



Unspeakable (Tracers Series Book 2)

By Laura Griffin

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ELAINA MCCORD WANTS TO FIND A KILLER. BUT HE'S ALREADY FOUND HER.

Elaina McCord's dream of being an FBI profiler is threatened by her very first case—investigating a string of murders near a Texas beach resort. The victims, all young women, were drugged and brutally murdered, their bodies abandoned in desolate marshland. Elaina's hunch—met with disbelief by local police—is that these are only the latest offerings from a serial killer who has been perfecting his art for years, growing bolder and more cunning with each strike.

True-crime writer Troy Stockton has a reputation as an irresistible playboy who gets his story at any cost. He's the last person Elaina should trust, let alone be attracted to. But right now Troy, along with the elite team of forensics experts known as the Tracers, is her only ally in a case that's turning dangerously personal. A killer is reaching out to Elaina, taunting her, letting her know how ruthless he is and how close he's getting. Now it's not just her career that's in jeopardy—it's her life. . . .

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Unspeakable (Tracers Series Book 2) By Laura Griffin Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #23960 in eBooks
- Published on: 2010-06-18
- Released on: 2010-06-29
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Review

"[Fans] who've been waiting for a book featuring sexy true-crime writer Troy Stockton, your time has come and you won't be disappointed. This is a tight suspense with the sexiest of heroes and a protagonist seriously worth rooting for." ---RT Book Reviews

About the Author

New York Times bestselling author Laura Griffin is the author of the Tracers series, the Alpha Crew series, the Moreno & Hart series and several other novels. A two time RITA Award winner and the recipient of the Daphne du Maurier Award, she lives in Austin, where she is working on her next book. Visit her website at LauraGriffin.com and on Facebook at [Facebook.com/LauraGriffinAuthor](https://www.facebook.com/LauraGriffinAuthor).

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CHAPTER 1

Lito Island, Texas

N 26° 14.895 W 097° 11.280

24 hours later

The police station was quiet.

Alarminglly quiet.

Elaina McCord pulled into the empty lot and parked in the space closest to the entrance. She shoved open the car door and got out, sighing at the faint stirring of air. Not a breeze, exactly, but not too far off. For a moment, she stood beside the Taurus to get her bearings.

She scooped her hair off her neck and twisted it into some semblance of a bun. Her poly-blend Filene's Basement pantsuit concealed her holster but didn't breathe. She should have sprung for something silk, but when she'd purchased her career wardrobe, she'd been thinking D.C. or New York. In a million years she never would have guessed she'd end up in Brownsville, Texas—a satellite of a satellite office, a thousand miles from anywhere she wanted to be.

Except today.

Today Lito Island Police Chief Matt Breck had called Brownsville to request federal assistance in solving a string of homicides. Most likely he was expecting a pair of veteran agents in crew cuts and dark suits.

Instead, he was getting a rookie in a Donna Karan knockoff.

Elaina smoothed her lapels and gathered her determination. She slammed the door shut, locked the car, and hiked up half a dozen wooden steps so a cardboard sign could tell her what she already knew.

The place was deserted.

BE BACK SOON. The black hands on the clock had been positioned for ten-thirty. Elaina glanced up at the sun blazing directly down on top of her. She cupped her hand and peered through the tinted glass door to the darkened offices beyond. The place looked to be shut down.

Who shuts down a police station?

What the hell planet was this?

Elaina huffed out a breath and turned around. Beyond the minuscule lot, a row of tall palm trees bordered Highway 106, otherwise known as Lito Highway because it was the only highway in town and ran the entire twenty-two-mile length of the island. The first two miles, Elaina had discovered, were crammed with motels, restaurants, and surf shops. The last twenty miles consisted of God only knew what. From the map, it looked as though the road disappeared into the Lito Island Wildlife Refuge just south of town. She turned her gaze that way now and saw grass and water and what looked like never-ending acres of swamp.

Or estuary. Whatever.

