



Evil Glasses

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EOW Insurance

by Mike Kirkendall

EOW INSURANCE THIS IS AGENT# CDK556. CONRAD.BILL (POLICY# YHG456) KNOWN DWELLING IS OVERRUN BY TROLLS. AREA SURROUNDING THE MAIN DWELLING HAS A NUMBER OF HUMAN REMAINS, EITHER OUT IN THE OPEN, NAILED TO TREES, OR IN TROLL PILES. ONE PILE HAS A HUMAN HEAD THAT STRONGLY RESEMBLES POLICYHOLDER. SENDING IMAGE. STANDING BY FOR RECEIPT CONFIRMATION AND SATISFACTION NOTICE.

Jackson Morris (otherwise known as Agent# CDK556, and Jax to everyone else) hit send on his mobile unit after punching in the message. The thick, heavy duty buttons made typing out long messages annoying, if not tiring; a small price to pay so that the device would work in the field.

Putting the device aside, he picked up his camera and used the zoom feature to watch the house. He had taken enough pictures; he just wanted to make sure he knew where the Trolls were. So far he counted nine, which in the Troll world was quite a bit. Trolls have a strong patriarchal hierarchy where every group is lead by the strongest male. The problem for Trolls is that every male thinks they are the strongest, which leads to constant fights where the pecking order is reestablished multiple times a day. Normally these fights are a quick punch, bite or kick; and then followed up with a severe beating by the current “head of state.” Every once and a while, these fights get nasty, and the challenging male does not back down as easy, and a Troll dies...

One of these fights took place as he watched the house and waited for a response. Jackson was happy that the Trolls were busy with each other, and not looking around for something to kill – responses from the Wave Net could take anywhere from minutes to hours, depending on how the messages were picked up and relayed. Wave Net devices throw out their messages to a variety of radio bands and wavelengths in small packets. Eventually, the intended recipient gets all the packets,

and thus, a complete message. No longer are there reliable cell-towers, satellite phones, or other rapid communication technologies. Wave Net uses parts of all of the old tech, when it can, and the senders hope the messages get through. It's like a hacked together crappy telegraph without the wires, but with the ability to send simple photographs.

Satisfied that the Trolls were not going anywhere anytime soon, Jackson slowly crawled backwards down the ridge he was using for cover, taking his Wave Net communicator and camera with him. He shimmied down to the rest of his gear; where his backpack and carbine were leaning against a tree, silently awaiting his return.

Jax waited.

He ate some food; a compressed cake of corn, berries, seeds and dried beef. It was not that bad for field food, and had all the nutrients that his body needed.

Jax waited.

He drank some fresh apple juice out of an old sports-drink bottle.

Jax waited.

He checked on the Trolls; one was beating another over the head with what looked like a human leg, as he ate what looked like a human arm.

Jax waited.

He wiped down the outside and lightly lubed the bolt on his carbine, an old Sig Sauer 553. He was once told that the Sig showed people that he had taste, was a connoisseur of old euro tech, someone who knew weapons – and not to be trifled with. In reality, he could give a shit. He was not a gun person, and never really understood the appeal. He needed something for protection in the field, and something that made him not look like a victim in town. He won the carbine in a card game with a pair of nines and kept it because it did not weigh a lot.

Jax waited.

The temperature was still nice, about the mid 80's. Summertime in the Free Northwest can't be beat Jackson thought to himself as he noticed that the

“Message” light on his Wave Net device was glowing a dull green.

Jax stretched his arms wide, a slight “uhhhhh” escaped his lips at the apex.

“Time to get the fuck out of here,” he quietly said as he picked up the device and hit “receive.”

AGENT# CDK556 THIS IS EOW INSURANCE. POLICY NOT SATISFIED.
SATISFACTION CONDITIONS ON POLICY ARE LISTED AS ABSOLUTE.
FULFILL ABSOLUTE SATISFACTION REQUIREMENTS AND REPORT BACK.

