

LOVED TO DEATH

BY JEFFREY BEATY

Pushing through the bar's doors, I was hit with a blast of overly-warm air, smells and sound. My senses – snow-blind and raw from the early winter weather – reeled in the dark entryway, overcome by fried food, booze, sweat, and perfume; by juke box, TV, and monkey-chatter voices. As my senses adapted, I slowly navigated the shoals of tables, swimming the currents of costumed patrons. Looking for my client, I was less than amused by the fake webs, orange and black streamers, and the usual panoply of paper spiders, cats, witches and skeletons fluttering between dusty beer signs and promo posters.

I was in a mood, had been for centuries it seemed.

"Why the long face?" I turned to see a Cheshire cat grin on a face made-up as, appropriately enough, a kitten.

"It's a Mister Death, dear." The kitten-costumed stranger continued. "He's come about the Reaping? I don't think we need any."

Monty Python, of course. It's usually that or...

"Alas! Poor Yorick. I knew him well."

Now there's one I hadn't heard in a while. *'This lady's sharp.'* She took my pause as confusion and took pity on me.

"Sorry. I love your costume. My name's Cat, obviously."

Her grin was a sunrise lighting the hilltops of her cheeks beautifully, despite the Halloween makeup whiskers. A sunrise that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"And you?" she asked. "Cat got you're tongue?" She meowed and winked.

I laughed in spite of myself.

"Nope," I finally replied. "I'm afraid the worms took my tongue long ago." I clacked my bone white teeth in my best impression of the Chatterly Teeth novelty toys. "Name's Morey."

"Memento Mori?" She asked with a cheesy Italian accent that sounded like 'Now that's a Gouda pizza pie' instead of a grim reminder of mortality. And again I thought, *'This lady's not your average bar denizen. And those eyes...'*

Pleasantries followed. I let her play with my scythe. That kind of thing. Then I made an excuse about finding my party.

"My group's out there somewhere," she said. "I'll be here all night, so..." She left it an invite, and I nodded and smiled.

She adjusted her wheel chair as I turned to go, and I'm sure she was thinking that *I* was thinking, *'Yeah right, I'll spend an evening with the handicapped chick.'* I never acknowledged her wheel chair, though of course I noticed immediately; as I had the pain in her eyes and the cancer in her pancreas.

No one so much as noticed as I moved to a corner. I watched as she reached out to those around her, caring more for others' joy than the pain she *knew* was killing her. A soul so sweet she'd cheer up Death. Cue the swelling music and whirlwind romance montage. I sighed.

I approached from behind, whispered, "Till Death do us part," in her ear, then brought another loved one on to her next adventure... Without me.