

Chapter 1



1992 - Seattle, Washington

Maria

Maria Frías had been promoted to detective five days before she met the little boy who would haunt her for the rest of her career.

She got the call late one Saturday night, as she was arriving home after a long day. She was heading home to her tiny, yet extremely expensive, studio apartment in downtown Seattle. Her partner, Alyssa, had called her at the station before she left. She told her that there was a hot meal waiting for her. And a hot dessert too. The tone of voice told Maria that Alyssa certainly wasn't talking about crème brûlée.

So all in all, Maria was not particularly interested in taking the call right as she walked into her house from the bitter cold.

"I'm not on shift right now," she complained to the officer, Chandler, who had called her. "The detective on call right now is Gleeson. Bother him."

"I would, but none of us guys can get close to this kid. He starts getting hysterical whenever we try. Don't think it will be any better with Gleeson. I think we need a girl."

Maria sighed. She was one of the very few female detectives in Seattle, and always got called for the cases involving children and domestic issues. And subtly blocked from the rougher investigations of drug rings and armed robbery.

"I'm a grown woman, not a girl. But fine. I'll be there in ten."

She disconnected the call and gave Alyssa a kiss goodbye, trying to ignore the look her partner shot at her. Yet another late night.

She daydreamed of what was waiting at home the entire time she drove, cursing Chandler and the entire Seattle PD as well.

All thoughts of home were wiped from her mind the second she walked into the station and saw the child.

He was no more than nine or ten at the most, skinny with stick arms wrapped around himself. He was wearing a short-sleeved prison jumpsuit. It was the smallest size available, but the little boy was still swimming in it. He had black wavy hair and red-rimmed blue eyes that were shining with tears. His golden-brown skin was reddened by the crying and his lips were cracked and looked sore.

But the thing that caught Maria's eye first were the splashes of dried blood caked on every part of his body.

"Hey, buddy," she said, crouching down. She stayed a safe distance from the boy to avoid scaring him, but the boy flinched and cringed at her words as if they were slaps.

"Are you hurt?"

The boy sat so long that Maria didn't think he'd respond, but after a moment his small head gave a quick shake, indicating no.

If he's not hurt, who's blood is all over him? Maria thought. Could this be a domestic? Maybe his father hurt his mother and he ran off?

"Can you tell me your name?"

Another pause, then a tiny whisper.

"Lo siento, Señora. No puedo decirle."

I'm sorry, ma'am. I can't tell you. Maria wondered if he was from an immigrant family and was afraid to talk to cops. If his parents had warned him about deportation, he may think that he would be taken from his family if he spoke to her. It wasn't a completely baseless worry. Seattle may lean towards law enforcement not contacting INS, but there were assholes in the department who would do it in a heartbeat. Case in point, one of the officers in the other room.

"Can you tell me why not?"

The boy shook his head violently.

“Okay, you don’t have to right now. But I got to say kiddo, I’m pretty worried about you. Are you sure that’s not your blood?”

The moment the words passed her lips Maria knew that mentioning the blood was a bad idea. The child began to shake and covered his face with his hands. A sob came from him, low and terrified.

“*Está bien, chico.* Whatever’s going on, I can help you.”

Maria felt helpless. Truth be told, she wasn’t great with kids. She’d never wanted any of her own, and always felt awkward around them. Like she was a huge, hulking mass of a person who was scary and threatening to a tiny being. She knew it was silly. She wasn’t particularly big. She knew children often reacted more to demeanor and actions than size anyway. But it didn’t remove the feelings of unease and awkwardness when tasked with interviewing a child.

“No,” the little boy whispered. “I can’t tell. *Por favor.*”

“I know you’re scared, kiddo. But we need to keep you safe. Can you give us your parents’ phone number?”

Another violent shake of his head, and the boy now wrapped his arms around himself again and rocked back and forth.

“Okay. You’re not ready for that,” she said soothingly. “You don’t have to.”

This wasn’t working. Maria sighed and gathered her thoughts. She looked at him now, curled up in a ball in the chair that was too big for him, and noticed something.

The boy’s head was buried in his hands, and when he bent forward, she could see something on the skin right beneath his neck, between his shoulder blades.

She leaned forward slowly to get a better look, careful not to make a sudden movement to scare the child.

There were raised scars on the child’s back. As she got a better look, she could see what it was.

Cigarette burns mostly healed. She’d seen them before in child abuse cases. It wasn’t something she’d ever forget.

Her stomach turned. Someone had branded this little boy in pain. This was some type of long-term abuse, not one violent night.

She needed more information on the circumstances surrounding this child being found wandering the streets in Seattle.

“Will you be okay if I go talk to the officers who found you for a minute?”

After the boy gave a tiny nod, but as she began to walk from the room he spoke, voice still small and scared.

“Do I have to stay? Am I arrested?”