“What the shit? Absolute?” Jackson pulled out Bill’s policy and jumped to the satisfaction terms. They were listed as “probable,” just as he knew they were, because he looked at it this morning over a decent cup of toasted barley tea (that the proprietor had the balls to call new coffee). He flipped to the last page of the policy and looked at the insurance issuer rights notes and saw the word “seconds.”

“Those shady mother...” Selling insurance in a world where everything is trying to kill you is a losing proposition at best. The big guys can make a little on volume, where the small guys make it on spread or you actually dying. What they do is sell you a policy for a decent chunk of change because you have loose satisfaction terms, then, they buy a policy on you to cover the expense of paying out (or even above the amount of your current policy), but with stricter satisfaction terms so they can get it for cheaper. The difference between the two pays the company every month, and when you die, they get a nice payday.

Jax just gave his company proof enough that they will have to pay out, now he needed to get proof so that his company would get paid. He instantly knew that there was no arguing or complaining, absolute is absolute, and End Of World Insurance wants their money.

Author Mike Kirkendall lives in Washington state where he gardens and has a shit ton of guns.

Elevator to the Moon

By Sara Lufrano

“Just the two of us,” he said to her.

She barely smiled while looking at the floor holding her small tote bag.

“I’m Paul.”

“Hello, I’m Julia.”

They didn’t shake hands.

He stood in one of the two back corners and she stood in the other. Both looked out of the only porthole as the earth moved further away.

“This is weird right?” Paul asked with a smile.

She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

“You’re very beautiful.”

She turned her head away from him but blushed.

“You know that though, right? You must get that all the time. It is true.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“Women often think that I’m handsome.” He smiled at her even though she wasn’t looking at him.

She nodded.

“I really wish you’d talk to me. This is such a long trip.”

He took the two steps to the porthole to watch the earth. “Come look.” He urged her over.

She went to his side and looked out. There it was, Earth. Moving away from them as they ascended to the moon.

“It’s marvelous,” she said.

He watched the earth and she looked at him from the corner of her eye. He was very handsome, tall, muscular.

“You—you are handsome,” she said looking out of the porthole.

He smiled. “I know.”

“Why are you going to the moon?” she said.

Paul sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “Earth isn’t kind to everyone.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s not your fault. I’m sure if I knew you there I could have stayed.”

Julia went back to her space and put down her tote. The elevator they were in had black walls, black rubber floor, stainless steel trim. The porthole was the only thing that let them know they weren’t simply going to the top floor of a tall building.

“Hopefully it’s better for the both of us.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Are you feeling fine?” She asked him.

“Yeah.” He turned and looked at her.

“Oh.” She took a deep breath. “I think my body is reacting to the travel shot.”

“Is there anything I can do?” He stood in front of her now.

“I don’t know. I’m sure I couldn’t throw up even if I had to.”

The traveling shot they both received retarded their body functions to trick them into feeling like a few hours had passed instead of the three days. They couldn’t eat, sleep, use the restroom.

“I’m sure you’ll feel better soon,” he said.

“Thank you.” She looked at him. He was smiling at her and she smiled back.

They stayed quiet for a while. He started to hum and she looked out the porthole. Now there were only stars.

“They’re so unfamiliar,” she said.

“Hmm?”

“The stars. I don’t recognize anything.”

He stood next to her and looked. “Yeah.” He looked at her. He reached out with his hand and turned her face toward him. She looked at him now. He kissed her softly but completely without question. She didn’t kiss back.

“I—I am married,” Julia said.

“Oh.” Paul gave a small smile.

“My husband is on the moon. I’m going up to be with him.”

“He’s a lucky man.” He stepped back from her and leaned against the same corner of the elevator that they began their journey.

She looked at the stars again. “He’s been there for three years.”

“What’s he do?”

“Air chemical engineer.”

Paul laughed. “Someone we all need.”

She nodded. A bit later she went back to her original corner. He started to hum again and slid down to sit on the floor, legs out in front of him. She went over to him, squatted down and kissed him.

He didn’t kiss back.

She pulled away and looked in his eyes.

“Are you done?” he asked.

“Uh.” She was startled. “Yes.”

She stood and went back.

“Why did you do that?” he asked.

“I guess I didn’t mind you kissing me.”

