

Soft

The FBI agents sat on straight-back metal chairs staring silently into the mirror facing them on the other side of the metal table. The mirror reflected a second mirror behind them and gave the illusion the room was bigger than it was. The mirrors were an illusion, too, since everyone knew they were really one-way mirrors and served as observational windows into the interview room. Between the agents, a video camera sat on a tripod and pointed toward the empty chair opposite them. A welded loop of metal protruded from the tabletop in front of the opposite chair. Through the loop was a short chain with handcuffs at both ends. Another empty chair waited beside the agents. The walls consisted of concrete blocks painted green, and the cement floor was a darker shade of the same color.

At the sound of the door opening, both agents swung their heads to look. A man in a gray suit with a maroon tie entered. Behind him, a uniformed guard pulled the door closed again and was visible for a moment through the small, wire-reinforced window before moving out of view.

“Detective McGinty?” the female agent asked. The man in the gray suit nodded. “I’m Special Agent Keisha Williams,” she said, standing and extending her hand. “This is Special Agent Mark Dobbs.” She indicated the other agent, who somewhat reluctantly got up and shook McGinty’s hand.

“George McGinty. Call me George. I’m Chief Investigator for the Clarkson County Sheriff’s Department.”

“Please to meet you,” said Williams. Her partner grunted as he sat.

“Sorry I’m late. I had some problems getting through the security check, being from out of state and all.”

“No worries. We’re just waiting for Clotham to get here.”

“Anybody tell you what to expect?” Dobbs asked.

“Not really. Just that this Clotham fella’s confessed to raping and murdering a little girl from Glaine in Clarkson County.”

“He’s done a lot more than that. He’s confessed to ten murders in all, including that of Alice Grant from Glaine in your neck of the woods.”

“Special Agent Dobbs and I have been assigned to the Clotham case for the last several years. Every now and then, we get word he wants to make a new confession. When we do, we call in the local authorities from the crime’s jurisdiction.”

“Appreciate that. This is a cold case for us, but it’s an important one. We don’t get many child abduction-rape-murder cases. I expect you get quite a few, though.”

“You’re ‘Chief Inspector?’” asked Dobbs. McGinty nodded. “I assume you know how to handle yourself in an interview like this.”

McGinty was taken aback. “Of course I know how to interview a suspect—”

“I’m sure you do,” Williams said. “It’s just that this isn’t a typical police case. Usually, police are trying to ascertain a level of guilt warranting charges. In this case, we already know Clotham is guilty: he’s confessed. What we want is the location of Alice Grant’s body. That and any further details regarding the crime itself.”

“Besides being a monster, what’s this Clotham fella like?”

“Complicated guy,” said Dobbs, “complicated question.”

Williams spoke. “He’s intelligent and well-organized. He likes to think of himself as smarter than others, particularly law enforcement. He *will* try to manipulate us.” Williams gestured to the empty end chair for McGinty, and she sat in the middle. “It’s a delicate dance we must perform with him, giving him enough of a feeling of control that he’ll talk to us without letting him take over the interview.”

“Every criminal I’ve interviewed that thinks he’s smarter than law enforcement turns out to be an idiot,” said McGinty.

“Clotham’s got a reason to feel superior,” Dobbs said, looking at McGinty’s reflection in the mirror. “He’s a serial killer who operated for decades before being captured. One of our jobs is to figure out just how many victims he’s got out there.”

“I’m only concerned with one of his victims: Alice Grant.”

“That’s why it’s a good idea for you to say as little as possible.”

“What Special Agent Dobbs meant to say is that we’ve got to look at the bigger picture. He’s already confessed to Alice Grant’s murder. Regarding that case, our task is to get enough details to locate her body and identify her cause of death, as well as how Clotham was able to abduct her without detection, so her parents – and the larger community – can get some sort of closure. We might also be able to use the information to prevent another serial killer from claiming a new victim.”

McGinty reflected for a moment. “I understand your point. I’m not an expert here. I’ll follow your lead.”

“The important thing for you to remember is that Clotham is going to test you. He’ll want to see if you’re a weak link, so he’ll try to goad you, to provoke you, to see what happens,” said Dobbs. “Try not to react.”

“What do *you* already know about Clotham?” Williams asked.

“Well, I’ve read his file, which is why I know he’s a monster. I know he was captured getting rid of the bodies of twins, a boy and girl age ten. I know that after he was caught, he confessed to seven more murders to help him avoid the death penalty. I know his victims were all between the ages of nine and twelve, seven girls and two boys. And I know this monster raped and strangled all nine, and Alice Grant makes ten.”

“So you know the basics,” said Dobbs, looking at him through the mirror.

