Clover mews at me, so I scratch her head. Above the foldout couch, there’s a giant Jackie Chan poster. The bookcase is filled with martial arts movies, including what must be every Jackie Chan movie ever made, and a bunch of karate trophies Larry got when he competed in high school and college. Larry’s always been obsessed with Jackie Chan, even though Jackie does kung fu, not karate. Larry says it’s because when he was a kid and

starting to get into karate, there were never any kick-ass karate actors to get obsessed about. I guess there still aren't.

I sit down, and Clover rubs against my arm. The bathroom is just down the hall, and I can hear Larry singing "I Gotta Feelin'."

I lean back and stare at the ceiling. It's covered with the glow-in-the-dark stars he put up there for me that summer I stayed here. I remember the first night, I was scared and wanted to go home. Larry lay down next to me and we stared at the stars until they started to dim. He didn't say a thing. He just stayed there next to me, his huge muscled arm pressing against my scrawny one, letting me know he was still there.

"You OK, bud?" Larry stands in the doorway. He's wearing a white button-up shirt and black jeans. His aftershave wafts in and catches in the back of my throat. The cat sneezes and dashes out of the room.

I sit up. "Yeah, I'm fine."

He gives me a look, like he knows I'm not. But then he shakes it off. "Well, how do I look?" He turns around for me, kind of dancing. The gold chain around his neck sparkles.

"I dunno about the chain," I say.

He fingers it. "No?"

I shake my head.

“All right. I’ll ditch it. So, don’t wait up for me. And uh . . . If my door’s closed in the morning, lie low if you can. That’ll be, you know, my sign. That I have company.”

“Should I hide in here till she leaves?”

“No, no. No hiding. It’s just . . . I didn’t want you to come knocking on the door or anything. You know. If you need something.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Right. OK! Well, thanks for being cool about me going out your first night here. But wait’ll you meet this girl. She’s really special. You’ll totally understand why I didn’t want anyone else taking my ticket.”

“No worries,” I say. “Have fun!” He gives me a thumbs-up and sort of bounces down the hall.

I fall back on the bed again and stare up at Jackie Chan, who looks way too happy. Kinda like Larry.

My phone buzzes, but I ignore it. I know it’s probably my mom making sure I got here safely. But it’s too late for that. It’s too late for checking in and making sure I’m OK. She should have been checking in a long time ago. But she didn’t. No one did.

Chapter 3

When I wake up, the apartment is quiet. It's 2:06 a.m. I roll over and hear a high-pitched grunting noise at the end of the bed. It's Clover. I see her in the TV light, stretching out her surprisingly long furry legs. I reach for the remote and turn off the TV. I must have fallen asleep watching *Dragons Forever*, Larry's favorite Jackie Chan movie.

Up above, the floor creaks as if someone's in a rocking chair. The stars on the ceiling have all faded out, but I stare up and listen. *Creak-creak, creak-creak*. Slowly. In a definite rhythm. The creaking stops and footsteps cross the ceiling. Then it's quiet.

Clover grunts again and starts to purr. I wish I could be that happy when I sleep. But I never sleep well. Not since . . . not for a while now.

I reach over and turn on the light and wait a minute, then shut it off again. The stars on the ceiling are back. I remember Larry had tried to make actual constellations, but he got frustrated and ended up making his own shapes. Instead of the big dipper, he made a smiley face. I smile, remembering.

And then I hear it.

A faint crying above me. Like a kitten, almost. But then it gets louder. And I know what it is.

A baby.

My heart starts to thump against my chest as the cries get louder.

Then footsteps hurry across the ceiling again. A muffled voice, soothing. More footsteps. Then, *creak-creak, creak-creak*. The crying gets less frantic.

But my heart is still punching the inside of my chest.

I put my pillow over my head to shut out the sounds.

But I can still hear them in my mind.

And I can see him. My baby. Wrapped tightly in a yellow blanket, a little blue cap on his head.

