Bah, Hubert!

"Good King Wenceslas loo- koo-kreachkh, kri-kriuk, ah crap, on the Feast of Steph-phreou kruk, yeauchk. Hey, just open up!"

Phil opened his eyes and saw the half-eaten slice of jam on toast he'd thrown there earlier, after realizing his stomach couldn't cope with solids just yet. It was amazing stuff, strawberry jam, especially once it had begun growing its own fungal offshoot. He wondered idly how long it would take before it fell.

"Jingle bells, jingle blechh – hrekna splerr. How long do I have to sing out ‘ere huh?"

There it was again, the sound that had made him open his eyes. His treasured isolation of the last few weeks was being invaded. There were several things wrong though. The caroler couldn't sing, that wasn’t so unusual, but he had a heavy New York accent, and that was rather odd in south London. Plus there was the fact he'd got past the downstairs door and into the apartment block. There was something else... now, what was it? Ah yes... Phil realised ruefully he was sober. It was difficult to prise himself out of the rut he'd worn in his leather sofa, but he was up for a fight, and intended to give the Bronx baritone a piece of what remained of his mind. A large young man, he lumbered to the door and stared at an invisible harmonist.

"At last! What did you do? Lose the map to yer own front door?" the same voice as before asked, followed by same retching and coughing once more.

Phil’s brain was still checking out all its higher functions and testing the focusing power of his eyes when he looked down and finally saw the source of the sound. There, right outside his door was a large wooden box with a bright red ribbon tied round it. There were several holes around the side, and smoke was coming out of all of them.

"Hey, ringworm! Get me inside and get me out."

It seemed as plausible a plan as any. Phil quickly dragged the box in and closed the door, bent down, tugged on the bow and lifted off the lid. Like the vapours from hell's own humidor, a thick cloud of cigar smoke belched forth and made Phil's eyes sting and his Mojave-dry throat felt a layer of Sahara added as he joined in the mutual feast of expectoration, coughing along with the inhabitant of the box. As the smoke cleared, Phil slumped onto his rear as he tried to understand what he was seeing. In the box, sitting on his hindquarters and chewing a large cigar in the corner of his mouth was a ginger cat. It was a very specific type of ginger cat too. It was huge, fuzzy and in dire need of a good brush. Its large expressive ears were ripped from battles past; a scar replacing its left eye told of honours won. It came with a big grin at no added charge.

Leaning with his forelegs on the edge of the box, a huge paw withdrew the cigar from his mouth and said calmly, "Hi, I'm Hubert. Merry Christmas."

"Hubert?" Phil checked with a furrowing brow.

Hubert lost his grin, jabbed his cigar at Phil, "Yeah, you got a problem with that?"

"No, no," Phil said quickly as he got up onto his knees, "Well, not per se. It's just it's a rather unusual name for a cat."

Hubert pulled off the tricky maneuver of squinting with the missing eye and sneered, "Know many talking cats do yer?"

Phil had to concede that the presence of a talking cat was perhaps of more importance than his name. Hubert jumped out of the box and wandered into the living room blowing smoke out his nose. Phil got up and followed him in as Hubert sniffed at one of several empty bottles and gently touched some greening curry still in its silver tray.

"Jeez, you really live like this?"

A bit defensive of his excessive bender Phil shot back, "At least I don't smoke; I'm only harming myself."

Hubert snapped his head round and advanced on Phil emitting a growl that lions could take lessons from. Back on his haunches and managing the trick of looking down on Phil from his inferior position he spoke sharply, "One more crack like that and I'm outta here. I don't need it okay, this job is ‘ard enough without my little pleasures being attacked!"

"Job? What job?" asked Phil. He still wasn’t really able to cope and was beginning to consider the very real possibility he was having a breakdown.

Hubert pulled his cigar from his mouth, stubbed it out on his other paw, looked up at Phil and grinned, "Gotta make sure you spend Christmas with your true love! Sweet, ain't I?"

"Haven't we had Christmas yet? Sorry, I'm not really with it," Phil apologized sheepishly.

A huge paw whacked Phil playfully in the knee as Hubert coughed and laughed, "Christmas Eve buddy, there's still time, but first...."

