

Chapter 2 Humans

Robbie awoke to the sunlight shining in his eyes through his curtains. He noticed that his arms were sore and stretched them to relieve the pain. He didn't think he had done anything wrong last night when his stepdad grabbed and shook him. He knew the den was off limits, but he needed a pair of scissors for a school project. He didn't look at anything else, intentionally, but his stepdad was very protective of everything in that den. This was not the first time he had gotten angry and certainly was not a rare occurrence as of late. The house often felt like he was walking on eggshells and Robbie's only real relief was playing soccer with his friends after school. He felt free to run and just be a seven-year-old kid during that time, unlike his home where his actions were always guarded. Robbie loved soccer, robots, drones, and teasing girls. "Girls were so easily scared", Robbie thought, "how can you not scare them for a bit of fun".

His curtains were normally closed by his mom at nighttime, but she was distracted and upset last night. He was sure that her upset, which comes more often these days, was not about him. She and his stepdad were whispering more often now, almost like they were planning a birthday party for him or something, but his birthday was not for weeks. They would go quiet when he entered the room and awkwardly say hi and ask him if he wanted something. Robbie felt like an intruder in his own home, wondering where it was safe for him to be. His room was safe, the basement was safe, but the family room, the kitchen, and certainly the den were not safe. It seems that secrets were always being discussed and he felt very strange, especially when his stepdad was around.

Robbie had never gotten over the loss of his real father in that car accident just over a year ago. His dad was alone, early evening, driving back from a sales meeting. The police had said that likely the car's steering system had failed and caused him to run off the road and hit a tree. Given that his dad was a car guy and always working on it, this seemed strange to Robbie. "Why would dad not repair his car so the steering wouldn't fail like that?" Robbie had posed this question to his mother, but she looked away and just shrugged her shoulders. His dad and mom had some very loud fights prior to the accident, Robbie remembers, and he was concerned that he would become another kid of divorce, just like Billie across the street. Mom had done something wrong and dad was very upset about it. "How could you do this to me, to us?" Robbie remembers hearing through the door. Both his parents were crying and very upset.

Frank had become his stepdad just nine months after his dad's death. Frank and his dad had known each other and had gone to a few football games together. Frank had come over for dinner several times and he was funny during those times. He had a deep and jovial laugh that was contagious and made us all laugh. Mom used to laugh so hard that she started to cry. Those times were fun but never returned once dad died. Frank came over and helped mom overcome the loss. They argued sometimes, saying they shouldn't have done something, but it was never clear to Robbie what they had done. Frank had changed after dad's death. His behavior was more strict, angry, and he hardly laughed like he did before. At first Frank and mom used to hold each other and kiss. But they haven't done that lately and there was so much secrecy between them. Robbie had come to not like Frank and he also didn't like his mom when she was with him.

Uncle Charlie had always liked Robbie. He would come to visit his sister and then end up playing lego robots with Robbie all night long. They watched fun robot movies, like "Short Circuit" and "WALL-E" together. One night, when the parents had left Uncle Charlie to babysit, they watched "iRobot" together. "What a movie!" Robbie thought. He'd never seen robots go mean like that and start hurting people. He also felt sad for those robots abandoned in the shipping containers, huddling together, with no humans to love them or play with them. The movie made Robbie love robots even more, especially Sunny, who had done something terrible but, in the end, it was something he had to do. The demolition robot that crashed the house was very scary and Robbie had several dreams where he woke up screaming that a robot was crashing through his window. Uncle Charlie and Robbie never told his mom that they had watched the movie as she would not have approved. That would be their little secret.

Uncle Charlie was concerned for Robbie. Robbie had experienced a terrible trauma in losing his dad. Frank marrying Chelsea so soon after the accident also seemed too fast for Robbie. Robbie didn't have enough time to grieve his dad's death and he continues to show the pain of his loss. Truth be told Charlie didn't like Frank marrying Chelsea and he didn't like the way Chelsea behaved around Frank. There was always an awkwardness about their interaction and they are never comfortable or at ease at least when Charlie was around. One time Charlie had suggested that Robbie be allowed to attend a grief session for children at a local church, but this just angered Frank and Chelsea. When challenged, they blew up and said they're not going to have some extreme, right winged Christians invading their home. They also seemed to be very secret and reserved about their relationship and they certainly never discussed Sam, Robbie's real father, when they were all together. Chelsea had broken down in front of Charlie multiple times when Frank wasn't around. Her grief was clearly not healed, and she would spiral into a deep sorrow and weeping about how sorry she was that it happened. There was something she was afraid to tell Charlie, but continued attempts probe produced no new revelations about her feelings or what happened.

Uncle Charlie felt that Robbie needed a new friend. His friends at school didn't share his love for robots and Robbie was always looking to play with robots. His buddies all wanted to play soccer and ride their skateboards at the local skate park. Several of his friends had drones, but since Robbie's broke, he had lost the ability to fly with them. Robbie had a scooter and would join them at the park, but it was clear that he was there just to hang out and wasn't super excited to be there. Maybe Robbie needed a dog. Charlie floated the idea to Chelsea but learned that Frank was supposedly allergic to dogs. "What a bummer", thought Charlie, that Robbie wouldn't be able to have a dog because of Frank. Before his death, Sam had proposed multiple times to Chelsea and Robbie that they should get a dog, but Chelsea had always resisted that Robbie was too young. Now that he's older, she still has the perfect excuse to not get a dog for Robbie. Maybe there was some other toy or pet that Charlie could get to help Robbie. "He really likes robots, I wonder what types of robots are available today?" thought Charlie. "I'll need to do some research," Charlie pondered, "I think Robbie needs more than a Lego mindstorm set to get him excited."