And me, walking away.

Chapter 4

In the morning, I get up and get dressed before I leave my room, just in case Larry got lucky. I step into the hall and peer down to see if his door is closed, which it is. I try to imagine what a woman who's into Larry would be like, but can't.

It's only nine o'clock, so I figure I have time to make a quick breakfast before I disappear for a while and give him and his girlfriend some privacy.

I leave a bit of milk from my cereal bowl for the cat and go outside. As I walk down the sidewalk, I try to remember the neighborhood, but nothing seems familiar. At the corner, there's a Dunkin' Donuts, so I go in and buy some coffee and head back to the apartment building

and sit on the stoop. It's Sunday, and the neighborhood seems to be mostly asleep. I take a sip and lean my head back on the cement wall along the steps.

Down the sidewalk, I see a woman pushing a baby carriage toward me. My heart automatically skips a beat. I start to get up to go back inside, but I realize Larry didn't give me a key yet.

I'm locked out.

Crap.

I lean my head back and close my eyes again. I quietly hum the first song that comes to mind to block out any baby sounds.

"Black Eyed Peas?" a voice asks.

I sit up. The woman, who turns out to be about my age, is standing at the base of the steps, her hands squeezed around the bar of the carriage.

"Yeah. Dumb song stuck in my head," I say. I try to act calm. But all I can think is that here's this girl, my age, with a baby. And it's too much.

"Think you could help me with this thing? This is my building."

No, I think. No, I cannot help you.

But instead, I say, "Sure," and purposefully head to the other end of the carriage. Together, we lift it up the steps and into the foyer. Then she unlocks the interior door.

“Thanks,” she says. She waits for me to do something else. Like leave the building.

“So, um, this is my building, too,” I say. “But I forgot my key.”

She gives me a *Yeah, right* look.

“No, really. I’m staying with my uncle, Larry.

“Larry? The Karate Man?” The way she says it, it’s more like she’s saying, “The crazy guy?”

“Yeah. I just moved here.”

“To live with Larry?”

“Just for the school year.”

She nods. “So you’ll be going to Roosevelt Tech, then?”

“Yeah.”

“What year are you?”

“Senior. You?” As soon as I ask, I realize that if she has a kid, maybe she doesn’t go to school anymore. Way to be sensitive.

“Same.”

The baby makes a noise.

“Uh-oh, I better take him to his parents before he wakes up.”

“Oh,” I say. “You’re just babysitting.”

She laughs. “You thought he was *mine*? No, thank God. Can you imagine?”

I fake a laugh. *Yes*.

“No. I’m just the babysitter,” she says. “Sometimes I take him on Sunday mornings so his parents can catch up on some sleep. He keeps them up a lot. Um, are you all right?”

“Huh? Yeah. Fine.” I take another sip of my coffee to hide my face.

The baby starts crying.

“Shoot,” she says. “Here he goes. He’s a howler when he’s hungry.”

“Yeah, I know.”

She gives me that creepy look again. “You do? How?”

“I could hear him last night, I think. He must be in the apartment above mine. Either that or there’s another baby in the building.”

She nods. “No, just him. Well, see you around, I guess.”

“Yeah.”

“Look. I don’t mean to be all paranoid or anything, but do you mind if I buzz you in once I get to my apartment? We have strict rules about letting in strangers.”

Do I really look like a serial killer?

“No worries,” I say.

She pushes the carriage through the door and it closes behind her.

I lean back against the wall and wait, wondering if

she'll really buzz me in. Standing in the stuffy entryway, I feel trapped. And hot. And like I don't belong here. Not outside. Not inside. Not anywhere.

But after a minute the buzzer goes off and the door clicks, so I quickly push it open.

I was smart or dumb enough not to lock the apartment door, at least, so I go in quietly and head back to my room. Finally, about an hour later, I hear Larry singing at the top of his lungs. I don't hear anyone else, so I poke my head out the door.

