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**INSIDE:**

**I AM NOT A LONE GUNMAN**  
M.L. Fortier

**UNWEAVING THE RAINBOW**  
Stephen D. Rogers

**THE ENIGMATIC FLETCH**  
Liz McGrath

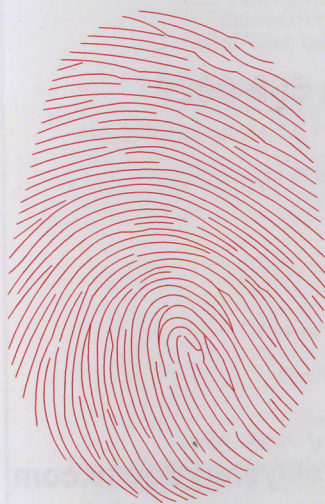
**THE GHOST OF BRIDGET BISHOP**  
Christine Bagley

**THE VOICE**  
J.F. Nardizzi

**MEN OF MEANS**  
Sharon Love Cook

**BOSTON MYSTERY REVIEW**

**THE OTHER HALF**  
Amy Hawes



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CRIMESTALKER CASEBOOK

— FOUNDERS —

Andrew McAleer and John McAleer

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**THE VOICE**

J.F. Nardizzi

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Paul Gatling looked comfortable on the witness stand. The ex-cop wore a khaki suit, his face tanned the color of tobacco. His accuser, Monica Tse, had leveled serious charges: raped repeatedly while working for him as an informant.

Tse's investigator, Ray Infantino, sat in the gallery. Thus far, questions broke harmlessly over Gatling's snowy-haired persona: he answered patiently, made eye contact with jurors--a thoroughly professional witness. But as the morning session drew to a close, he made a mistake. Asked about a former partner, Gatling claimed to forget his name. After the noon break, Tse's lawyer, Paul Cebella, huddled with Ray.

"He looked uneasy with the partner question," said Cebella.

"News article identifies his partner in a 1974 arrest," said Ray. "Jerome Billings. Lives in downtown San Francisco."

\* \* \*

Ray took a late flight west. He taxied to the rough Tenderloin district near downtown. At 17 Turk Street, he saw a building with a sagging metal sign--SENATOR HOTEL. The lobby was filled with sunken sofas and artwork that was bolted to the walls.

He walked inside and asked the clerk for Jerry Billings.

"Jerry? You mean Voice."

"I'm an investigator." He handed the clerk a business card. "I need to see him about a trial."

"Oh, OK." The clerk looked at the card nodding. He seemed to understand the urgency of the word: trial. "From Boston, huh? Must be a big case."

Ray said nothing.

"He's in 204."

Ray walked upstairs and knocked at 204. An old man looked out. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

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Billings wore jeans and a soiled white shirt. His face betrayed poor nutrition, a yellowish hue—he seemed lit from within by a cheap bulb. But his voice was strong, powerfully at odds with the rest of body, which crumbled toward the end of his life, fleeing its responsibilities.

"I'm investigating a case in Boston," explained Ray. "Involves something that happened in the 1970s. Like to talk with you."

"How did you find me?"

"Standard research—databases."

"They let you in downstairs?"

"They were OK, Mr. Billings."

"No one calls me that here."

"They told me your nickname."

Voice looked away. "I was a singer before I was a cop," he said, muttering his way from the door.

Ray sat down on a wood chair. "You want to talk downstairs? I'll get some coffee."

"Kind of you. But I never stay in the lounge—sofas are musty." Voice sat on the bed. "So what can I do for you, this trial back east?"

"What made you become a cop?" asked Ray.

"My papa was a sheriff. I followed a long line."

"You enjoyed police work?" asked Ray.

"As a police officer, I was, well, you might call it a straight arrow," said Voice, jabbing the air. "Fine years for a young man, the 1970s. You could afford a house then."

"I read about the corruption trials," said Ray.

Voice nodded. "Done your research before coming."

"What were those days like?"

"Tough. Hard days for everyone." The deep voice went silent. "For some guys, the shiny badge was just for show. The corruption trials derailed friendships. Wrecked careers."

"Anyone you remember?"

"Oh, the names!" Voice rumbled. "The big name was Joe McNeil, Lieutenant from Area D."

"You remember an officer named Gatling?"

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Voice went still, rubbed his mouth. "That who this case is about?" he asked.