Phil's jaw dropped and then his eyes began to hurt more than they did anyway as the rubbish, bottles, food and even toast vanished. His living room became a grotto of seasonal delights. A floor to ceiling natural Christmas tree dominated the room and it was festooned with so many fairy lights that it passed through tacky and came out the other side unsullied and marvelous. Looking down at the cat, he saw he had on a festive Father Christmas hat.

Before he could say anything, the cat spoke, "If you so much as even think about making a Santa Claws joke, I'm going to have to hurt you."

The warning was followed by a shwing of claws unsheathing and Phil was forced to take a step back as Hubert leapt into the air, paws flailing. The feline had finished before Phil had stopped screaming. When he had, Phil found he was wearing a very nice dark casual suit with a dark blue shirt and had been given a close and neat shave.

Hubert relit his cigar by scraping it along a paw pad, took a long drag and looked Phil up and down, "Not great, but not bad for a human."

Once his power of speech had returned, Phil asked, "Who are you?"

“I told ya, the one who’s gonna get you paired up for good. Now, stop askin’ fool questions and get the car keys, let’s go get... what’s ‘er name?”

“Ophelia.”

Hubert raised a suspicious eyebrow, “You kiddin’ me? Some poor gals not only been named Ophelia, but she’s got to put up wid you?” he stomped past Phil in disgust, “Let’s get a move on. How far is it?”

“Ten minutes, we can walk,” Phil said pleasantly.

Hubert looked sceptical still, “Walk? In this weather?”

Phil looked out the window, “It’s quite dry. I know it’s dark out and late, but it’ll be fine.”

“Might snow,” Hubert commented indignantly.

“In Richmond, on Christmas Eve? You’re not from around here are you?”

Hubert looked around disapprovingly when they got outside; he hated the travel his job involved. They set off and he quizzed Phil. “So let me get this straight,” he said at length, pausing to grind his cigar stump under his foot, “she dumped you because she caught you with her sister? You’re lucky you ain’t singing soprano.”

Phil blushed. Copious quantities of alcohol hadn’t drowned the memory. “I honestly thought it was her,” he said feebly. Ophelia’s parents were old-fashioned country types, made him sleep in a separate room. “I got the wrong room in the dark. I realised eventually, well, in time.”

“When she was naked?”

“They’re very similar, as sisters I mean.”

“Don’t worry bud, I wouldn’t be here if you’d really hit on her nympho younger sister, against the rules. It’s alright though, dealt with worse, there was this guy once.... Well, let’s just say they don’t invite ‘er muvver round.”

They reached Ophelia’s apartment block.

“She’s got money, right?” Hubert asked, as he looked the place up and down. There was an unhappy looking concierge behind the desk in the reception area. “Bet she’s beautiful too,” he asked with a lascivious grin.

“She’s pretty exceptional,” sighed Phil, lovelorn still. He pulled the front door of the complex open and allowed Hubert to go in. The cat marched past without a word of thanks, his tall raised and twitching like first was his natural place.

The concierge perked up and stood when the odd couple strode in and headed to the lifts. Phil tried to play it casual, “Hi Maurice, Happy Christmas.”

The old, short and balding gentleman spoke nervously, “Um, excuse me sir, may I enquire as to your business?”

Phil turned and walked over to the desk, Hubert took a professional look at the big Christmas tree in the corner and jumped up gracefully onto the counter. “I’m here to visit Miss Hays, Maurice. Is something the matter?”

Maurice rolled his eyes. He didn’t like confrontation, and liked Phil, who was less posh and up himself than most tenants and visitors. But he had his orders. “I’m sorry sir... Miss Hays, she’s asked... you’re not to be allowed in.”

Hubert turned to his client, “Come on Phil, he’s barely half you size, what’s he gonna do?”

“Lifts won’t work. Maurice has a switch.”

“I’m sorry sir?” Maurice asked, “Switch?”

“For the lifts, I was just telling Hubert here,” Phil said and watched as Maurice lost some more of his pasty colour and began blinking rapidly.

“He can’t hear me talk you putz!” Hubert began, “All he hears is me meow and then you answer.”

“Oh, I see, makes as much sense as the rest of the evening.”

“Look at ‘im, poor sod, scared witless.”

Phil joined Hubert in looking back at Maurice, who was indeed looking fearfully at the two of them and shaking like a lethargic jelly.

Hubert meowed again, “Can we walk?”

“Thirty floors, penthouse suite, a great view,” Phil replied. There were many things he missed about his ex.