A weathered wooden deck surrounded the dormant police station, and Elaina followed it around to the back, taking care not to let her low black heels catch on the uneven slats. The white adobe station house reflected the sun like a mirror. It backed up to Laguna Madre, the bay that separated Lito from the mainland. Elaina averted her gaze from the glare as she made her way to the back of the building. A speck of movement on the water caught her eye.

A boat. Moving in her direction, too, which meant it was either heading toward the police dock or the cleverly named Lito Island Marina just next door.

The boat drew nearer. Some sort of official logo marked the side of it, and Elaina counted at least four passengers standing behind whoever was at the helm. Her stomach tightened as she thought about the fifth passenger, whom she knew would be lying on the floor.

The boat zipped past the police dock before making a wide turn and gliding up to the marina. The wake splashed up through the wooden slats, soaking Elaina's shoes.

Water squished through her toes as she picked her way across the thick carpet of Saint Augustine grass separating the station house from the marina. SUVs and pickups crammed the gravel lot. She spotted two police units and a red Suburban with LIFD painted on the side.

Elaina ducked around the side of the corrugated metal building, passing a leathery man toting an empty crab trap, then a pair of teenagers carrying yellow bait buckets. Next to a humming Coke machine, a man stood smoking a cigarette and watching her. She passed a wooden fish sink and a balding, bearded guy who paused in the act of hacking off a fish head to stare at her. Ignoring all the curious gazes, Elaina focused on the end of the pier.

The boat's captain—Chief Breck?—barked out an order, and a man in a khaki uniform hopped down from the vessel to tie the bowline to a cleat.

Two uniformed men bent down in unison and lifted something off the boat's floor. Elaina watched, shocked,

as they manhandled the long black bundle onto the pier, where they laid it out in the sun. Finally, the captain disembarked.

Elaina strode forward. "Chief Breck?"

His gaze shot up and turned instantly suspicious beneath the bill of his LIPD cap. "Yeah?"

She stopped before him and looked up at the guarded expression in his brown eyes.

"I got no comment at this time," he stated.

"Excuse me?"

"You're with the *Herald*, right?" His gaze skimmed over her suit, pausing on her wet cuffs, then snapped back up to her face. "Or maybe you're TV? Either way, I got no comment as of yet, so —"

"I'm with the FBI." Elaina thrust out her hand. "Special Agent Elaina McCord."

His eyebrows popped up, disappearing beneath the hat.

"You called Brownsville this morning?" she reminded him as his baffled gaze dropped to her hand.

"Requested assistance?"

His brow furrowed now, and Elaina gave up on the handshake. He looked her over once again. She peered around him at the body bag laid out on the dock. A white-haired man in street clothes stood beside it. The ME?

"Why don't you step on over there?" Breck gestured back toward the building. "Someone'll be with you in a minute."

Elaina gritted her teeth but complied with his request by stepping back a few paces. It wouldn't be wise to piss off the police chief in her first homicide investigation. She crossed her arms and looked on as Breck turned his back on her and exchanged words with his officers.

Smoke wafted over to her. Elaina glanced at the Coke machine, where the man with the cigarette still stood, his shoulder propped casually against the door frame. Something about his steady, penetrating look gave her goose bumps.

She glanced away.

A flurry of feathers erupted as the man at the sink tossed some guts into the water and the seagulls scrambled. A giant brown pelican flapped over to snatch away the prize, then perched on the dock as he gobbled it down.

Elaina glanced around, taking mental notes. The teenagers had disappeared but the crabber still lurked nearby, his arms folded over his chest and his trap at his feet while his attention remained fixed on the body bag. Elaina memorized his face, then scanned the rest of the area for suspects. Some perps liked to hang around and observe the aftermath of what they'd done. Elaina counted nine spectators at the moment, including a shirtless, sun-baked twenty-something with blond dreadlocks. He had his arm draped over a

young woman's shoulders, and they watched the end of the pier with morbid fascination.