"Coast clear?"

"What? Oh. Yeah. Um, I forgot about our signal and shut my door out of habit. Sorry."

I shake my head.

"Did you get breakfast?" Larry saunters into the kitchen. "What a night. I think I'm in love, Sam Man. I really do."

"Wow." *And please, for the love of God, don't call me that ever again.*

"Yeah. She's awesome. You know why she didn't want to stay over?"

"Tell me."

"She said you and I should spend time together. In fact, she almost called off our date last night, she felt so bad about me leaving you alone on your first night here."

"Oh. Sorry."

“No, no. Don’t you get it? That’s what makes her so cool. She’s so unselfish. You’ve gotta meet her. I’m telling you. She could be the one.” He opens the fridge and pulls out a tub of plain yogurt and a carton of eggs.

“How long have you been dating?” I ask.

“Only a few months. But, Sam, it’s like I’ve known her all my life.”

“Wait. Is me being here going to screw things up? I mean, don’t you, like, want some privacy?”

He wiggles his eyebrows at me. “We can always go to her place for that. Don’t worry about it. I’m psyched you’re here! Are you kidding? Samurai Sammy!” He does a bunch of karate moves around the kitchen, then circles over to me and smacks my back.

As I watch him, I wonder how on earth this guy can be related to my dad.

“If you’re sure,” I say. I sit at the kitchen table and watch him make his breakfast.

“You gonna want some of this? It’s a protein thing I make.”

“Um. No, thanks. I’m good.”

He starts dumping stuff into a blender. “I’ve been making this concoction for, like, a month, and I’m feeling great! You should try it sometime. No steroids. Just all organic stuff. It’s amazing.” He squeezes what looks like a half a jar of honey into the blender, then turns it

on until the concoction becomes smooth and a nasty-looking brown color.

“Looks appetizing,” I say.

He pours himself a giant glass and sits across from me. “Bottoms up!” His Adam’s apple bobs up and down as he chugs half the glass.

“So,” he says, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “We’ve got one week together before school starts. How should we entertain ourselves?”

“Don’t you need to work?”

“Funny you should ask.” He sits up straighter in his chair, all excited. “OK, so check this out. You know I still teach karate at the local YMCA, right?”

I nod.

“Well, they asked me to do karate camp this week. This is a great chance for me to recruit some students for the rest of the year. Because you know with my charm, one class and they’ll be hooked, right? And I was thinking how you used to do karate, and you could help me out. Wouldn’t that be fun? We could be partners!”

“But . . . I took karate from you that summer when I was eight,” I say.

He waves his hand. “Yeah, but you were a natural.”

“No, I was eight. I just waved my arms around and kicked the air.”

“Don’t be so modest.”

“Um —”

“It’ll be fun! Plus, I’ll pay you.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Look, come with me the first day, and if you hate it, you don’t have to come back.”

“What age group are the kids?”

“It’s all ages, not just kids. That’s what’s so cool about it.” He takes another bunch of swigs from his drink.

“Camp for all ages?”

“Yeah! Even adults! I’ve got, like, a seventy-year-old black belt coming in. He said he wanted to brush up!” He is glowing. “Whaddaya say? It’ll be great! And it means we’ll be able to spend time together. You know. Get reacquainted.”

He looks so hopeful, I know I can’t say no. “All right,” I say. “I’ll try it.”

“Great!” He drains his glass and drops it in the sink. “OK. Well, I’ve gotta get over there for a couple hours to deal with some paperwork for the registrations, and then I’ll come back and we’ll have lunch. Sound good?”

“Yeah, sure.” So much for spending the whole day together. Not that I’m complaining.

“Did you sleep all right? The couch comfortable enough?”

“Yeah, it was fine.”

“Cool.” He stands up. “So I’ll see you later, then!”

When he’s gone, I go back to my new room and make the bed. I check my phone for texts.