Maurice swallowed and managed to get a form of words to defend himself. “I’m sorry sir, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. No pets allowed in the building.”

It was the wrong thing to say, and Maurice came to this realisation when Hubert growled, arched his bristling back and marched across the desk towards him. “Pet! Call me a pet will ya?”

Phil looked on a little concerned. Did it count as murder if a cat you were with killed someone? With that speed Phil was becoming familiar with, the ginger blur caused chaos around the desk. A distant bleep told of the arrival of a lift.

“Come on!” shouted a voice behind him. Belatedly, Phil realised it was Hubert and turned to run. He just made it through the lift doors as they were closing.

“Poor Maurice, he’s a decent fellow,” said Phil trying to feel bad to counteract the exhilaration he felt from what they’d just done.

“Don’t feel bad lad, he called me a pet! Everyone knows you don’t own a cat! They choose to be with you. Lift my hat up.”

It was hardly an onerous request, so Phil squatted down and did so. Above the smug smile of his feline friend, a little box in shiny red paper sat on the flat of his head. He picked it up and replaced the hat.

“It’s the perfect present for your lady,” Hubert explained.

“What is it?”

“What’s up? Don’t you trust me? Just be prepared with the right follow up,” he warned.

Phil stood and held Hubert’s gaze. He understood the implications and gulped. If he hadn’t been so drunk for so long, he may have come up with this solution on his own. He’d been with Ophelia for over three years, and he should have done the decent thing by now anyway. Even so, he was nervous, in doubt. It was a big step. But still, as she was the love of his life, he had to do it, get it all fixed. With an engagement in the last few minutes of Christmas Eve, he might even remember the anniversary of his proposal in future years. Women appreciated that sort of thing.

All too soon for Phil and his sweat of panic, the door opened to allow one man and his feline friend to step out into the small hallway in front of Ophelia’s place. After receiving a reassuring wink from Hubert he rang the bell. Phil took a deep breath. He knew it was all going to be fine. If a cat had taken the trouble to learn to speak and smoke a cigar, he must know a thing or two.

The door opened and Phil heard a small growl of approval from the floor. Ophelia was a tall, statuesque, blonde with curves that could keep the eye occupied for hours. A little seasonal red negligee was draped delicately over them. Phil thought it a good sign. She always looked through the viewer in the door, even when she was expecting someone, and she had chosen to open it dressed like that.

Her plucked and shaped eyebrows were raised to indicate her surprise, “Phil? Oh, hello,” she began suddenly catching sight of a cat that looked up at her and meowed.

“Now that’s a chest you could get comfy on!” Hubert said for Phil’s ears.

“This is my friend, Hubert,” said Phil more calmly than he felt. He was well aware of what was beneath the flimsy silk garment, and there was no sacrifice he wouldn’t make to get his hands on it once more.

Ophelia hadn’t lost her questioning look, and looked from cat to ex for a few seconds. “Phil . . . It’s late, what is it?”

“Can I come in?”

Ophelia stepped aside and Hubert strolled in. “I know I’m a cat, but that’s a goooooood view,” he said as he brushed against Ophelia’s legs.

“Shut up,” Phil suggested as he went in.

“Sorry?” asked Ophelia sharply.

“Not you, the cat.”

“Are you drunk Phil?” she asked with a note of despair.

Phil turned from waving Hubert into the lounge and turned back to the lovely lady he knew almost for certain he wanted to marry. “Er, no, but . . . Well, Hubert can be a chatty cat.”

“Where did you get him from anyway?” she asked as they shimmered into the lounge, tastefully done out in little red lights.

“He turned up outside my building, I gave him food, he stayed,” Phil hedged.

“So you came over here to tell me you own a cat?” Ophelia asked over folded arms.

“One never owns a . . . No, that’s not why I’m here. It’s Christmas Ophelia, in a few minutes anyway. I’ve been a mess without you, I need you, I love you Ophelia.”

The question marks had gone, but one of her eyebrows was infused with scepticism. “Aren’t you saying all this to the wrong sister?” she asked coldly.

“Oh come on,” said Phil, not having rehearsed what he was going to say, and not a great improviser, “we’ve been through all this. That was perfectly innocent.”

“Innocent!” she cried, “When I found you, you had your hand on her....”

“That was when I knew I had the wrong room!” Phil shouted back in exasperation.