Elaina checked her watch. She cursed under her breath. Breck and his men stood huddled on the dock, shooting the nonexistent breeze. Elaina felt her temperature rising as the minutes ticked by and the sun glared down.

A large brown bird alighted at the end of the pier and wobbled over on spindly legs to check out the body bag, jabbing at the plastic with a sickle-shaped beak.

Elaina shot past the men and waved her arms. "Shoo! Shoo!" she yelled, and the bird took off.

She whirled around. "*Where* is the body-removal team?"

Breck frowned at her. "The who?"

"The body-removal team! She's baking in there, along with whatever evidence we might recover."

Breck's hands went to his hips. "We're waiting on our ambulance. They got hung up with some sorta accident down at the beach."

Elaina took a deep breath. She felt dozens of eyes boring into her as she straightened her shoulders and tried to calm down.

"When will it be here?" she asked.

"When it gets here. Maynard." Breck jerked his head toward one of the uniforms.

"Yessir."

"Go take Miss McCord over to the station house to cool her jets."

They left her waiting for more than four hours.

Elaina refused to acknowledge the snub. Instead, she retrieved her briefcase from her car, along with her cell phone. She spread her files out across the conference room table and worked diligently, as if she'd gotten up this morning with every intention of spending her Friday afternoon in some backwater police station. By five-thirty, though, her patience was gone. She was hungry and tired. And sticky, too, as the room had no air-conditioning— only a portable fan that circulated the same warm air, over and over. She was about to get up to search for a vending machine when the door popped open. Officer Maynard again.

"Miss McCord? The chief'll see you now."

Finally, an audience with His Highness. Elaina collected her manila file folders and shoved them into her briefcase.

"Right this way, ma'am."

Maynard was shorter than she was, probably five-nine. But he had a trim build and rigid posture that reminded her of the Marines she'd crossed paths with during her twenty-two weeks at Quantico. He led her

through the wood-paneled police station and past a sixtyish woman seated at a metal desk beside one of the offices. She was talking on the phone and writing on a pad, a stack of pink message slips piled at her elbow.

Maynard opened the door to the inner sanctum of Breck's office, and Elaina stepped inside. The room smelled faintly of cigars, and the chief sat in a padded leather chair behind a faux wood desk. Arranged in a semicircle around the desk were plastic chairs occupied by people she'd seen earlier at the marina, with the exception of a bald man who held a cowboy hat in his hand. The star pinned to his chest told Elaina he was a Texas Ranger.

"Dr. Frank Cisernos," the white-haired man from the dock said, standing up. "County Medical Examiner."

Elaina shook his hand and introduced herself. She darted her gaze around to the other faces. The young Latino officer smiled at her, but no one else rose to greet her.

Maynard took one of the two empty chairs and gestured for Elaina to take the other. She deposited her briefcase in it and remained standing, then laced her fingers together in front of her so no one would see that she was trembling.

"So, you're here to lend us a hand." Breck leaned forward on his elbows. "Scarborough tells me you're fresh from the Academy."

Elaina tried not to wince. "I graduated last fall." She wondered what else the supervisory special agent had told him. Her boss made no secret of his dislike for her, but he'd finally given her a shot at criminal profiling. Maybe he was coming around.

Or maybe he'd sent her here to fall on her face.

She cleared her throat. "I'm here to provide a criminal profile. Also, I'm authorized to offer FBI assistance with any labs you need." She glanced at the Texas Ranger—who also probably had the clout to fast-track lab work—and knew her stock was sinking quickly.

"A profile, huh?" Breck leaned back in his chair now. "You're gonna tell us about our unsub?"

Everyone's attention settled on Elaina.

"What I have on our subject is preliminary," she said. "I'll need to see photos from this morning's crime scene and I'll need to observe the autopsy. I understand someone from the state crime lab's coming down to assist?"

She glanced at Cisernos, who gave a slight nod.

"And do we know the victim's name?" she asked.

