

And the Dog Took the Cat

by Renée Gardner

CHAPTER 1

"Marvelous, isn't it? It will be your very own maisonnette. This is *the* apartment for you," real estate broker extraordinaire Aldyn Sheridan gushed.

"It's marvelous, if you like chocolate brown, which I don't. And it's dark. Carla Miller craned her neck to look beyond the chocolate brown dining foyer into the small chocolate brown living room, plucked clean of decorative ornaments. The gaping empty spots on the wall where pictures once hung reminded her of missing teeth in the middle of a grinning smile.

"Let's go." Carla dismissed the apartment with a wave of her hand.

Aldyn arched a finely plucked eyebrow. "Of course, it's dark. A man owned the apartment. He lived here just six months of the year and spent the rest of the year in Florida. Disregard the heavy dark furniture. Visualize how it will look after you've put your personal stamp on it." Her tight smile suggested a new face lift.

"I can't visualize anything." Carla spun around on her three-inch heels. She'd seen enough of the ugly one-bedroom apartment.

"Wait, don't go." Aldyn's blade thin fingers grabbed hold of Carla's arm. The realtor resembled a one hundred and five pound arsenal: razor sharp elbows, hip bones that jutted out like drawn revolvers, burgundy hair lacquered into lethal spikes and a voice sharp enough to cut steel. A shapeless jacket hung from her rapier-thin shoulders. Armani, Carla figured. Who else could make puce chic?

"Please, Ms. Miller, keep an open mind until you've seen the entire apartment." Aldyn pushed Carla into the small, spotless chocolate brown kitchen crowded with old, unused appliances. "Now isn't this marvelous space? Imagine the room refurbished with Euro style cabinets and a Sub-Zero fridge. It will be your dream kitchen."

Without warning three loud achoos drowned out Aldyn's voice.

"Oh, excuse me. Something in the air makes me sneeze." Carla dabbed a tissue to her nose. The culprit had to be Aldyn's musky Opium perfume. "Actually, I'm not interested in kitchens as I don't plan to do much cooking after I move to Manhattan." If Carla chose to tell the truth, she'd admit that her lack of cooking skills forced her children, Robbie and Nancy, to flee the Miller home. Robbie took off for Silicon Valley the day he graduated from college and Nancy skipped college to enroll in the Culinary Institute of America (which she affectionately dubbed the CIA) to learn to cook properly so she wouldn't copy her mother's cooking blunders, like using a barbecued chicken to make chicken soup.

Aldyn's sharp voice drilled into Carla's consciousness. "Well, if you don't cook, use the space as a walk-in closet. Let's look at the bedroom and bath." The realtor closed the kitchen discussion with a quick shrug of her shoulders and hurried down the short, narrow hall.

Carla sneezed again.

"You might want to keep the lovely molding, Ms. Miller." Ignoring her sneeze, Aldyn pointed out the woodwork that surrounded the built-in floor-to-ceiling mirror at the end of the hall. "Regency-style, you know."

"It is nice the way the foyer is reflected in it." Carla snuck a glance in the mirror to see if her short amber curls had wilted in the summer heat. They had.

The small bedroom proved to be as unfeminine as the rest of the apartment -- chocolate brown walls and massive dark furniture. And, the same as in the living room, someone had made off with all the *tchotchkes*.

"Dee-vine, isn't it?" Aldyn looked at Carla for confirmation.

"Not really. Honestly, this apartment isn't for me."

The realtor's eyebrows shot up to her Botoxed forehead. "How can you say that about an apartment in a building of this caliber? A federal judge, four attorneys, three doctors and a top, top, super model live here. The co-op board allows only the *very* best people to buy in," she bragged.

"No crazies?" Carla's voice had a husky Kathleen Turner quality.

"Most definitely there are no crazies in this building or, for that matter, anywhere on Sutton Place." Aldyn referred to the exclusive six-block enclave between East 53rd Street and East 59th Street just steps off the East River, jammed packed with elegant high-rise apartment buildings and town houses that many of the city's most influential citizens call home.

"But this apartment building isn't *on* Sutton Place. It's on East 56th Street, a half block west of Sutton," Carla reminded the status-conscience broker. "And no matter what its address may be, it isn't for me and neither were any of the other apartments you showed me. I've seen enough for one day."

When Carla made an appointment to go apartment hunting with Aldyn Sheridan she never anticipated that she'd be dragged all over the Upper East Side to view a succession of over-priced, dark, mouse-hole size apartments. Now she had blisters on her feet and a vise-like tension headache that was every bit as fierce as the one she got last December when her then-husband Larry the Louse announced his desire to trade her in for a 27-year old bosomy blonde, which made the home wrecker exactly 20 years younger than Carla. The minute the judge pronounced her a divorced woman, Carla became keenly aware of the wary looks she got from her married friends and the gapping holes in her social calendar. She didn't need a big "D" for divorced pinned to her designer jacket to know that she had become as welcome in Merrick, Long Island as crabgrass. That unpleasant epiphany convinced her to seek a new life in Manhattan. Too old to attract a second glance from Brad Pitt or Matthew McConaughey, Carla hoped to find someone in the age range of Pierce Brosnan.

"Please, Ms. Miller, you can't leave until you've seen the *pièce de résistance*. It's to die for," Aldyn shrieked. Then fast as a cockroach scurries across a counter top, she dragged Carla back to the living room, and triumphantly flung open a chocolate brown curtain. "Look!" She pointed a finger beyond the French doors.