It was like the last few weeks hadn’t happened, Ophelia certainly hadn’t calmed down. She clenched and unclenched her fists, closed her eyes and visibly counted to ten. Hubert went over and rubbed against her legs and then crossed over to do the same to Phil.

“I think he’s trying to tell us something,” Phil suggested.

Ophelia relaxed and gave him a crooked smile. “I want to believe you Phil. I mean, Leonora’s door and mine are next to each other, and little sis has never turned a man away from her bed yet.... But, I don’t know, things are different now....”

Phil stepped closer, took her hands, “I know we said a lot of things, and maybe we meant them at the time, but that’s all over, Christmas, time for forgiveness and all that. Here,” he said, pulling out the box from his jacket pocket.

Ophelia did a double take. She knew what the box was likely to contain and she drew a sharp intake of breath. She didn’t know how to react. “Oh, Phil,” she sighed, taking the box out of his hand.

Her eyes were glistening and in the twinkling red lights, she looked like a sexy Christmas angel. Phil wondered why he had ever had any doubts at all. Hubert jumped onto the back of the sofa and sat with a smile near the pair of them. With shaking hands, Ophelia managed to get the wrapping paper off, dropped it and opened the box. Phil was standing close and was as disappointed as Ophelia to see it wasn’t a ring, but

rather a pair of emerald earrings in a platinum setting. Phil turned to Hubert and the cat gave a nod. He remembered what Hubert had said about the follow up question and his mind raced. He knew where he'd seen similar gems.

With a pleased smile, Phil spoke softly, "They're to match that lovely emerald necklace you have. I remembered how beautiful you looked lying in bed wearing nothing but it and wanted to complete the look."

Ophelia's slap was so fast, it caught up with the box that hit him in the face, "You bastard! I don't have an emerald necklace, I hate emeralds!"

Phil's face stung and he bent down to pick up the box, catching a sight of Hubert sticking his tongue out at him. He stared at the earrings, trying to get his memories straight as Ophelia's face got red enough to drown out the lights.

Then he remembered. It was Leonora that liked emeralds. "Oh, f-," he began to say, his exclamation cut off by a third voice.

"Everything alright in here Offy?"

Offy? Phil didn't like the sound of that; he'd never been able to get an abbreviated version of her name by her. He was large, but the man in her bedroom doorway was even larger. "Eustace?" he asked, not recognising him straight away, never having seen him wear nothing but tight boxers before. They were red silk and clearly matched Ophelia's outfit. That was a nice touch.

Eustace strode over more manfully than his name would suggest, and slipped a powerful arm round Ophelia's waist. Caught out, Ophelia had the good grace to lose some anger and look embarrassed.

"Hi Phil, Merry Christmas," Eustace said.

Phil blinked a few times to give him time to process all that was going on. "Things are different now," he repeated.

"Well actually," Ophelia said sheepishly. "They've been different for a while, since the summer actually," she added, biting her lower lip.

Phil looked at the calm and confident profile of Eustace as he looked down at Ophelia. It explained a few things now he thought about it. Eustace had it all. He had looks, that body, and his own tropical island. He turned to look at Hubert, who just shrugged in disgust, as if it was Phil's fault he couldn't keep the woman happy.

Eustace guided Ophelia round with his arm, "I think us men should have a talk Offy."

"Her sister's a better lay anyway," said Hubert to their backs in a perfect imitation of Phil's voice.

Phil had no opportunity to correct the erroneous impression he had spoken, and the happy Christmas couple had clearly heard him. The fist was as powerful as it was fast. Eustace also had a good punch and it sent Phil over the sofa. He got up in time for Eustace to give him several more. Not one of those placid people, Offy's hunky lover had a temper and Phil had no chance to protect himself against the blows. There was a sudden crash of glass breaking behind and around Phil as he went through one of the unbreakable floor to ceiling panes of glass. Ophelia's scream pierced the night air. He teetered, wobbled, tried to reach out to the hand that Eustace, in a reversion to the status of gentleman, extended. Hubert flung himself at Phil and they were both launched into the night.

All Phil could remember of the fall was the smug grin Hubert gave him as he dug his claws into his chest. Seconds later there was a thud and although he ached, he wasn't dead. Phil looked at the cat in his arms.

"We always land on our feet," Hubert pointed out.