“You’re married.”

She nodded.

He stood up and turned his body to her but leaned against the wall.

“It’s only unfortunate for me that you’re married,” he said.

She shook her head without looking at him. “No, not just you.”

Paul reached out and took her hand. She looked at him. He kissed her and she kissed back. His hands moved deftly around her body and under her clothes. She moaned and pulled her body against his. They kissed sloppily and rushed, they breathed into each other’s ears and necks. Soon they were both exposed and he was inside her.

He finished and slumped down next to her. She moved to nestle her head on his shoulder. He smiled and stood up before she could settle.

She propped herself up and watched him dress. He smiled at her.

“You’re beautiful,” he said.

“Thanks. That was great,” she said.

“Yeah.”

He stretched a bit and stood in his corner. She got up and gathered her clothes and dressed. She stood in her corner.

“What are you going to do once you get there?” she asked.

“Find a job.”

“What did you do on Earth?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Oh. I won’t say anything bad about it.”

He looked at her with a plain face, and then smiled with the corner of his mouth.

“No,” he said calmly

She looked out the porthole.

“I wish I could sleep,” he said.

“That would be nice,” she agreed.

She started to dig around her tote. He watched her.

“I’ve got some chocolate. Would you like some?”

Paul held out his hand. Julia dropped a few pieces in his palm. He popped them into his mouth.

“Thanks.”

She smiled. His eyes stayed on her. She was expectant.

“Come here.” He waved her in to nestle under his arm.

She went to him and fit next to him closely. He held her to him with his arm.

“I was almost sent to prison for selling drugs,” he said.

She didn’t pull back from him.

“Does that scare you?” he said.

She wasn’t sure. “No.” But maybe it did. “That’s fine. You’re starting a new life.”

“I am.” He nodded and loosened his grip on her. She moved away from him.

“Maybe I’ll see you around. There aren’t many people there,” she said.

“There’s enough and I hope we don’t,” he said.

“Why not?”

He smiled at her. “You’re married and I’m a bad person.”

She looked at the rubber floor. “My husband and I don’t have the best relationship.”

“You should work on it.”

“Why?” she said and looked at him.

“Why not? Don’t you love him?” he asked while looking out of the porthole.

“It’s been so long since we’ve seen each other.”

They were silent. He didn’t start to hum.

“We still might see each other,” she said.

“I guess.”

She went to the porthole and looked out.

“I don’t mind about the drugs,” she said.

“It doesn’t matter if you mind.”

Julia sighed. She turned around and looked at him. “You are very handsome.”

“Thanks.”

“I won’t tell my husband about us.”

“That will make your life easier.”

“Why don’t you care?” She turned to him and leaned against the door.

He laughed.

“Do you care?” she asked.

“You’re a good person.”

She looked away from him and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Don’t be so torn up about it,” he said.

“Please don’t tell me how I should feel.”

He nodded his head. She looked at him. He was leaning against the wall in his corner, hands in his pockets.

“You’re very handsome.”

“Stop it,” he barked.

“I don’t understand you.”

“You’re not going to.”

She went up to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. He grabbed her hands and got her away. She tried again. He pushed her back.

“Can’t you just let me do this?” she asked.

She reached for him again.

He slapped her across the face. “I said stop it!”

She covered her entire face in surprise and went to her corner. He started to hum. The moon came up in the porthole.

“We’re almost there,” he said.

She stared at the moon. Her cheek stung.

“Do you have any more chocolate?”

She took her time to hand over the bag without looking at him. He smiled at her.

The elevator stopped and the door slid open. He walked out and she followed.

“Julia!” she heard. It was her husband. His smile was large and great. He held his arms out for her.

She smiled and went to him.

Paul walked to an information screen. “Sector B-87.”

“My God. What happened to your face?” Her husband gently cupped her cheek.

“Oh,” she laughed, “I was packing and knocked over books from the top shelf in the library.”

Paul pushed through screens that were shown. “Sector A-163. That one.”

Her husband kissed her and held her tight against him. “I missed you so much.”

Paul left and then Julia and her husband headed home.

