

Buried in the Townhouse

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Christina Braganti is well acquainted with the adage, “Never mix families and business,” but she never dreams how bad it can get. With her brother, Jake, she buys a townhouse in Manhattan that once housed a psychiatric hospital and converts it to a fitness center.

The entire Braganti clan has a stake in the enterprise. Gina thinks her investment entitles her to run the weight-loss classes. An idea quickly quashed by Jake who acerbically points out that she is hardly the poster-girl for fitness. The only person who wishes he wasn’t working there is eighteen-year-old Alex, Christina’s son.

Alex is one of the strongest characters and comes across with a distinct, adolescent voice. This is especially true one morning when he’s taking the trash out, trips on a broken step, and falls on a dead body. “He opened his mouth to scream but ‘f___’ was all he managed to utter and it came out like a croak.”

The victim was the janitor at a school next door, and he dies just after telling Christina about patients disappearing when the building housed the hospital. Negative publicity threatens to ruin the business, and Christina hopes the police can find the killer soon. That hope falters when the prime suspect is found dead, and Christina is pulled into the investigation.

Some of the plotting is somewhat weak, such as when Christina decides not to go to the police with important information, but the identity of the killer is masked well. It could be Mike, the strange old caretaker, or Julie, the real-estate woman who blackmails Christina, or even Rick, the singer who has an unusual interest in the old building.

Despite the stumbles in the plotting and some inconsistency in the quality of the narrative, the book offers some truly delightful characters. The narrative is also redeemed with scenes that paint vivid mental pictures. “The worry began, as it always did, with just the slight rumble in his stomach, but minute by minute it grew. It grew from a small furry thing to some dark, gigantic rodent. He could almost feel it in his mouth, in his brain.”

MARYANN MILLER (September / October 2000)

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