"Nothing confirmed," Breck said. "But for the past half hour, I've had just about every parent whose college kid is down here ringing my phone off the hook. They all heard about the body on the news. Now their daughter's not answering her cell, and they want to know if it's her or not.

"So go on ahead." Breck nodded. "Tell us your profile."

“You said ‘nothing confirmed,’” Elaina replied, sidestepping the bear trap. “You mean you have a lead?”

“All I’ve got for sure is Caucasian female, long dark hair.” Breck eyed Elaina’s long dark hair as he said this. Then he glanced down at the yellow legal pad on his desk. “She was a mess—we can’t even tell her age. But we took a call this afternoon about an abandoned Audi sedan at a boat slip on the north side of town. Car’s been there two days. It’s registered to Valerie Monroe, twenty-seven-year-old from Houston. There’s a purse inside. Driver’s license, med school ID, health insurance card. She’s a brunette. Car’s been impounded, but we still gotta process everything.”

“And my supervisor told me the victim was found in the marshes this morning by some fishermen.” Elaina looked at the ME. “She was naked and had been eviscerated, apparently, like Gina Calvert back in March?”

“Gina Calvert was found March fifteenth,” Cisernos said. “By my estimation, she’d been there at least two days. This new body looks about three days old to me.”

“And Gina’s body was also discovered in the wildlife park.” Elaina’s confidence returned as she ran through the facts of the case, which she’d committed to memory months ago. “She’d been injected with ketamine hydrochloride. Her car was found abandoned at a boat slip. Her personal items were left inside.”

Breck folded his arms over his chest. “Okay, sounds like you’ve done your homework, Miss McCord. So tell us about our perp. Who’re we looking for?”

Elaina’s instincts screamed for her to stop. The prudent thing would be to wait until she had all her facts together. But her face felt warm, her armpits felt damp, and the air in the room was thick with skepticism.

She took a deep breath. “I think the offender is a white male, late twenties to mid-thirties. I think he’s bright, but he has an inflated sense of his own intelligence and he’s driven by ego. He’s most likely attractive, possibly charming, and comfortable approaching women with some kind of ploy. His sophisticated MO shows that he’s organized and capable of controlling his impulses. I think he lives on the island, is underemployed, and owns or has easy access to a boat. His hobbies include hunting and fishing. He likes guns. I also think he’s probably got some background in law enforcement.”

She noticed the startled looks but kept going. “No sign of sexual assault, at least nothing overt.”

Breck’s brows arched. “Overt?”

Elaina shifted slightly. “Even without rape, I believe these are sex crimes. The knife work is a form of penetration. And this type of offender sometimes can’t get an erection, so he substitutes something else.”

Breck traded looks with the ranger, and Elaina plunged on so she wouldn’t have to answer any questions yet.

“He kidnaps these women, injects them with a chemical to incapacitate them, takes them to remote locations, and then makes a deep abdominal incision with a serrated hunting knife. He leaves almost no trace evidence behind, indicating a good deal of knowledge and planning—”

“Now, wait a minute there.” Breck held up his hand. “We only got two victims. You make it sound like we’re dealing with a serial killer.”

“I believe we are.”

“It could be a copycat. Some domestic murder, staged to look like the girl from spring break, just to throw us off.”

Elaina tipped her head to the side. “And how many of those details were released to the media?”

Breck darted an uneasy glance around the room, and she knew she’d made a tactical mistake by challenging him in front of an audience.

But he recovered quickly. “And we don’t know what evidence he might have left in that Audi,” he added. “Could be prints all over.”

“I’m also referring to Gina Calvert’s car. And the abandoned Mustang found at the boat dock following the Mary Beth Cooper murder.”

The room fell silent. Breck’s face was pure astonishment.

“Mary Beth Cooper,” he stated.

She nodded.

“From nine years ago?”

She nodded again.

Breck leaned forward now, scowling. “A guy *confessed* to that crime. He’s sitting in Huntsville.”

Elaina nodded again.

“You mean to tell me you think they got the wrong guy up there? He was convicted in a court of law. Someone wrote a book about it, for chrissakes.”