It was too much for Phil and he gave up on thinking. He'd left his old self thirty floors up. He idly began scratching Hubert behind his ears, to the feline's purring delight and then looked curiously at a scantily clad Ophelia who was hugging him a few minutes later, a cat trapped in the middle, enjoying his location. Minutes passed quickly with Phil giving monosyllabic reassurances to Ophelia, Maurice, and Eustace that he was fine, and that he landed luckily. The temperature got lower, and the air crisper. Eustace said, "Come on love, let's go in, it's snowing."

Hubert and Phil watched them go. It was done. Phil ached all over, had black eyes and a buckled nose, not to mention a selection of cuts from the window. If he hadn't got the love of his life back, at least he knew it was over. He smiled benevolently at the bare-chested Eustace, who seemed to be struck by a thought and turned back. He had one last punch for Phil. He held onto Hubert as he fell and smiled up at his attacker from the ground, "Merry Christmas Eustace."

It was rather comfy on the grass verge and Phil couldn't immediately think of a reason to move. The snow began to layer on Hubert and him as they just looked at each other and laughed. Midnight bells began to ring out across the area. It was Christmas Day.

"Um, excuse me, are you alright?" came a question on the twelfth peal.

Phil looked away from the cat and up into the eyes of a little skinny reddish haired young woman standing shivering in a thin jacket. The streetlamp shone down just to her left, illuminating the snow as it gently came to rest over her. Now that is a real Christmas angel, thought Phil as his heart leapt with precision in her direction. Thin stick legs pointed out from under a threadbare cotton skirt. They were covered in cheap tights and Phil knew how a woman could reach sartorial perfection. It was there in front of him.

Hubert twisted and jumped. The girl staggered as she caught him. Phil smiled at her when she stopped. She smiled back, "Is this your cat?"

Phil pushed himself up onto his elbows, "One never owns a cat...."

"They choose to be with you," she finished with a nervous giggle.

Hubert gave her a lick, turned and winked to Phil. The prone one brushed the snow off his face and stood up. He looked down at her and she shrank back; it was her normal reaction. Her left eye was opaque with a scar running across it, her right a luxurious brown. Gently, he took the cat out of her arms and put him on the ground. Hubert gave a sage nod. It was an older, wiser, nod than his fake directions of earlier. Standing up again, Phil took her hands, frozen and covered in cuts from her job washing dishes. She was too surprised to stop him leaning down and kissing her lipstick free chapped lips.

"Merry Christmas," he said softly.

She giggled again, and found some colour other than pasty to put into her cheeks. "Merry Christmas. I - I - my name is Katherine, Kate."

"I'm Phil, and this is Hubert."

They both looked down at the cat that lowered his head and sneezed under his Santa hat.

“Hubert has a point,” Phil said, looking into the face that pushed the memory of all others out of his mind, “It is snowing, and cold. What’s a beautiful girl like you doing alone on a night like this?”

Kate covered up her embarrassment at the use of the b-word by turning her head and looking back at the source of the recent bells. “Church,” she began shyly, “I left before the big finale. It’s funny....”

“What is?”

“I made two Christmas wishes, prayers actually, earlier... One was for a white Christmas....”

“And the other?” Phil asked, interested in everything about her.

Kate chewed her lower lip and gave off enough heat in blushing to begin melting the snow in her hair.

“Oh,” said Phil slowly as he realised. He let go of her hands and pulled a box out of his pocket. He had more confidence this time and opened it to reveal a tiny silver cat pendant coiled up on a thin chain. Taking it out, he stepped round behind her and with bated breath freezing and falling from the air, she lifted up her ginger hair to let him put it on. “I’ve got an interesting story to tell you,” he said as he came back round to face her.

“I’m not busy,” she said boldly, swept off her feet by what was happening to her.

He took her hand, “My place isn’t far. You coming Hubert? You’re more than welcome.”

The cat shook his head, said in a voice they could both hear, “Nah, you two go along. Have a Happy Christmas, you make a lovely couple.”

Kate was willing to accept a talking cat by this point. “Thank you,” she replied simply.

Phil bent down, shook his paw, “It’s been an honour. Merry Christmas Hubert.”

Standing up and taking the hand of the love of his life, they smiled at Hubert and went off to spend Christmas together. Hubert watched for a moment and then slipped into the shadows, singing.

“Jingle bells, jingle blea-achtch. Where’s my cigar?”