



## A Just Clause (A Booktown Mystery)

By Lorna Barrett

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**Just when things are getting back to normal in Booktown, Tricia and Angelica have their lives turned upside down by a shocking visitor from their past in this latest entry in Lorna Barrett's New York Times bestselling series.**

Tricia Miles, mystery bookstore owner and amateur sleuth, is in for a surprise when her ne'er-do-well father, John, comes to town—and promptly becomes a prime suspect in the murder of a woman with her own scandalous past. Even Tricia's faith in the old man is shaken when the Stoneham police break the news that her father is a known con man who has done jail time.

But what about bestselling thriller author Steven Richardson? Is it a coincidence that he arrived for a book signing just before the crime or that the victim was found with a signed copy of his latest bestseller?

From merlot to murder, Tricia is determined to clear the family name before another body shows up and ruins Stoneham's first—and highly anticipated—wine and jazz festival.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

#### Praise for the *New York Times* Bestselling Booktown Mysteries

“Diverting entertainment...An engaging story line, an intrepid heroine...Good for lovers of intrigue.”—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

“Lorna Barrett never fails to offer a suspenseful cozy mystery...Entertaining, highly enjoyable.”—Cozy Mystery Book Reviews

“Fans of Carolyn Hart and Denise Swanson, rejoice!...This first-rate cozy artfully blends crime, cuisine, and even bookselling in a cheerful, witty, well-plotted puzzler.”—Julia Spencer-Fleming, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Through the Evil Days*

“A mystery bookstore in a sleepy New England town, a cat named Miss Marple, a nasty murder, and a determined heroine...Delightful...Everything a cozy lover could want and more. Bravo!”—Leann Sweeney, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Cat, the Vagabond and the Victim*

“Lorna Barrett’s new cozy creation...has it all: wonderful old books, quirky characters, a clever mystery, and a cat named Miss Marple!”—Roberta Isleib, author of *Asking for Murder*

“[A] delightful, and often funny, mystery series about a town that lives and dies by the love of books.”—Kings River Life Magazine

“Tightly plotted and paced to keep you turning the pages, this series is indeed getting better with each book.”—Gumshoe Review

“Charming...An engaging whodunit.”—*Publishers Weekly*

#### About the Author

**LORNA BARRETT** is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Booktown Mysteries, including *Title Wave*, *A Fatal Chapter*, and *Book Clubbed*. She lives in Rochester, New York. Visit her websites: [lornabarrett.com](http://lornabarrett.com), [facebook.com/LornaBarrett.Author](http://facebook.com/LornaBarrett.Author), [twitter.com/LornaBarrett](http://twitter.com/LornaBarrett).

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One

Tricia Miles almost always felt a thrill to host a book signing at her mystery bookstore, Haven't Got a Clue, especially when it involved a favorite author. Tonight that author was Steven Richardson, known for writing *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling thrillers. Stacks of his latest hardcover, *A Killing in Mad Gate*, sat on a table at the front of the store. The weather was perfect for a signing: drizzling and gray. Now all she needed was for the guest of honor to arrive.

Tricia's assistant, Pixie Poe, checked the big pink watch on her left wrist. "He's late," she sang. To honor the author, Pixie had chosen a fuchsia floral dress that had been made at least six decades before, and, despite her rather chunky frame, the dress not only fit as though it had been made for her, but was actually quite

flattering, giving her an hourglass figure that she seemed to enjoy flaunting.

This month, she was again a blonde, and when she smiled, her gold canine tooth flashed. She'd been smiling a lot that evening—every time she glanced at the modest diamond solitaire on her left hand. Her newly minted fiancé, Fred Pillins, was a nondescript kind of fellow who matched Pixie in years—about fifty. He stood near the back of the store, camera in hand, trying to look inconspicuous—except that his fond gaze rarely strayed from Pixie. He seemed to enjoy the view. He must have taken at least a dozen candid shots of her since his arrival some twenty minutes before. That was when the signing was supposed to have begun.