“He confessed to a string of murders,” Elaina said. “Investigators have irrefutable DNA evidence he actually committed some of them, too. What I’m saying is, I think we need to look at Mary Beth’s case again. I think it’s related to our unsub.” In fact, Elaina believed there was a good chance Mary Beth Cooper was this perpetrator’s first kill.

“The Cooper girl died of traumatic asphyxia,” Cisernos said.

Elaina’s gaze shifted to the ME.

“Manual strangulation,” he added. “I performed the autopsy myself.”

“And as you mentioned in your report,” she said, “the victim had ketamine in her bloodstream at the time of death. And she’d been stabbed postmortem with a serrated knife.”

The room fell silent again. Elaina searched all the faces for some sign of support. Breck sat with his arms crossed, looking disgusted. Cisernos frowned. The cops in the room looked uncomfortable, with the exception of the young Latino officer, who seemed intrigued. He sat forward on his chair, watching her, as if waiting to hear more.

“Well, now.” Chief Breck stood up and finally offered her his hand. “We’re glad you could make it up here today, Miss McCord. I think we can handle things from here.”

After her stellar performance in front of Breck, Elaina had the urge to go get drunk. She eyed the festive bars as she drove through town, thinking how nice it would be to pull in and order a double frozen margarita with salt.

Instead, she headed for the bridge. A knot formed in her stomach as she replayed the meeting and forced herself to accept what had happened.

Her first homicide case, her first criminal profile, and she’d totally blown it. No way, no how, would she be invited to observe tomorrow morning’s autopsy. Breck had made that clear enough. If she continued to assist on this case at all, she’d have to do it from Brownsville, using whatever reports she could get her hands on. That was if Scarborough didn’t yank the case away from her and hand it over to a more experienced agent.

Elaina stripped off her jacket at a stoplight. She gazed out the window at the tourists crowding the sidewalks. Women strolled up and down in shorts and bikini tops. Sunburned teenagers with skim boards tucked under their arms trekked home from the beach. A sign up ahead advertised a vacancy at the Sandhill Inn, where Gina Calvert had spent the final days of her short life.

The light changed, and Elaina hung a left onto Causeway Road, which would take her back to the mainland. As she neared the bridge, she glimpsed Laguna Madre glistening in the evening sun. Catamarans and Sunfish dotted the bay, and Elaina watched them wistfully, remembering the last time she’d been aboard a sailboat. It was out on Lake Michigan, half a lifetime ago. The wind had been frigid, but she had spent the afternoon with a smile frozen on her face because her dad had taken the entire day off.

Her cell phone chimed from its berth in the cup holder.

“McCord,” she said.

A brief pause. “Did you get the cigarette butt?”

“Who is this?”

“Bet you’ve got it tagged and bagged by now.” It was a male voice. Low, with a Texas drawl. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

Elaina had a flash of the man leaning against the Coke machine. There had been something familiar about him, something that had been nipping at her subconscious all afternoon.

“Who is this?”

“Troy Stockton. I saw you at the marina, Elaina. Very impressive.”

Troy Stockton. She drew a blank.

“How did you get this number?”

“I’ve got lots of numbers. Hey, you really leaving us already?”

Elaina's shoulders tensed, and she glanced in the rearview mirror.

"I'm disappointed," he said. "I wouldn't have pegged you for a quitter."

Elaina surveyed the cars behind her: several SUVs, a convertible filled with young women, a delivery truck of some sort. "Listen, why don't you tell me where you got this number and—"

Click.

Elaina checked the display, but the call was gone. Her incoming-call list read only "Private Caller." She tossed the phone onto the passenger seat.

Stockton. Troy Stockton. The name rang a bell, but the voice had been totally unfamiliar.

Pop!

The wheel jerked right and the car lunged across two lanes of traffic. Brakes squealed. Horns blared. Elaina wrestled the steering wheel as the car skidded off the road.

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Users Review

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