"Oh, my!" Carla stepped outdoors to drink in the dazzling panoramic view from the large terrace -- a brilliant cobalt sky, the gray Queensboro Bridge, the murky East River and the glistening windows of surrounding apartment buildings.

"Admit it, Ms. Miller, the view is to die for. And look there," Aldyn's forefinger waggled far below them at a formal garden dotted with white benches, "a shining jewel in

Sutton Place's crown, reserved exclusively for the residents of this building and its twin around the corner. A locked door in the lobby of each building is the only access to the secret garden."

"That should keep it secure." Carla said. "And speaking of security, how safe is this building?" Her friend Mimi Berk told her to ask about building security. On the plus side, Mimi, the wife of Mervin Berk, Carla's divorce attorney, didn't back away from her after the divorce. On the minus side, it was Mimi who sicced Aldyn on her.

Another tight smile flashed across the broker's face. "A fortress couldn't be more secure. Of course, the resident manager lives on-site, there is 24/7 doorman and concierge service and every building entrance plus the laundry room, the exercise room and the playroom are under constant video camera surveillance."

"How safe is this terrace?" Carla asked, still unconvinced that the building's security was as tight as the proverbial drum. "Could someone climb up over the terrace wall or down from above?"

"Not a chance of that happening unless he's Spiderman." Aldyn's annoying laugh mimicked the sharp sound of the car horns that floated up from the street. "This terrace isn't connected to any others on the floor. And need I point out that not only is the apartment twenty floors above the ground, but it's also five floors below the roof-top garden? Believe me, Ms. Miller, the building is safer than your house in Merrick."

"You may be right, but what's that?" Carla's eyes focused on a small puddle in the middle of the terrace.

"Nothing to be concerned about," Aldyn sneered. "It's just a clogged drain. The maintenance man can clean it out in two minutes." If Aldyn had a hot buyer for the Liberty Bell, she'd swear on a stack of Bibles that a dab of Crazy Glue would make it good as new in ten seconds.

"Bonkers would love to sit out here and catch flies," Carla confided.

"Who or what is Bonkers?"

"My dog. He's a West Highland Terrier. That is he was. He died two years ago, but if he were still alive, he'd love the terrace."

Aldyn nodded sympathetically. "One of those little white dogs with short legs? Of course, he would love it. Now that's an omen, and I always say one should never ignore an omen. Shall we chat inside?" Aldyn smoothly maneuvered Carla back into the living room.

"Let me share something with you, Ms. Miller." Aldyn folded her scrawny body onto the leather couch to sit beside Carla. Her small pointed teeth gnashed into a shark leer and her steely grays locked on Carla's trusting ambers. She resumed her unrelenting sales pitch, "I have been in the real estate business for 20 years and never have I seen an apartment in such an elegant location with such a marvelous terrace, such classic high ceilings, marvelous soffits and well-proportioned rooms. Grand, isn't it?" Her twig-thin arm made a wide sweeping circle.

"Well, I do love the terrace and the private garden, but I don't feel good about this apartment. I sensed something wrong here the moment you unlocked the door."

"What did you sense, Ms. Miller?" The solemn tone of the realtor's voice reminded Carla of the undertaker who had arranged her grandmother's funeral.

"I sensed that something terrible happened in the apartment." Carla paused before she verbalized the question that gnawed at her the entire time she wandered through the

apartment. "Did someone die here?"

Aldyn's thick lashes fluttered like bat wings. "To be perfectly honest, and heaven knows I'm always honest with my clients, Victor Reynolds, the former owner, died here last December."

"December? But a little while ago you said he wintered in Florida."

"That's what I was given to understand ..." The muffled chirp of her cell phone broke into their conversation. "Excuse me a sec." She snatched the phone from her black Prada bag to stare at the number displayed on the tiny Caller ID screen before she hit the "Yes" button. "I'll call you later" she whispered into the tiny flip. "So what's the problem, Ms. Miller?" She picked up the thread of the conversation as though there had been no interruption.

"The problem is why did Mr. Reynolds come back in December?"

"I don't understand the relevance of your question, but if it's that important to you, I'll try to get the answer." Aldyn spoke very slowly and clearly, like she was fighting hard to hold onto her composure.

"No, don't go to all that trouble." Carla backed down.

"Good." She cracked a thin smile. "But if it makes you feel any better, Mr. Reynolds died as the result of an unfortunate accident. He slipped on a small rug in the foyer and fractured his skull on the edge of the console table." Aldyn pointed back at the bare floor and marble topped table. "If he had wall-to-wall carpeting, that man would be alive today. Make note of it, Ms. Miller, wall-to-wall is the way to go. Accidents happen all the time, and given the fact that this building is 34 years old, I'm sure many residents have died here."

"You're probably right." Carla's eyes wandered back to the terrace.

"I'm glad you see it that way. And I'll let you in on a little secret." Aldyn cupped her hand to the side of her mouth to whisper, "Mr. Reynolds's daughter, the executor of his estate and sole heir, is *tres* anxious to sell, so I know you can snap up this place for a fish cake."

"Exactly how much is a fish cake?"

"A real steal."

"How much is a real steal in dollars?"

Aldyn named a figure.

Carla gasped.

The small one-bedroom apartment cost ten times more than the price she and Larry the Louse paid for their first house twenty years ago.

"Forget it, I can't afford that," Carla stammered.

"But that's only the asking price. We'll negotiate."