



The Unspeakable: Murder in Memphis

James C. Paavola

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Detectives are given insights into the hopes and dreams of young immigrant children in this gripping murder mystery.

James Paavola's suspenseful thriller *The Unspeakable* centers around the unconscionable act of child sex trafficking.

The novel is predominantly set in Memphis, but opens in a small Mexican town and follows a family—ten-year-old Gabriela and her parents—as they attempt to cross the border into the United States.

Gabriela documents her worries, concerns, and dreams in a small, red diary. As they travel along, the family struggles to know who to trust, especially with their limited language skills. At a rest stop, Gabriela is abducted. Not long after, the body of a young Mexican girl, a Jane Doe, is discovered in the woods in Memphis. This brings the story to the desk of Officer Julia Todd of the Memphis Police Department.

Working through the murders of young girls to discover the sex trafficking ring behind them, Julia, with her coworkers Tagger and Marino, encounters plenty of discrimination. The hot-button issue of undocumented immigration is also present, though the novel avoids either condoning or condemning positions. Dialogue and action stay centered on the horrific abductions and murders of the young girls.

Using chronology as a marker, the book maintains a steady and consistent flow of action. The story moves at a brisk pace, rarely lingering too long on one piece of action or one conversation. Pieces come together well and keep suspense building.

Minor characters, like gang members and immigrant families, including Gabriela and her parents, are introduced without their purposes or fates fully realized until the conclusion. Then, all the moving pieces of the sex trafficking ring mystery are brought together.

Main characters continue to develop throughout the book, with growth in thinking and bonds strengthened through dialogue and action. When Julia is placed in danger, Marino and Tagger step up to protect her, giving glimpses of the deeper bond that the coworkers share, which grows throughout the story.

Initially Julia, Marino, and Tagger have limited knowledge of illegal immigration and the underground transportation from Mexico to the United States, but through their work on the case and conversations with those who help immigrants, they are awakened to another side of their town. When Gabriela's diary is found and translated, the detectives are given insight into the hopes and dreams of the young immigrant children who are being murdered, adding emotion to an already serious story.

While the lead characters are fictional, the book's afterword reveals that the sex trafficking ring and the gang who ran it, the Gangster Disciples, are based on real arrests and real crimes committed in Memphis. This gives the story extra depth.

The book is part of a larger murder mystery series focusing on Julia Todd and the Memphis Police Department, and many of the friendships and relationships within it are taken for granted. While most of the novel can stand alone, some insider information is lost.

The Unspeakable is a murder thriller that, backed by facts and data, convincingly tells the story of taking down a sex trafficking ring.

JENNIFER MILLER (July 11, 2017)

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