

Stale cigarette smoke reeked, and the contemporary American songs translated into Chinese held little appeal. Thoughts of the beer in the hotel room offered more comfort. Dr. Rodney's condescending voice played in her mind, reminding her that she couldn't drink alcohol while taking prescribed medications. *How many beers do I have left, two or three? Will that be enough?*

Jackie opted for the stairs, avoiding two groups of young people gathered around both elevators. On the third floor, she rode an empty elevator the rest of the way. She approached the door to her room, dejected none of her leads had panned out. A longing for Loren grew with each step. The craving for alcohol and pills monopolized her thoughts. She wanted to be left alone in this misery, to curl up in a ball and sleep. Nothing she did numbed the pain or helped her to forget.

Jackie entered her hotel room and went to the mini refrigerator. Relieved beer and snacks had been restocked, she chugged down half of the ale and fired up her laptop. A scream came from down the hall. She opened the door and stood in the foyer, but all remained quiet. An unsettling feeling prompted her to investigate further. She started walking down the hallway and saw a man on the floor next to the elevator. Jackie's heart skipped a beat as she ran toward him. First at the scene, she gasped. A dark puddle of blood had already formed around the man's body, but, bending down, she discovered a faint pulse. Blood gushed from a small circular hole in his chest, and she applied pressure to the wound. Her hands couldn't contain the bleeding though, and she screamed for help. The man's body twitched, his eyes opened wide, and with a confused, unbelieving gaze, he died.