"Gatling is involved, yes."

"Who are you working for again?"

"A woman, Monica Tse. She says that he"—Ray paused. "Gatling abused her."

Voice nodded. "Paul Gatling was one of the few brass left standing after the grand jury recessed in '72. We were all scared. A young man had no place to turn. Command level was obliterated. Gatling, with fifteen years in, seemed like my best choice."

The old man stretched out a veiny arm and shifted in

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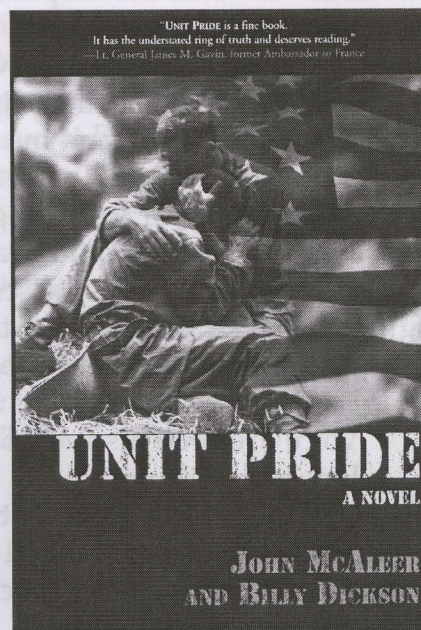
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his chair. "Your client, this woman, she was an informant." It was not a question.

"Yes."

"Gatling was vicious. Getting a mentor, making him like you, protect you, that is something no one ever talks about. After you found your protector, you worked hard, made yourself indispensable." Voice rapped his knuckles on the table. "So the beating that got out of hand was overlooked. Payoffs--we called it the nut. Pimps. Gay clubs. Drug dealers, who everyone despised anyway." "What about Gatling," asked Ray, "was he ever implicated?"

"No! He was insulated. We collected for Gatling. And others. They ran it. We got the scraps."

"Is the stuff I'm looking at—abuse of informants—this sound like him?" "Of course!" Voice's face glistened. "Last person I sang to, you know what he told me? I had serenaded him! Gatling was a pig!" Voice leaned toward Ray. "The girl I'll never forget. Found her on Carson, Oriental girl, wandering around, black circles for eyes. No English. Someone had beaten her. We put her in the car and headed towards the hospital. So I thought. Gatling just kept on driving, heading out to the flats. It was the middle of winter, Christmas decorations everywhere."

Voice touched his fingertips to his lips. "He pulled over—just him, the girl, and me. It was dark. Told me to take a walk. I had no idea what for, but I got out of the car—this was a twenty year vet telling me what to do. He raped her as I walked away, I could hear her screaming.

"I couldn't stand it, the screaming. So I started singing. I walked the length of that road, singing and crying for everything that had happened, and now the worse of all."

Voice dropped his eyes to the floor, exhausted.

Ray said nothing.

"Gatling mocked me. After he was done—he dumped her off somewhere—he thanked me for serenading them. Told me I was his singer for special occasions. And he

CRIMESTALKER CASEBOOK

laughed at me the whole ride back."

Voice sat back. "So you ask me to sing? Would you hear my voice? No happy songs here at the Senator."

\* \* \*

In court the next day, Cebella strode briskly toward his witness. "Detective, you deny any history of forcing women—"

"Objection, judge," interrupted Gatling's lawyer, "asked and answered numerous times."

"I'll sustain that," said the judge. "Move on, Mr. Cebella."

Cebella returned to his chair, glancing at Ray Infantino in the gallery. "One last question," said Cebella. "The name of your first partner, Mr. Gatling, have you had a chance to remember?"

"No."

"Jerome Billings ring a bell, sir?"

Gatling scanned the courtroom, went still.

"I recall it now, that's it."

Gatling returned to the defense table.

The judge gestured to Cebella. "Your next witness."

"I call Jerome Billings to the stand."

The rear door swung open and an old man walked into the courtroom. Ray glanced at Billings—he looked like the essence of decay. But Voice would boom in the oak paneled courtroom; he would sing this jury back to the flats, to a night in 1973, sing them over the humped back of Paul Gatling as he raped a girl with black eyes.

Monica Tse glanced back at Ray. He hustled to the plaintiff's table. "Gatling's charade is over," he whispered. "Let me tell you about a voice I heard last night."

END

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