Caleb: u ok?

My mom: miss u

Dave: [About twenty lame jokes that I won’t bother to repeat.]

My dad still doesn’t know how to text, but I’m sure he wouldn’t bother even if he could. He’s more likely to call and act all awkward. He loves me. I know that. But it seems like it’s physically painful for him to talk to me about anything besides football, the latest engine work he’s had to do to keep his van running, his most recent “gig” with his pathetic excuse for a band, and how much longer our old dog, Rosie, will survive.

Clover wanders into the room and jumps up on the bed, then does that thing cats do with their paws, like she’s trying to make the mattress softer. I give her a pat, then get up to unpack my clothes and put them in the tiny closet Larry said he emptied for me. There’s a new-looking wire organizer with drawers for socks and underwear and stuff in the closet. I think Larry must have bought it for me, which was nice. When I’m all done, I step back and look at the closet and my noticeable

lack of stuff. After eighteen years, this is all I have to show for myself. No family photos. No friend photos. Just a few pairs of jeans, some T-shirts, and a pile of socks and underwear.

Everything else, I left behind.

Chapter 5

As soon as Larry gets back from the Y he tells me he's taking me out to lunch. We walk a few blocks to a deli where he claims they have the best sandwiches ever. We order takeout and cross the street to a park where we sit on the grass. Larry doesn't eat meat, so he ordered a TLT (tofu, lettuce, and tomato sandwich). Before I could order for myself, he'd ordered one for me, too, and promised I would love it. I thought tofu would be disgusting, but it's fried with soy sauce and basically that's all it tastes like. I wouldn't say this is the best sandwich ever, but it's not too bad.

"I'm so going to give you a makeover, man," he says, looking at me as if I weigh four hundred pounds. "This is just the beginning."

"I didn't know I needed one," I say.

"You're at that age where if you don't start eating right and getting regular exercise now, you'll be doomed to a beer gut and a bad heart."

"Thanks for the warning."

"I'm not messing with you. Good habits last a lifetime."

"So I've heard," I say. "That's, like, a kids' health campaign on TV."

"Nah, I made it up."

"OK."

"I'm just saying. America is fat." He takes a huge bite of his sandwich. Juice from the tomato dribbles out the corner of his mouth.

"I played soccer all last year," I tell him. "I get plenty of exercise."

"And now karate," Larry adds.

"Right."

We finish our sandwiches in silence. Then we lean back in the grass and squint at the clouds.

Larry takes a deep breath in and slowly lets it out. "Sometimes I come here to meditate," he says.

I close my eyes and feel the sun warm my face. I imagine Larry sitting here, cross-legged with his hands resting on his knees, saying "Ommmm" to the park. I really hope he doesn't start meditating right now.

“Sometimes I come here to think,” he adds.

I still don’t answer.

“But I’m happy to talk, too. You know. If you need to talk. I’m here for you, Josh.”

Josh.

I’m glad he remembered my actual name. I was honestly beginning to wonder. I open my eyes and tilt my head toward him. His own eyes are closed and his face is tipped toward the sun. Maybe if he looked at me, I would somehow know what to say. But with his eyes closed like that, it doesn’t exactly feel like he really wants to talk. And honestly, I don’t really want to, either. What would be the point? There’s no way he could know how or what I feel. And there is no way he could make me feel better. No one could.

“I don’t need to talk,” I say, closing my eyes again.

I can practically feel the relief ooze out of him.

“Well, then, we can just think,” he says. “It’s a good place for that, too. Ya know?”

“Sure,” I say. Whatever.

We’re both quiet. Thinking.

Larry’s probably daydreaming about the love of his life. Me, I don’t really want to think. I mean, that’s why I came here. To get away from every daily friggin’ reminder of what I did. What happened.

I wish Larry could just act like I’m only here to go

to school. But no. My parents had to tell him everything so — what? He could treat me differently? Like I'm some fragile freak who might crack at any minute? Yeah, that's helpful.

