

Romance Divas Ebook Challenge



Gaps

Over and over, Meg kept thinking she could see something behind the glass panels of the door.

It was late at night. Tim and the children were asleep upstairs, and Meg, by herself in the kitchen, was cutting sandwiches and filling lunch box drink bottles.

To start with—a few minutes ago—it had been nothing more than a blur, just at the edge of her line of vision. The sort of thing you often thought you saw at night, when you were tired. Nothing to make your chest clench tight and your breath have to be let out slowly. Nothing, *nothing* to remind you of—no, no, don't think about that.

Of course, there couldn't be anything there. The door led to the back hall, but the outer door had stayed locked all day. No one, nothing—not even a stray cat—could have got in there.

It's just that time of day, Meg told herself. Get the lunches done, go to bed, and in the morning it'll be all sunlight and a shiny tiled floor, and you'll feel safe again.

When she had been ill, after the accident, in the evenings—when the lights went murky and every sound grew teeth—she had needed Tim to stay up with her. Once, checking on the children, he had let the kitchen door click shut behind him, and she had screamed, motionless, locked in sudden terror of being left alone with—*no*.

She was better now (the doctor said, her mother said), and past eleven Tim got so tired. It wasn't fair to keep him up with her. *"He has to work, he's been so good to you."* Unspoken: *some men wouldn't have stayed.*

So now she let him go to bed and smiled at him—*"I'll be up in a minute."* Needing to say it not for his reassurance, but for hers.

Turning to the cupboard to get out two crisp packets, all at once she felt her throat go tight. A flicker of colour this time. Moving so swiftly past the corner of her eye that when she snapped round to look it had already gone.

Glass reflects movement. Come on, Meg. She tucked the crisps into the lunch boxes, forcing herself to breathe steadily, through her teeth. She just needed to get these done, then she could go upstairs, up to Tim and safety.

The *feeling* of safety. No matter what her mind was shrieking at her, there was no danger down here, in her own kitchen.

It had been a terrible accident, of course. She was lucky to be alive at all, and although she'd recovered now from the long convalescence that had affected her so strangely, they all acknowledged it had left her with weaknesses. *Gateways in my mind where stuff can get through.*

No, that wasn't what she'd meant to think. Weaknesses, that was all, like the weakness in a broken and healed limb.

They'd explained what was wrong with her. The physical trauma of the accident, the weeks when she thought she'd never see again, had shaken her mental balance, tipped her into a form of depression.

She'd clung to their definitions, read the booklets, matched her symptoms to what they told her.

But it had never seemed to...quite...match. It hadn't felt like something contained—neat, reassuring word—in her mind.

It had felt as though all her life she'd been looking at the world as if it were safe, solid. Then the illness had pushed her sideways, she'd seen it from another angle—and from that angle it wasn't solid. It had chinks, like the gaps in the slats of a fence. She could see through them. She could see what the safety had been hiding.

Darkness gathering—deliberately—in the corner of a room. Curtains bulging as some shapeless something passed behind them. The time she'd looked in the mirror and seen—*no, not that. Don't think about that.*

She hadn't tried to tell anyone. She was ill, and she was seeing things skewed, wrong. *Unbalanced.* That was what they'd said and that was what she'd told herself.

Because she had to get better. She had to get back to where she could no longer see the gaps in the world. Because worse than *seeing*, was the thought that she might, too, be *seen*.

She clipped the lunch boxes shut and brushed up crumbs, dropping the cloth into the sink. It was more than she could do to spend an extra moment rinsing it out. She knew this state of mind: much longer and she'd be clinging onto the very edge of panic, would have to go upstairs and wake Tim, making him fumble into his dressing gown and come downstairs to turn off the lights.

Now all she had to do was put the lunch boxes in the fridge. Which meant she had to go past the door.

She took the handles in one hand, keeping the other free, trying not to let herself specify why this mattered.