Cloned

by Marshall Bowles

"It isn't natural," Susan said. She ran her hand across the rock face above her, feeling for a handhold. The warmth from the sun was in perfect balance with the crisp air. This was turning out to be a great day for climbing. "You're not going to be able to convince me otherwise, Roger."

"I'll never understand you," Roger said from below her. Today was Susan's turn to be the lead climber. She and Roger did not get much time to climb anymore. The last time they were out had been seven months ago, and she missed it. She often daydreamed about being out on the rock while sitting in her cramped windowless office.

"Cloning people, Roger!" Susan said. She found a hold and gripped it with her fingertips. "That's insane. It's like body snatchers. Some imposter is walking around wearing your skin and using your memories, but they don't have your soul."

Roger laughed. "There you go again with the metaphysical talk," he said. Susan shook her head. "You don't have to believe," she said.

"That's why I love you," Roger said. Susan was looking at the rock, but she could hear the smile in his voice. It made her smile too.

They climbed in silence for a while. The ground shrank away and the wind picked up. Susan looked up at the vast blue sky above her, not a cloud in sight. What a day to be alive.

"I'm going to invest," Roger said.

Susan smiled. Roger became an unstoppable force when he had something on his mind. It was one of his quirks that she had gotten used to. She still loved him as much as she did when they first started dating. From years of experience with him, she learned it was easier to humor him.

"You'll lose our money," she said.

"Don't worry about that," Roger said. "I won't invest our joint savings. I'll cash out my bonds. And even if I lose it all—which I won't—we'll have our backup plan for our retirement."

Susan wanted to tell him no, and it was not because of the money. Roger's long time friend Ganesh had graduated from MIT with a Ph.D. in bioengineering. Ganesh had a very successful career in the financial industry, but he had quit to get back to his roots. Ganesh approached Roger about investing in a startup.

Ganesh believed he was on the verge of a breakthrough in cloning. He had spent nights and weekends in a makeshift lab in his tiny Brooklyn apartment. He self-funded everything using his banker salary. Ganesh was the only person she knew who could be considered a true mad scientist.

Susan only knew of this second-hand through Roger. She and Ganesh weren't on speaking terms. As much as she wanted to think it was a hoax, she believed it was probably real. Ganesh was brilliant, and if he said that he would do something, he always followed through. Always.

"Roger, I don't think it's right," she said. She knew he was prepping his argument, and she cut him off. "I'm being serious. It upsets the natural order."

"If he's right and can copy your memories," Roger said with a slight quaver in his voice, "it's like you could live forever."

Susan felt a lump in her throat, and she took a deep breath. So that's what this was all about. She suddenly felt like crying, but she held it back. Instead she let go of the rock with her left hand so she could pivot to look down at Roger.

He looked up at her, and she could see the fear in his eyes. Her bout with ovarian cancer had changed him. The carefree boy turned more solemn. Roger tried to pretend to be that same man, but his fear of losing her would surface at unexpected times.

"Roger," she said. "Promise me you won't ever do that to me."

Roger opened his mouth but no sound came out.

"Promise me," she said.

"If I lost you, I'd—"

"Roger, no." He tried to argue, but she cut him off. "No!" Her voice shook, and she turned away so that she would not start crying. The pain in his face was too hard to bear.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the cliff face. Her helmet made a soft scraping sound on the rock. "It wouldn't be me," she said. "It wouldn't have my soul."

Roger muttered something she could not hear, but he sounded angry. This had been such a good day, and now they were ruining it by fighting. Maybe she could still salvage it. She let go with her left hand and turned around. "Roger, honey, let's not fi—"

Her right hand slipped. She had leaned back too far, her emotions clouding her judgment. She flailed her left hand at the wall, but she had already lost her grip. She tilted into the air, a slow motion fall that she was powerless to stop.

Everything was happening too fast for her to think. Her body went into autopilot, her arms flapping at the air. Susan's body picked up speed as gravity took over, and she felt herself tumbling. She thought she heard Roger screaming.