Williams ignored his comment. “Have you ever interviewed a serial killer before?” McGinty shook his head. “Serial killers get off through reliving their crimes. The reason most of them take some sort of token from their victims is to help facilitate that process. Obviously, they are deprived of their tokens when they are incarcerated, so they need to find other ways to relive their killings. One of these ways is talking to us. They get to reexperience their actions as they relay them to us. Another way will be to revisit the murder site and the disposal site.”

“‘Disposal site’ sounds so– ”

“Insensitive?” said Dobbs. “We’re not talking to victims’ families where we’d have to be mindful of our word choice. Direct language is best among professionals.”

Williams sighed about her partner's crustiness. "This is important: we don't want Clotham to have the pleasure associated with reliving his experience of raping and murdering Alice Grant. That's what makes an interview like this even more tricky. We need the details, but we don't want him to get off telling us about them."

McGinty's face showed he understood the difficulty of their situation.

"One last thing: if he offers you his hand to shake, don't take it."

"I'm not afraid of—"

"It's not about fear. It's a power thing. If he can get you to shake his hand, you've unintentionally accepted him as an equal. That might be a tough thing for you to finesse." Williams smiled.

The door opened and in shuffled Clotham. He was huge. McGinty knew from the file that he was six-foot-seven-inches tall and pushing three hundred pounds, but he seemed even more enormous in the small room. Clotham wore an orange jumpsuit and a manacle belt connected to both hand and ankle shackles. His sandy hair was thin and wispy, but his moustache was full. His lips, however, were almost nonexistent, and they hid small, dingy teeth. On his face he wore black framed eyeglasses in front of shiny dark eyes.

The two FBI agents sat still as Clotham entered, and McGinty followed their lead. As he moved past, Clotham offered McGinty his handcuffed right hand. McGinty ignored it, and Clotham smirked and waddled to the opposite side of the table. A guard followed him and exchanged the cuffs on the belt for the one attached to the table. No one spoke, but Clotham closely eyed the trio in turn. When the guard finished, he left the room, and Clotham sat down.

"Can I have a cigarette?" he asked.

"Mr. Clotham, you know there's no smoking here," said Williams.

Clotham smiled. "Agents Williams and Dobbs: so nice to see you again. Who's the new local yokel?"

Dobbs switched on the video camera.

"For the record, this is FBI Special Agent Keisha Williams. It is September 8, 2024, 0940 hours. With me are Special Agent Mark Dobbs and Detective George McGinty of the Clarkson County Sheriff's Department. Please state your full name."

"Charles Henry Clotham."

Williams reached down and pulled a folder from her shoulder bag on the floor next to her chair. "Mr. Clotham, you should be aware that you have the right not to talk to us without an attorney present and that anything you say may be held against you in a court of law. Do you understand these rights as I've explained them to you?"

"Yes, I do."

"Do you waive your right to an attorney at this time?"

"Depends. I assume we have the same deal as with the others."

Williams removed a packet of papers from the folder. "Yes. These documents contain an admission of guilt for the rape and murder of Alice Grant."

"Don't forget sodomy," Clotham said.

“That’s detailed in the rape charge. They also contain an offer, approved by a federal judge, for any and all punishments associated with this crime to either run concurrently with the sentences already meted out to you, or to be served successively.”

“In other words, no death penalty, no move to a different prison.”

“That’s correct,” said Williams. “And no offer of leniency as well. No possibility for parole, no commutation of sentences.”

“That’s the deal.”

“Please initial here,” Williams pointed with a pen to a line in a margin of the papers, “to acknowledge you’ve waived your rights. Again here that you understand the terms of the plea offer. And finally, sign here as a general admission of guilt in the case of Alice Grant.” She handed the pen to Clotham. He set about initialing and signing.

“Don’t you want to read that first?” McGinty asked.

“No, Detective Yokel, I don’t need to. You see, the special agents and I have an understanding. They don’t lie to me, and I don’t lie to them. If they did, they know I’d never talk to them again, and all those murders – who knows how many – of all those children would just remain unsolved.” Clotham smiled and handed Williams her pen.

“I get what’s in it for them, for us,” he corrected, “but what’s in it for you?”

Clotham looked directly at McGinty with dead eyes. “You really don’t have a clue about what a supermax prison is like, do you, Detective Yokel? Let me fill you in about Pelican Bay. Everybody here is in isolation. Of course, solitary is preferable in my case since other prisoners don’t take kindly to my peculiar—” he searched for the right word. He smiled, happy to have found it. “Predilections. Pede-s and rape-os don’t live too long in an open prison population. Here, I don’t have to worry about who’s behind me in the shower or the chow line or in the yard because I know nobody is there. I’m alone.”

He broke his stare on McGinty and glanced at the agents before continuing.

“So I’m already getting what I want. I get to leave my cell and have some nice visits with Keisha and Mark here, and now you too: my new bestest buddy. Later, all of us will get to go on a little field trip to see where you’re from, Detective Yokel.”

