

Haunted

by Marta Randall

"Here, darling, I fixed you a nice turkey sandwich," Mrs. Nichols said, disturbing the quiet of the workroom. "And a bit of macaroni salad, just the way you like it. Doesn't it look nice?" She thrust the tray between Robert's face and the drawing board.

Robert's fingers clenched around his pen; his hand ached. "I'm not really hungry," he said. "I do have a deadline."

Mrs. Nichols snatched the tray back. "I just thought you should -- you work so hard." Her voice quavered.

He laid the pen down and looked up from the drawing board. Her chin trembled; she wore one of his old, discarded bathrobes. His shoulders tightened.

"Mom, it's the first commission I've had in two months, and the deadline's tomorrow--"

"Well, I'm sorry. I just want to help you, you don't have to snap at me like that."

"I'm not -- " He caught his breath and let it out slowly. "Sorry. All right. Put it on my desk, I'll eat it in a minute."

"Good," she said happily. "I brought enough for both of us. You go ahead and work, I won't bother you."

He closed his eyes while the tray thumped onto the desk, a chair scraped back, china clattered. Anything he said would only lead to tears, accusations, and, if he persisted, an afternoon of slammed doors and blaring soap operas, the dissonance of her unhappiness. She hummed to herself, cheerfully out of tune. He sighed and picked up his pen.

Before him, calligraphy spilled in elegant lines across the paper, translating the stark typeset of the advertising copy into a work of art. A simple enough piece, similar to the works that used to slide in a seemingly endless line below his pens before computer graphics nibbled at, bit into, eventually ate his business. Now the work came slowly, if at all -- perhaps a blessing, his mother said, since the arthritis in his hands had worsened. Besides, she said, they could both live on her pension, now that he was back at home. Back at home. The pen shook and he lifted his hand away before ink splattered over the work.

"Oh, Bobby," Mrs. Nichols said, around a mouthful of sandwich. "We must go shopping this afternoon, we're almost out of chicken pot pies. You know how you love chicken pot pies. Just yesterday I noticed that we only had two left, I said to myself, we'd better get to the store, Bobby will miss his chicken pot pies."

