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## **SCHNOCKERED!**

**By**

**DEBRA S. KLEINBERGER**

The day started like every other day, with my head pounding like a Sousa march, and I cursed the night before. I rolled over and wrapped the pillow tight around my head, but the pounding continued until I finally rolled out of bed. I staggered to the kitchen and choked down two aspirin without any water, the bitter medicine making my tongue curl and I wondered if it was worth it, but it was an obsession, cold, hard and unrelenting.

They called me Lou and I worked the beat with the slow methodical actions of a cop hardened to the scenes. The city was rampant with crime and it was my job to slap the lousy creeps in irons only to see them eventually released on parole, back on the streets doing the same crap all over again. Every day my feet hit the pavement in the stiff hard soled shoes the department deemed suitable and listened to the clap of leather on concrete. Every inch of pavement was lined with the filth thrown out by humanity and graffiti dotted the walls of the brick and mortar buildings the slugs called home. The slime spewed out into the streets like a

river of putrid sludge and I did my best to contain it with a bucket and shovel disguised as a badge.

On a good day I collared twenty villains on my watch, but that was a good day and they were scattered few and far in between. Most days I nailed a handful of thugs too stupid to run or so drugged out of their skulls that they were caught by their own hallucinations. Today was no different and I plodded down the walk with indifference. I passed Harry's Bar and Grill, poking my head into my favorite haunt to make sure he was okay, then I wandered on knowing that I'd be back later. I'd tried to beat it; I really did, but like all obsessions it crept back up on me grabbing hold like a vise biting into wood.

That's what wrecked my marriage. Her name was Lois and she had a vibrant passion for life. I can still see her red curls bobbing up and down as she jogged through the park on one of her morning runs, absorbing as much of the city as she could and throwing it back in the form of adrenaline. The day she left she said I'd wind up dead, if not from the creeps then from my obsession. She was probably right, good old Lois. I inhaled the fumes of carbon monoxide left from the exhaust mixed with the stench of the sewer and shook my head, erasing the memory like a clean slate.

Farther on I spied a group of regulars crowded around a mound of filthy rags and I took out my stick as I walked over to break it up. They dispersed in a hurry like water droplets skittering across a pool of oil and I snickered at their reaction. I prodded the pile of rags with my stick and said, "Let's move it, buddy." The mound remained still and I thought for a moment that he hadn't heard me. I jabbed the toe of my shoe in his ribs and yelled, "Let's move it." No movement. Damn. I got a sick feeling in my gut, like you do when you know the worst is true, and reached down to find the gaunt wrist hidden in the folds of fabric. Dead! What a waste. I

called for a wagon on my squawk box and shooed away the nosy youth looking for what they could snag. By the time the wagon was loaded reality had hit home, no one had even shed a tear. The cold heartless life of the city had snatched the life of the old man and no one seemed to care.

That was why I did it; my obsession that is. My beat was over, the clock had ticked, and with the movements of a man caught in the routine of life I returned home to change. I shed the fabric of the heartless beast and pulled a sweater over my head. Before long I stood in front of Harry's Bar and Grill. I had known that I'd be back, I always was, and I pulled open the heavy wooden door with the familiarity of a patron at his favorite establishment. I swaggered to the bar and said, "The usual."

With a gentle swoosh the bartender swept a cold frosty mug in my direction and I reached out a hand with a reflexive motion of a man used to the action. The smooth cold glass plunked in my hand like a long lost friend; the surface slippery from the amber brew that had frothed over the edge. There was no hesitation as I lifted my glass in a toast to the old man, then tilted my head and washed it back.

I called for a refill and then another. Somewhere in the wee hours of the morning, when my vision blurred and my words slurred together it was then that I knew it was an obsession, cold, hard and unrelenting, and as I stumbled out the door realization hit home and I knew once more I was schnockered!