

MURDER is like real estate. The key to it all is location, location, location. Kill a poor guy in the back streets of Washington, D.C., and they sigh and moan about life in the naked city. But kill a businessman in Georgetown, and you assault commerce. Everyone is pretty nervous right now, so when commerce is assaulted, the prosecution swoops down to guard our nation's capital. If you're the one they finger, you had better have an attorney like me.

Cleveland's need for my services began with Benny's trip to Georgetown's hottest nightspot. By all accounts Benny Batiste had a wonderful time on his late-night jaunt to the Potomac Club. Unfortunately, things took a tumble when Benny walked out the door. Somebody cut his head off in the parking lot.

I inherited Benny's problem a few hours later. Within minutes of his untimely demise, police scoured the city in search of the lady who left the club clutching Benny's arm. Instead, they found Cleveland Barnes, pushing a shopping cart of empty cans down M Street. Mind you, recycle bin theft was no big crime in the District of Columbia. The officers fixed on something else. Cleveland wore a green army raincoat, a battered top hat, and bloodied Bally loafers. As the police discovered Benny without a head or shoes, Cleveland had big trouble, and I didn't sleep.

5:03 A.M. I'd spent the night catching up on paperwork after a three-week trial, and hoped to rest a few hours before going to court. But no such luck.

The cell phone blared. I flicked it open, and he spoke before I could.

"Attorney Stuart Clay?"

"Howard?" Howard Reynolds, Director of the Criminal Justice Act office.

"You're the on-call CJA defender this month," he said. There's been a grisly murder, the public defender has a conflict, and we need you now."

"Not the on-call until September. For God's sake, it's July."

"I know the month," Howard barked back. "This is an emergency, and the Felony One judge on the case wants to appoint you. What part of that don't you understand?"

I paused several seconds, tried to focus. Don't bicker. Foolish for a CJA lawyer to cross Howard Reynolds at any hour. The judge picked me and nothing else mattered.

Patrick Hyde

“Sorry, man. Long night.” I sighed and sat up. “A name would help.”

“Barnes.” His voice lightened. “Cleveland Barnes. They got him wearing the dead man’s Bally loafers! Now they’re waiting for you, Mr. Clay. Okay?”

“Sure, but I—”

“Sorry Clay, I’ve got other fish to fry. You wouldn’t believe last night’s lockup!”

The line went dead.