Her free fall lasted only a fraction of a second before her left arm slammed into a part of the cliff that jutted out. She felt the vibration of her bones breaking, but she did not feel any pain. She tried to grab the rock with her right hand, but it just scraped across the rocks and peeled the skin off.

She bounced away from the cliff, more out than down because of her collision with the wall. She had finally gone far enough for the rope to catch her, but she was upside down when it did. Her momentum slammed her against the cliff and she bounced away again. Pain tore through her entire body.

Susan tried to flip upright before she hit the cliff again, but her body was not responding. She hit and bounced off. She gave up on flipping. She rotated instead so that she was looking at the cliff. She reached out as she came closer to the wall.

Her right hand brushed the rock, but she could not grab onto anything. She could not feel her left arm below the shoulder, and her right hand was slick with blood. She left streaks of blood on the granite.

She finally was able to get a hold on a large jug, using her wrist to get enough traction to keep her still in one spot. It had only been a few seconds since she fell, and now she was upside down staring at a drop of several hundred feet.

Her senses started to return, and the first thing she heard was Roger yelling.

"I'm alright," she tried to say, but her voice did not work. She took a few ragged breaths and tried again. "I'm alright!" she yelled.

"How bad are you hurt?" Roger said. "Can you climb back up?" He sounded scared, but she was impressed by how well he was holding it together.

"No," she said. She was barely holding herself still, and the blood rushing to her head made her eyes feel like they were bulging out. "You'll have to climb down here and help me."

"Okay," Roger said. "Hang tight. I'm coming down."

She tried to calm herself by taking deep breaths. Everything will be fine. Roger would get her back upright, and then they would figure out how to safely get off the mountain. He was a good climber. He would get to her soon.

Her harness slipped. The straps should have been able to hold her even while upside down, but she could feel the flat nylon sliding over her hips. Susan

panicked. She let go of her hold on the rock and grabbed at the rope clamped to her waist. She drifted away from the wall and hung in midair.

She wrapped two of her fingers around the rope, but they immediately slipped off. Susan tightened her abs and swung upwards, flinging her good arm. Her wrist flew wide and missed the rope. She only had time for one more attempt before she fell completely out of the harness.

With all of her strength, Susan heaved her torso upwards and reached with her arm. She was too late. Her legs slipped through the loops of the harness, and her arm missed the rope by inches.

She spun head over heels as she fell. The bright blue sky and ground swirled together, and she felt an overwhelming sadness. Roger, Roger, Roger, Roger, Roger, Roger, Roger, Roger, Roger, Roger, Roger, Roger, Roger.

Susan woke up.

She was lying down in a large bed staring at a plain white ceiling. She felt dizzy and could not remember where she was. She blinked hard to try to force her brain to work, and she ran her hands across the soft sheets under her.

She looked around and saw Roger. He stood a few steps away from the bed, clutching his hands together in front of him. He looked different, like he had aged a year. Something about the way he was standing made her uncomfortable, but she was too groggy to put a finger on it.

Roger opened his mouth and made a slight motion like he was going to come closer, but he stopped himself. He opened his mouth to speak. His lips moved for a moment without words, and he looked like he was on the verge of tears. "Susan?" he said, his voice choking.

"Roger," she said. Her voice felt odd, and she had a strange sensation that she had never used it before.

Roger burst into tears and fell to his knees beside the bed. He embraced her with his muscular arms and buried his face in her chest. Susan started crying because he was crying. What was wrong? Susan could not remember anything.

Susan wrapped her arms around him to hold him. Her arms felt weak, and she had trouble controlling them. She wrapped her fingers gently around the back of his neck so that her arm would stay steady.

Their tears stopped but they stayed in the same place for a long time. Neither of them spoke. Susan tried to recall the last thing she had been doing

before waking up in this bed, but her memories were like wet ropes slipping out of her grasp. She felt a twinge of fear. Was she sick? Dying?

She pushed those thoughts away and looked around the room. It was a chic modern apartment decorated in a minimalist style. A large flat screen television was mounted on the wall opposite the bed beside the mirrored sliding doors of a closet. To her left was a pair of mahogany double doors that were closed. The wall to her right was clear floor-to-ceiling glass with doors leading to a large balcony with an amazing view of the New York skyline.