In addition to the Tuesday Night Book Club members, nearly two dozen of Tricia's customers from a fifty-mile radius had shown up to welcome the author. Tricia was glad she'd not only ordered a cake with the book's cover printed in edible ink from the Patisserie but a big plate of assorted cookies to go along with the sparkling punch she'd made from her sister Angelica's recipe.

Angelica approached, looking stupendous in a tailored ivory suit with matching stilettos, holding a paper cup filled with punch. "Your author *was* aware of the time of the signing, wasn't he?"

Tricia sighed. "Yes. But he was driving up from Boston. Thanks to the rain, who knows what the traffic is like. I'm sure he'll be here soon—and if not, I hope he'll at least call me." Tricia squinted at her sister. "Remind me again why *you're* here?"

"*Moi?*" Angelica practically cooed.

"*Oui, tu.* You're not exactly a thriller reader."

Angelica sighed patiently. "I want to see if there are sparks!"

"Sparks?"

"Yes, between you and Steven."

Tricia eyed her sister coolly.

"He kissed you on the *Celtic Lady* cruise."

Tricia frowned. "I have kissed three men since then."

"Daddy, Antonio, and Mr. Everett don't count," Angelica said, citing her stepson and Tricia's elderly employee and friend.

"There will be *no* sparks."

"She said in denial," Angelica muttered.

Tricia's frown deepened to a glare. "Instead of sparks, you might see my temper explode."

Angelica shook her head. "It's never going to happen, my dear sister. You don't *have* a temper."

"I'll consider getting one."

The bookstore's door opened, the little bell overhead tinkling cheerfully, but it was not Richardson who entered. Instead, it was someone well known to Tricia and Angelica.

"Oh, dear," Angelica muttered, taking in the man dressed in an outrageous—for him—pink aloha shirt and holding a big black umbrella with a couple of broken ribs. Again, Tricia sighed and, despite a pang of dread, forced a smile. It had been five all-too-very-short months since she'd last seen her father, John Miles.

"Daddy! Whatever are you doing back in Stoneham?"

John struggled to close the soaked bumbershoot. "I came to visit my two best girls, of course."

Angelica's smile was even more rigid. "What a pleasure."

It wasn't.

Still, once he'd closed the umbrella, the sisters leaned in to give John a kiss on each cheek.

To say John had outstayed his welcome back in January was an understatement. Not only had he left the village owing money to nearly half the Chamber of Commerce's members—which Angelica had had to reimburse—but he'd left the Sheer Comfort Inn without notice and apparently with his suitcases filled with a number of the antiques that had decorated the place. Their father's deadbeat behavior had not only been unexpected—but unprecedented. That he'd left with no explanation was just as surprising.

Before the sisters could ask even the most basic of questions—like *"When are you leaving?"*—the bell over the door tinkled once again, this time admitting the long-awaited author, looking decidedly damp around the edges.

"Tricia!" Richardson called. He sounded winded.

"Steven—at last!" Tricia excused herself, leaving Angelica to deal with their father. She joined the author. "Are you okay? I was getting worried."

"I just ran from the municipal parking lot. Sorry I'm so late. The traffic outside of Boston was abominable, and then there was a wreck near Nashua that backed everything up for miles."

"I figured as much."

"Do you still want me to give a reading?"

"I think your fans would be disappointed if you didn't speak—but if you'd prefer to do a Q and A instead, I don't think anyone would object."

He nodded and pointed toward the table piled with his latest novel. "Shall I?"

"Yes, please," Tricia said, and gestured for him to stand beside it. She joined him to face her customers, who were mostly talking among themselves and scarfing down cookies and punch. "May I have your attention!" she called, but without much impact. "Excuse me; we're ready to start!" Her efforts weren't attracting much attention.

Pixie moved to stand beside her. "I'll take care of this." She raised her right thumb and index finger to her lips and let loose with a shrill whistle that was as effective as nails on a chalkboard for silencing the room. Tricia winced as everyone turned in attention, while Pixie studied her hand. "Damn. Now I've got to go freshen my lipstick."