As she opened the fridge, the dark glass gleamed on her right. No movement, nothing. But tension climbed up her spine, and she dared not look.

The fridge shut, she backed away into the kitchen. She couldn't turn her back on the hall door. There was something there. Now she was sure of it. She couldn't look. If she could just get out of the kitchen and up the stairs to Tim—

She'd have to wake him. She couldn't do it, not this time—she couldn't turn out the lights and leave herself in the dark, with that *something* moving behind the door—

Too late. In the glass, the reflected door handle moved. Not the real handle, the one on Meg's side: just, slowly, the reflection. The door itself didn't move, didn't open. But out of the darkness of the glass, something came.

It looked like Meg. Its hair was Meg's, its height, it wore the same clothes. But the cold that came with it, and the smell...

Meg's body went still. She wasn't far from the kitchen door. The stairs, and Tim—

"You won't make it," said the thing with her face, in a thin, flat voice. *"Not now you've let me through."*

It came forward, walking like Meg walked, and she backed away against the kitchen cupboards, her mind blanking out. *This can't be real, this isn't happening—*

"Of course it's real," said the thing, and its mouth moved in a shape like a smile. *"You've known it for months. Known we were there, watching you as you were watching us. You must realise we don't get many gateways—you don't expect us not to notice when one appears."*

"You were resistant. Very unwilling to widen it enough for me to get through. If you hadn't been so determined to be better, hadn't insisted on staying down here, in the dark, letting your fear rise and rise and force the gap wider, you might have succeeded in closing it again. Others have." Its face, which was like Meg's face, twisted in a way hers could not have done.

"How—?" whispered Meg, pressed against the cupboards.

"You know how. The barrier between us and you only works as long as no one sees through it. But once you do, all it takes is a little pressure and it widens, out, out, out, until you can have...visitors."

"Don't," said Meg. "Stop it."

"But you're the one who let me in. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you."

Meg's gaze slid to the doorway. She was only steps away. She could reach it—

"No you can't," said the thing with her face. *"It's too late."* And then it spoke, too, in her voice. "Come on Meg, I can't do this without you."

Its hands closed round her wrists, cold and tight. And although they'd looked like her hands, when they touched her it felt wrong, wrong, horrible.

For the first time, Meg screamed. But it came out as nothing more than a shrill gasp and then her throat closed up and she couldn't speak and couldn't scream and Tim wouldn't come and save her—

"Don't do that," said the thing. *"Save it for later."* And now it was pulling her with it, towards the dark glimmer of the door.

She'd known there was something there, known it was dangerous. She should have, she should have... Too late.

The glass felt cold at her back, then sticky like a snail's underbelly. It clung and dragged, like a mouth sucking, like an undertow.

The dark enclosed her. She wasn't in the kitchen, nor the hall, but somewhere where the air felt cold, as if she were underwater, and around her something swirled, like mist, like smoke, except it moved too slowly, looked too thick, like plumes of dark oil in a lake.

And from somewhere—not near, but not far enough away—she heard noises.

In front of her, no longer like a mirror but like a window, rose the glass of the door. She pressed her face against it, seeing the lit kitchen and the thing that stood in it. The thing with her face and her eyes and her voice: identical, impenetrably disguised.

"It's no good staying there," it said. *"They won't see you. And you'll be busy soon."*

From the lit world came a sudden cry, wailing down the stairs: "Mummy!"

The thing went to the kitchen door and spoke, again with Meg's voice.

"Coming!"

Then its face turned to Meg. "*Oh yes,*" it said. "*I'm coming.*" And it snapped off the light and moved to the door. Towards the stairs. The bedroom where Tim slept. And the children.

"What do you want?" Meg shouted through the glass, her voice high and cracking. "What are you going to do?"

The thing turned back. For a moment, in the light from the stairs, its face showed through the disguise.

"*Nothing good,*" it said.

Then the last light went off and, in the darkness, Meg heard the stairs creak as it went up them.

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