The double doors swung open, and Ganesh walked into the room. Susan gasped. Ganesh was the last person she would have expected to be there.

"Ah, you're awake," Ganesh said. He walked to the bedside and laid a hand on Roger's back. "Roger, I need to run some tests."

Roger looked up into Susan's eyes. "Okay," he said, not taking his eyes off of her. Ganesh helped Roger to his feet and guided him to a seat at the foot of the bed.

Ganesh took a small flashlight out of a pocket of the lab coat he was wearing. "How are you feeling Susan?" he said as he sat on the edge of the bed at her side.

"What's happening?" Susan said. She looked to Roger.

"There was an accident," Ganesh said. He flicked on the flashlight and shined it into her right eye. He put his thumb against her cheek to pull her eyelid down, and she jerked away out of reflex. She did not like Ganesh. "Come now," Ganesh said, "I need to make sure you're healthy."

"Since when are you a doctor?" Susan said. She struggled to sit up in bed. "Roger, tell me what happened."

"I lost you," Roger said. Tears rolled down his cheeks. "I couldn't get to you in time. You slipped out of the rope and... and..." He broke down again.

Ganesh shook his head and smiled at Roger. "But it's all back to how it should be now, Roger," he said. He gestured at Susan with a wave of his hand. "Susan is here with us and she is in perfect health." He frowned at Susan. "Well, I will assume it's perfect health since you will not let me check."

Susan felt disoriented and a little scared. What did Roger mean about losing her? There had been an accident? She could not remember anything. She scrambled to get off of the bed to stand up. Her knees wobbled but she kept her footing. The more she moved, the more stable she felt.

She walked around the bed and put her hands on Roger's shoulders. He looked up at her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Please, Roger. Tell me what happened," she said.

"You died," Roger said. He shuddered and held her tighter. "We were climbing. You fell. Your harness came off. And you fell."

"I don't understand," Susan said. She rubbed her hand across her chest. "You mean, like clinically dead? A heart attack?"

Ganesh stood up and walked around the room, stroking his beard absentmindedly. "No Susan," Ganesh said. "He means you literally died. You fell from over two hundred feet and landed on a boulder. Your body was completely broken and you were quite, quite dead."

Susan shook her head. "That's absurd," she said. She pointed at herself with both hands. "I'm standing here talking to you right now. I couldn't have died."

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong," Ganesh said. He smiled more. "I cloned you."

Susan's jaw dropped open and she stared at Ganesh in shock. Then she burst out in laughter. "Oh my God," she said. She slapped Roger on the head. "This isn't funny."

Roger looked at her and his face showed no signs of humor. "It's true," he said. "You died and we brought you back to life."

"I brought you back to life," Ganesh said.

This was impossible. Susan grabbed Roger's arms and pulled them away from her waist. He was reluctant to let go, but she shoved him off. She stumbled to the mirror on the wall and looked at her reflection. What they were saying was completely impossible. It was absurd. But why did she feel like the person looking back at her in the mirror was not really her?

Ganesh stepped up behind Susan and his reflection stared at her. "Marvelous, isn't it?" he said. "I've been developing the technology for years, and I'm close to going to market. You are my first human subject, and you are the proof that I've discovered how to cheat death."

The realization hit Susan at once. Ganesh was not a man who joked. Ever. If he said it was true, then it was. Susan fell to her knees on the floor and dry heaved. There was nothing in her stomach, and only a thin sliver of bile spilled onto the floor.

Ganesh knelt down and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Are you alright?" he said. "I must run tests on you to ensure that you are functioning properly. I'm

particularly anxious to run you through some cognitive tests to make sure that your memories were transferred intact."

Susan batted Ganesh away with a wordless scream. He stumbled back onto his ass and slid away from her. He stood up and brushed his lab coat to straighten it out. She turned to Roger. "How could you?" she said.

Roger looked guilty. "I can't live my life without you."

"Me?" Susan screamed and stood up. "Who am I? I'm not Susan. I'm—I'm a ghost walking around wearing a mask that looks like her." A wave of dizziness washed over her. She stayed on her feet out of sheer anger.