Tricia plastered on a smile. "Ladies and gentlemen, won't you please take your seats? It's my pleasure to present a man whose books are well known, and loved, by all of us here tonight—"

"Not me," muttered a female voice from somewhere in the store, but Tricia had no clue who said it.

Momentarily rattled, she launched back into her introduction. "Author Steven Richardson."

A smattering of applause followed, and then there seemed to be a mad dash as everyone sought a seat at the front of the room, which had been rearranged so that the comfortable upholstered chairs of the reading nook faced the front of the store, with metal folding chairs set up in rows behind them.

It took another minute or two for the murmur of voices to quiet, then Richardson spoke.

"It's great to see such a welcoming crowd here at Haven't Got a Clue. Before I tell you about my latest book, *A Killing in Mad Gate*, I'd like to tell you a little about myself."

"Don't bother," came the same rude voice. Tricia searched the faces of the women that populated the small audience, but still wasn't sure who'd spoken. It definitely wasn't Grace Harris-Everett, who sat primly next to her husband, Mr. Everett, nor could it have been Mary Fairchild, her neighbor and owner of the By Hook or By Book craft store. Tricia wasn't as familiar with the rest of the ladies.

She circled back to the table that held the goodies, where Angelica was again ladling punch into her cup. "This really is good!" she whispered.

"Who's being rude to Steven?" Tricia asked.

Angelica took a sip. "No idea. Why would someone come to a signing if they didn't like the author?"

"I just hope there isn't going to be any unpleasantness."

John had ditched his soggy umbrella, and he sidled up to the table, grabbing a napkin and taking a couple of the cookies. "We should probably talk," he said, and popped one of the butter cookies into his mouth, chewing. He jerked a thumb in the direction of the back of the store.

Tricia wasn't sure she wanted to engage in conversation with her not-so-dear old dad. It was nearly seven thirty. Was he about to beg for a bed to stay the night? Luckily, she wasn't in a position to offer him one—thanks to the state of her home, which had been torn apart for the renovation of the second and third floors of the building she now owned, as evidenced by dust that had accumulated on the baseboards and had escaped Mr. Everett's lamb's wool duster. Unbeknownst to most of the village of Stoneham, Angelica owned not only the Sheer Comfort Inn, but the Brookview Inn. After he'd pulled a disappearing act, Tricia was pretty sure her sister wouldn't be issuing an invitation for their father to stay in either location. Angelica had been pretty steamed to have to not only clean up after him but come up with a reasonable explanation for his boorish behavior.

Still, he *was* their father.

The sisters followed John to the back of the shop.

"Daddy," Angelica began, and Tricia recognized that no-nonsense tone. "You left rather suddenly back in January, with many unpaid bills."

Instead of looking embarrassed, John actually grinned. "Now, that's not quite right—"

"Yes, it's definitely right," Angelica insisted, keeping her voice low. "I know, because I had to come up with excuses for many of the merchants in the village as to why you disappeared without a trace. You didn't even let Tricia and me know you were leaving the area."

"I was offered a wonderful business proposition—but it was time dependent, and I simply had to leave. But now I'm back and prepared to make restitution."

"*Full* restitution?" Angelica asked.

"Of course. Although there seems to be a little resentment from some of the local merchants. They said they had no rooms at both the Sheer Comfort Inn *and* the Brookview Inn, and yet the parking lots for both establishments were nearly empty."

Tricia knew Angelica had provided the staffs of both properties with a picture of John Miles and a warning to them *not* to give him a room should he ever show up again.

"Would I be able to stay with either of you?" John asked.

Tricia shook her head sadly. "My loft is undergoing a massive renovation. I'm not even staying here right now."

"Really?" John asked, sounding skeptical. "And yet I see no trace of work being done."

Tricia wasn't about to point out the dust. Instead, she jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "There's a twenty-yard Dumpster behind the building, just through that door."

John turned to Angelica. "I have a one-bedroom loft."

"I'd be perfectly willing to sleep on the couch."