McGinty fumed, but he held his tongue as long as he could. When he spoke, it was quietly. “‘Field trip?’ This isn’t some sort of game.”

“I can see the idea upsets you, but you’re wrong if you don’t see this is a game.”

“Listen you—”

Williams interrupted. She was holding her cell phone. “Detective McGinty, prison administration just texted me they forgot to have you sign Form 11R. They’re bringing a copy here for you to sign. Shall we go outside and get it done?”

McGinty and Clotham maintained eye contact for a moment more; McGinty glaring; Clotham smiling. Finally, he pushed up from the table and stormed out the door. Before Williams followed, Dobbs said, “Interview paused at 09:47,” and switched off the camera.

“Ok,” McGinty said in the hallway, “where’s this damn form?”

Williams spoke in hushed tones. “There is no form. That was just a ruse for getting you out of the room. He’s goading you. You can’t let him make you lose focus. Don’t let him get you to rise to the bait.” McGinty looked sheepish. “When go back in, don’t engage with him, if you can avoid it. Agent Dobbs and I will push the interview forward. Collect yourself before we go back.”

“Ok.” He took a deep breath.

“Interview resumed at 09:49,” said Dobbs as they sat down.

“Did Keisha read you the riot act, Detective Yokel? Don’t let it bother you, buddy. She usually has to set things straight for the local talent.”

McGinty remained silent.

Dobbs continued. “Mr. Clotham, as you know these questions are preliminary. If your confession is deemed creditable from the facts you provide today, it will lead to more detailed questioning on a later date.”

“I understand.”

“Did you abduct Alice Grant in the town of Glaine, Ohio, on or around March 4, 2020?”

“Yes, I did. And it was *on* March 4th.”

“How did you abduct her?”

“Same way as the others: a blitz attack. I followed her and learned her routine. The time and route of her way home from school. So I parked the van with the sliding door open by some houses I knew were empty during the day, and when she walked by, I just grabbed her and slammed the door shut. I bound and gagged her then hopped behind the wheel. Easy peasy.”

“Where did you take her?”

“The same as the others: to a storage unit.”

“What’s the location of this storage unit?” asked Williams.

“You sure I can’t get a cigarette?”

“No, you know there’s no smoking.”

Clotham’s thin lips smiled. “Ordinarily I’d make you wait until our visit to Glaine for that info, but I’m feeling charitable today, even if you’re not. Westside Storage. Unit 113. Same as always, I picked a rental place advertising 24-hour access and selected a unit isolated from neighbors. The first thing I did was to add a little minor soundproofing and line the floor with plastic.” His eyes started to glaze over with a faraway look.

“That’s unit 113 at Westside Storage?” Williams shook him out of his reverie.

“Right. You know there’s not going to be any evidence there. You know I’m too careful.”

“Yeah?” said McGinty. “Then how’d you get caught?”

“It was those twins. Got greedy. Broke my pattern. Varied from my modus operandi. No, if I’d stuck to my normal methods, nobody’d ever have caught me.”

McGinty gave a derisive snort.

“So what happened in unit 113?” asked Dobbs.

Clotham gave a full description of what happened – how he'd raped and sodomized Alice Grant for two days and nights. He told how, spent, he knotted a ligature and strangled her with it.

“As you know, agents, I always use a rope. Guns are too noisy and impersonal. Knives are messy. With a rope, you can feel that instant they cease to be. When they become nonexistent.”

He told how he'd put her body, wrapped in plastic, back into his van and buried her in some woods. Whenever his eyes got that dreamy, remembering look, either Dobbs or Williams would snap him out of it with another “clarifying” question.

“Which woods?” asked Dobbs.

“Ah, now that info you're just going to have to wait for until our little field trip. Rest assured, I know exactly where I buried it. And nobody's found it yet.”

McGinty couldn't resist. “How do you know that, smart guy?”

“Why else would you be here, dumb yokel?”

McGinty's lips twitched with fury. Clotham's lipless mouth formed a humorless smile.

“Agents,” said Clotham, “you know I can take you right to where it's buried, just like with the others.”

“Stop calling her ‘it’,” McGinty said. “She was a little girl.”

“Yes, she *was* a little girl. I'm more aware of that than you. You never even met her, while I knew her ... intimately. But you're wrong. Once I finished with her, she ceased to be a little girl and became an it.”

McGinty could no longer control himself. “You're an animal,” he said. “You're sick.”

“No doubt.”

“You're a monster.”

“I'm the bogeyman.”

“Did you ever think for a moment about how Alice felt?”

“I know how she felt.”

“How's that? How did she feel?”

The faraway dreamy look came back to Clotham's eyes. “Soft,” he said.