"You're Susan," Roger said. He stood up and took deliberate steps toward her. "You're my wife. I proposed to you at a wobbly table in the same coffee shop where we had our first date. You said yes. We're going to grow old together and live on the southern coast of France when we retire."

Roger reached out to hug Susan, but she put her hands on his chest and shoved him away. "I'm not that person, Roger. That person died. The thing—me—that you're talking to doesn't have a soul."

Ganesh scoffed. "Please, let's have none of that religion garbage," he said.

Susan turned on Ganesh. "Fuck you," she said. "You think you know everything. But you don't know God even though you're playing at being Him."

Ganesh tsked. "This was always your problem, Susan," he said. "You believe in fairy tales and ignore the actual real science staring you in the face."

Susan turned away. Ganesh's attitude toward her and her beliefs was the reason she had cut him out of her life. Or, it was the reason that the real Susan had cut him out of her life. What was she, this person with a dead woman's memories? She felt sick again.

"Please keep an open mind," Roger said. He tried to hug her again, but her stare made him stop. "Do it for me. I can't go on without you."

"Without who?" Susan said. "Without Susan? She's dead." She put her hand on his chest and pushed him hard again. She walked to the balcony doors to put the bed between her and the two men. "This is sick, Roger. How could you do it? You had to know that Susan would not have wanted this."

Roger looked down at the floor. Susan's jaw dropped. "She told you that she didn't want this, didn't she?" Roger would not look up to meet her eyes.

Ganesh held his hands together in front of him, almost like he was going to pray. "Please, Susan, let's take a step back from this for a moment," he said. "This is all very shocking information, and I'm sure we should have done a better job of breaking the news to you."

Susan was not listening to him. Her mind was reeling with the revelation of what she was. Her very being was a sin against the natural order. Every moment she existed was an affront to God.

She decided to act before she could change her mind. She turned and flung the door open. She could hear the men yelling as she bolted across the balcony and leapt over the rail.

Susan tumbled head over heels as she fell through the air. She briefly wondered what had gone through the mind of the real Susan before the woman had died. She hit the pavement before she could finish the thought.

Susan woke up.

She was in a hospital. She stared up at the white ceiling tiles from her bed, and she heard a monitor beeping along with the beat of her heart. She looked around and saw Roger sleeping in an uncomfortable looking chair beside the bed. She tried to speak but her voice croaked, almost like she had never used it before.

Susan cleared her throat and tried again. "Roger," she said. Roger jerked awake. His eyes opened wide and he looked at Susan. Something about his gaze made Susan feel uncomfortable, but she was too groggy to put her finger on it.

"Where am I?" she said.

"You're in a hospital," Roger said. To Susan, he seemed very hesitant. "Do you remember anything?"

Susan tried to think back, but her memory was fuzzy. "I'm not sure," she said. "What happened, Roger?"

Roger took a deep breath. "You were in an accident," he said. "We were climbing and you fell. You hit your head and—" He looked up at the ceiling. "And you've been in a coma for almost a year."

A year? Susan started to cry. "Oh no," she said. "Am I... Is there any permanent damage?"

"No," Roger said. His whole body seemed to suddenly relax, and he smiled at her. "You had a head injury, so your memory might be funny at first. But the doctors say it should all come back in time." He reached out and held her hand, careful not to disturb the IV needle in her arm.

"You've been here the whole time?" she said.

Roger looked away. "Every day," he said.

"Thank you," she said.

Roger looked back at her, and it looked like he was on the verge of crying. "I don't know what I would do if I lost you," he said.

"Well, I'm still here," she said, smiling. "It's going to take a lot more than a fall to kill me." She thought that comment would make Roger smile, but instead he looked like he was going to be sick.

Susan held out her arms, and Roger leaned over to hug her. She thought about what it would be like to be in Roger's shoes. A spouse stuck in a coma. Wondering every day if they would wake up. She knew she should be happy that she had survived and she was reunited with him, but Susan could not shake the feeling that Roger was lying to her.