"I'm sorry, Daddy, but it's out being upholstered," Angelica lied without batting an eye.

John's jovial features began to sag. "Where am I to stay? I have no other friends or relatives in the area."

"Why aren't you with Mother?" Angelica asked, rather pointedly.

"Ah, I hate to be the bearer of unhappy news, but . . . your mother and I have separated."

Tricia gave her sister a sidelong glance. This really wasn't surprising news. Not that either of them had heard a word about it from their mother after their ill-fated visit to Bermuda to see her five months before.

"Has she gone back to Rio?" Tricia asked.

"Uh, initially yes. As you know, things aren't quite as nice as they once were in Brazil. When we last spoke, she told me she had packed up and was moving back to Connecticut."

"When was this?" Angelica asked.

"About a month ago."

"And where were you at the time?" Tricia asked.

"In Las Vegas." John's good-humored smile had returned once more.

"Gambling?" Angelica guessed.

"Just for fun," John admitted. "Unfortunately, the business deal I spoke of only moments ago fell through."

"And that's why you're back here?" Tricia guessed.

"Er, yes. A man can always depend on his loving children in a time of crisis."

"What's the crisis?" Angelica asked, none too kindly. "You said you came back to make full restitution to the area merchants."

"Well, yes—"

"It's not a health scare, is it?" Tricia asked, and this time she was concerned.

"Oh, nothing of the sort."

"That's good," Angelica said, but her gaze was still sharp.

"Why don't we go over to the Dog-Eared Page and get a drink and talk things over," John suggested.

Tricia nodded toward the front of her store, where the author talk was still in full swing. "I've got a business to run."

"And I'm helping her," Angelica said.

Actually, Pixie was helping Tricia run the event, but she didn't contradict her sibling.

"I could go over and wait for you both, but there's a tiny problem. The proprietress doesn't seem to want to serve me."

So, his first stop after being refused accommodations *hadn't* been to seek out his darling daughters.

"That's because you left the village with a very large tab," Angelica said.

"What's a few dollars?" John said, shrugging.

"A few *thousand* dollars," Angelica corrected him. "Surely you didn't think the people you owed money to wouldn't come asking Tricia and me about your whereabouts and expecting to be paid."

"It's all a big misunderstanding," John insisted.

"I'm listening," Angelica insisted.

But before John could explain, the group of people at the front of the shop broke into enthusiastic applause.

"I've got to get back to work," Tricia said. "If you'll excuse me."

"And I've got to help her," Angelica insisted, and followed in her sister's wake.

By the time Tricia made it to the middle of the shop, Richardson had already taken his seat at the book table with pen in hand, while Pixie readied the books, handing them to him open at the title page, ready for him to sign.

"I'll take care of the cake," Angelica said, and marched around the goodies table. "Do you want me to wait until Steven has his picture taken with it before I cut it?"

"Let's not bother." The hands on the clock were already marching toward eight. "I'd better go man the register." Tricia turned, but Mr. Everett was already stationed behind the sales desk, waiting for the first customer.

She hurried over to him. "Oh, Mr. Everett, it's your night off. I'll take care of the sales."

"I saw that you were engaged, Ms. Miles, and I thought it best to cover all bases."

"You're a dear. Angelica's about to cut the cake. Why don't you get a slice for yourself and Grace?"

"I will, thank you."

Tricia watched her friend stroll over to the goodies table, but saw that her father was already there—stuffing his pockets full of cookies and speaking to one of the store's customers—Carol Talbot. The fifty-something woman's heavily lined features no doubt were the result of years of heavy tanning and reminded Tricia of an angry bulldog, which matched her personality. It was her body that was the envy of women decades younger. This evening she'd dressed in a form-fitting pink floral sundress with a bolero jacket, accented by a string of faux pearls around her neck. A cutthroat darts player, Carol had often played against Tricia on tournament nights at the Dog-Eared Page. Carol wasn't one of Tricia's favorite people, nor a regular customer, so it was surprising she had made the effort to attend the signing.

## Users Review

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