

Chapter 1: Millicent Fargenstropple

There was a name for this sort of gap in protocol, but right now Terrence could not remember it owing to the even larger gap in the wall where his office door had been only a moment before. True, when Millicent Fargenstropple entered a room, it customarily caused structural damage, but this was his *new* door. The one with the glazed window and the shiny gold lettering:

T. Morgan

Chief Inspector

The novelty of his promotion was quickly wearing off. He had *really* liked that door.

“Mrs. Fargenstropple, so good to see you again. Please do have a seat,” said Terrence, half rising from behind his desk. “Carefully,” he added under his breath.

The woman stared at the door knob in her hand and tittered weakly. She looked for an appropriate place to put the knob and finally shrugged, tucking it into her large handbag. Tromping heavily across the remains of the door, she sat with a thump in the leather chair opposite Terrence.

“So sorry about that,” she said with a voice much smaller than her frame would have suggested. “I forget my strength most days.”

“Yes, yes, not to worry, Mrs. Fargenstropple. What can we do for you today? Something brewing at Bloome Manor?”

Millicent simpered for a moment before drawing a deep breath and announcing her complaint. “It has to do with Lady Chatterly!”

“I’m sorry, *who* did you say?” asked Terrence, picking up a pen and clicking it open.

“Lady Chatterly,” she pouted. “She’s a cat.”

“Ah, well, my dear Mrs. Fargenstropple, I’ve heard women can be like that if they find some reason to be jealous,” he said smoothly. “Is she coveting your rose garden, then? Nothing like it in the county. I don’t believe I’ve heard of Lady Chatterly. Is she new in the area?”

“No, no, she’s a *cat*. A *real* cat.”

Terrence sighed and tried not to rub his temples too conspicuously. “A cat, ma’am? With fur? That kind of cat?”

“Yes, that kind of cat,” snapped Millicent. “Can you help me, Mr. Morgan?”

Terrence severely hoped this did not have anything to do with flowerbeds and feline toiletries. “Could you elaborate on the nature of your concern, please?” he asked.

“Lady Chatterly,” she explained seriously, “is the sort of cat that most people never notice. Not unless she becomes perturbed, but when she is upset, she releases a fearsome yowl and thunders about, knocking into walls.”

“I see,” said Terrence blandly.

“My dinner guest just last night paused mid-way through the creamed spinach course, and cried, ‘Good heavens! What was that?’”

“Creamed spinach. Yes. It is a dubious dish.” There was a pause while Terrence waited for her to continue. She did not, so he frowned sympathetically, and said, “That must have been quite disconcerting.”

“Quite. My little Irving didn’t dare raise his voice to answer an adult, thank heaven, or Dr. Nigglesby would have found out about the cat. As it was, my Blandthorpe told him that a rhinoceros had just been struck by lightning.” She dropped her hands into her lap with exasperation.

“A reasonable explanation,” said Terrence.

“Indeed!” sniffed Millicent. “Dr. Nigglesby simply assumed he had sipped one too many glasses of sherry before dining.”

“And so the trouble is within your own household?” asked Terrence. “Because this department deals primarily with concerns *between* citizens, you see—”

“Well, of course the *cat* is in my household,” she cried. “But the question is...”

“The question is...?”

“The *concern* is what is *upsetting* her so? I am convinced that we have intruders in Bloome Manor. Burglars, no doubt. Something is distressing her greatly, and it must be found out!”

“Well, now, burglars would be in our department,” said Terrence brightly. “Has anything gone missing, then?” he asked, reaching for his notebook.

Millicent closed her eyes solemnly. “Only the serenity of our home.”

“Ah,” he said, clicking his pen closed again.

“For weeks and weeks now.”

Terrence steadied himself. “Weeks and weeks of invisible burglars in your home taking nothing but frightening the cat at meal times?”

“Precisely. Can you help me, Inspector? The Chief Superintendent said you were his very best man for this sort of thing.”

Why does the Chief Super hate me? wondered Terrence. “I’ll certainly give due attention to the matter,” he promised, rising to guide her to the door. “May I come up to Bloome Manor in the morning, then? To take a look around for clues?”

“Thank you! *Thank* you!” she cooed. As she stepped into the corridor, she tapped the torn door frame with her finger. “They really ought to consider modernising your office, Inspector.”

Terrence smiled thinly.

Millicent entered the lift at the end of the corridor and jostled with the other passengers for access to the button pad. With a little wave, she disappeared behind the sturdy metal doors. Terrence momentarily considered what such doors would look like inscribed with his name, but shook his head. The Fargenstropple Case would not last long enough to justify such drastic architectural measures. He determined to wrap up the investigation before his office door was replaced.

By next Tuesday, perhaps.