After a while, Larry's breathing gets all steady and I realize he's asleep. At least he's not snoring.

I prop myself up on my elbows and look around the park. It's grassy, and there are lots of people walking around: dogs on leashes, kids racing ahead of their parents, then running back to them. It's a little like the park I went to growing up, only nicer. I never went with my parents. It was always Caleb, Dave, and me. The three amigos. Pretending we didn't care that our dads weren't around to teach us how to catch a football. Acting like we were too cool for all that crap. Whatever.

I lean back and shut my eyes again. I listen to the sounds and try to fade out, like Larry.

"Hi, there!"

We both spring up.

The girl from earlier is standing above us, rocking the baby carriage back and forth.

"Hey!" Larry says. "Stella, right? How's it hangin'?"

Please tell me he did not just say that.

Stella blushes. "Hi," she says. "Yeah. Stella. From the fourth floor."

"You signed up for karate camp, right?" Larry asks.

“Yeah,” she says. “My mom thinks karate is like self-defense or something. She wants me to learn before I go to college.” She rolls her eyes.

“You’ll love it,” Larry says confidently. “So, who’ve you got there? Gil and Jean’s baby?”

“Yup, this is Ben.” She peers into the carriage. “Poor thing’s teething or something. As soon as I stop walking, he starts to fuss.” She stops moving the carriage and a tiny cry of protest comes from under the bonnet. “See?”

“Bummer,” Larry says.

Even though Stella starts rocking the carriage again, the baby starts to wail. “Oh, shoot,” she says.

“Let me take him.” Larry gets up. “Hey, little munchkin, it’s your uncle Larry,” he says, reaching into the carriage. “Come here, sweet pea.”

My heart starts beating hard again, aching against my chest. I look around and grab the bags from our sandwiches. “I’ll be right back,” I say. “Just gonna throw these out.”

I get up and get the hell away as fast as I can. I walk quite a ways before I find a trash can. I drop the stuff in and put both hands on the metal rim. I touch something wet and slimy on the rim and almost puke my tofu.

I know it’s crazy, how seeing the baby makes me feel. But I can’t help it. I squeeze the rim of the trash barrel

again and close my eyes. But when I do, I see what I always see when I think of him. The hospital corridor. A nursery. A baby with no name. A baby that could be mine.

I take a deep breath and gag on the smell of rotten trash. Crap. I turn around and walk in circles.

Don't think about it. Don't think about it, I keep telling myself. *You came here to get away from all that. There was nothing you could do.*

But maybe there was. Oh, God. Maybe there was.

Finally, I get hold of myself and start to head toward them as slowly as possible. When I get closer, I see Larry putting the baby back in the carriage. I wait until Stella walks away before I go over to him.

Larry looks at me suspiciously. "You OK, Sammy?" he asks.

"Yeah. What?"

"You bolted."

"Huh? No, I didn't."

"OK." He puts his hand on my shoulder. "Ready to go home?"

Home? Is that what this is now?

We walk back a new way, through a quiet neighborhood lined with trees. "This is where I wanna live someday," Larry says. "It's so peaceful here. And clean. Me, Arielle — that's 'the one's' name, by the way — and maybe

a dog. Maybe even a ba—” He stops himself. “Yeah, a dog.”

“Clover may not be too crazy about that idea,” I say, pretending I didn’t hear what he almost said.

“Eh, Clover’s tough. She can handle it.” He does some sort of karate move with his hands.

“Clover knows karate?” I ask.

“I’m sure she’s soaked up some of my moves.”

God, Larry, you are such a freak.

As we walk through the neighborhood, I try to imagine Larry living here. Larry in his crazy-looking workout pants and no shirt, with his mystery woman and a ba —

A baby.

Why can’t he just say it?

But I know. He can. Just not around me.

Living with Jackie Chan

Jo Knowles

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