“You’re not in any trouble. But you must stay safe, so we need to keep you here until we figure out what’s going on.” Maria tried to give the child a reassuring, warm smile.

After another nod from the boy, she made her way to the office area where officers Chandler and Halverson were sitting, shooting the shit.

“Get anything out of him, hun?” Halverson asked. Maria utterly despised him. He was the epitome of what people thought of when they thought of a good old boys’ club in the force. A mid-fifties, heavy set white man with only wisps of gray hairs left and a jowly face. He was constantly undercutting Maria, condescending to her, using pet names, and asking her to fetch coffee as if she was her personal assistant. She’d heard him loudly talking multiple times about how the force was becoming too colorful, too. A total charmer.

“Don’t call me hun, my name is Frías,” Maria snapped. “And no. Tell me more about how you found him.”

Halverson rolled his eyes at the request, but Chandler jumped in. He was a good kid, brand new on the beat and much more enlightened than the older men around him. Pity he wouldn’t stay that way for long, with the company he had to keep.

“We got the call that a boy covered in blood was wandering around Pike Street marketplace,” he started. “When we got there, we found him. Brought him back here. We got his clothes there.” He gestured carelessly at the evidence bag before him. In it was a cheerful blue t-shirt, jeans,

and tiny Batman underwear. All the clothing was marred with brown-red streaks.

“He didn’t appear to have any injuries,” Chandler said. “So, we brought him here to wait for you.”

“You didn’t think to take him to the hospital?”

“He’s not hurt, sweetie. Nothing’s wrong with him,” Halverson said. “We know what we’re doing.”

“You don’t know that. The kid is clearly scared, and he’s *covered in blood*. He’s got cigarette burns on his back. Whatever incident that hurt someone bad enough to lose that much blood could have hurt him too. He could have internal injuries or be hiding one.”

“He seemed fine. Just weepy.” Halverson shrugged. “Just try to figure out who his parents are. My bet is that one killed the other. Domestic dispute. Kid gets covered in blood trying to wake up mom or dad and takes off running when he can’t.”

“Could be,” Maria said shortly, grinding her teeth to keep from telling the man exactly what she thought of him. “But that’s still no guarantee he wasn’t hurt.”

Halverson shrugged, biting at the end of his pen.

“Either we’ll find a dead mommy somewhere and identify him or a family member will show up to claim him. Either way, if he won’t talk to you, we’ll just call the bleeding hearts. They’ll take him to foster care.”

“I said that we should take him to the hospital.” The younger man finally spoke, voice filled with shame. Halverson looked irritated rather than embarrassed at his terrible job of assessing the boy, and he glared at his partner before speaking.

“Like we told you before, the kid would barely let us get near him. We didn’t have a chance to look him over. So, if he’s hurt it’s not on us.”

Maria turned away in disgust and went to her desk. She couldn’t help thinking that if the boy wasn’t visibly Hispanic, Halverson would have been much more concerned about his well-being. She’d take the kid to

the hospital herself, get him checked out. Maybe they could give him something to calm him so she could get more information from him.

After calls to the hospital and social services, Maria headed back into the interview room to somehow convince the child to come with her.

But the room was empty.

“Hey, kiddo?” she called out. “Where’d you go?”

No answer.

Maria tore through the station, forcing Chandler and Halverson to help look. They combed every inch of the place that the child could have had access to.

Nothing.

The child was gone.

“Call dispatch. Put out an APB,” Maria said.

“Let’s look a little more-” Chandler started.

“Just fucking do it,” Maria snapped. “Get off your ass. There’s a scared little boy running around in the dark after something terrible has happened to him. We need to find him. Now.”

Chandler nodded and hurried to go make the call.

Maria stood facing the glass door that looked out into the quiet street, a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. Somehow, she knew they weren’t finding that little boy. She knew that something horrible had happened, and their only chance of figuring out what happened ran out the door with the missing child.

The search was fruitless, as if the little boy had vanished into thin air. And no one cared but Maria, after the fanfare in the department had died down a couple days later and everyone stopped searching.

For the next twenty-five years, she’d dream of that small, terrified boy, golden-brown skin marred with streaks of cracking, dried blood. Big blue eyes staring out of his face, pleading for something that Maria hadn’t been able to give him before he disappeared.

Famous missing children cases always sent a pang directly through Maria’s heart. Little white children, all smiles in their elementary school

photos that the media shared. Their innocence was heart-breaking. The entire country was horrified and desperate to see the children home. Obviously, Maria wanted those children safely home, too. But she couldn't help thinking of her nameless little boy and how she was the only person who remembered him. The only person who cared about who he was and where he'd ended up. The only one who cared whether he was still alive.

She lit a candle every year on the day he'd disappeared without a trace, leaving nothing behind but a wisp of memory and the bloodied clothing in an evidence bag thrown carelessly in a closet.

Twenty-five years later he haunted her dreams just as much as he had the first night, she'd found him.

