

Resilient Feathers

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Summary:

The world always offers you surprises. And a child is one of them.

Notes:

The year is 2043, so Paul Denton is not nanoaugmented yet. The Deus Ex Bible claims he got the augs in 2050.

Chapter 1: Murray Hill

Manhattan offers a show of lights and ear-drilling music as the first leaves of autumn fall, covering the streets in a muddy layer. In one of these seedy bars in East Harlem, occasionally attended by mechanically augmented thugs and women of dubious reputation, a cold forty lays on the table as a gentleman greets the weekend of 2043. His face is visibly tired, with dark eye bags. The one and only Paul Denton sighs as he scratches his forehead with his thumb, seemingly exhausted after a devastating week. He's aware he is doing his best not only as an agent but also as a civilian, yet it's too hard...

It's too hard when your teammate is a hazardous woman who doesn't hesitate to pull the trigger if needed. She's a woman of no remorse and undoubted self-confidence. "Agent Denton, don't forget they are criminals; therefore, they can be considered scum. And scum must be eradicated from the face of the earth," she states with that cocky voice of hers as she elegantly walks like a panther. Even though the UNATCO troopers respect you for your willpower and strategies, you can hear some of the high-ranking soldiers creating rumors about you, followed by catty giggling.

It's too hard when you've recently rented a studio apartment in an old tenement in Murray Hill. The apartment is nothing short of a disgrace, and the landlord is always ranting about noises and visitors. However, no one can ask him to turn the volume down when he's hosting his wild parties every week. Would he put a finger on your little brother? He comes back from Switzerland several times a year to spend holidays and other important festivities with you. You are worried he will rub the young guy's face against the sign on the door, which are the most ridiculous rules ever written on Earth: no kids, no visits, no parties, no BBQs on Sundays, no nothing...? It's the cheapest you could find in an economically tight moment to you, yet you are certain that you will punch the landlord in the face. It's just a matter of time.

And many more problems ahead of you. Life as a man can become miserable sometimes, feeling alone against the world...

It's getting cold and dark, with lights flickering on the streets. His slow footsteps lead him to the subway, timing how long he has to wait for the metro to arrive. He pats his new trench coat, dusting it off - a large, dark gray piece of fine clothing with velvet-like inner fabric, adorned with pockets in its insides. Wallet, a candy bar, the keys... Everything is checked and ready for his trip to Murray Hill.

His return was short and swift. Paul takes in the pungent scent of the streets, stepping on beer cans and cigarette butts, his hands swinging at his sides. The distant sound of NYPD sirens can be heard, surely chasing after a gang, and some kids are engaged in a breakdance competition beneath a large Nuke! soda advertisement. Drugs are also present on the streets. He shakes his head and sighs as reality unfolds before his eyes. He sees an old man mumbling incoherently and laughing after

smoking from a peculiar pipe - he isn't even aware of the rats nibbling on his shoes, reaching his toenails.

Speaking of animals, two mourning doves glide gracefully in the air, flying non-stop. Are they looking for breadcrumbs, perhaps? It doesn't seem that way. Their flight is accelerated, frantic, and they coo loudly as they spot Denton from above, making a U-turn and flying back to where they came from.

-Hmmm...?

Paul tilts his head, confused by such strange animal behavior. He may not be a bird whisperer, but you don't need to be an ornithologist to know that doves don't usually act like that. Or at least that's what he thinks. He shrugs it off, resuming his walk. However, after twelve seconds, he hears a peculiar sound approaching him from behind, like a tiny, rusty 50cc motorcycle, and that doesn't bode well: undoubtedly, a robbery attempt. His gut feeling was right, but it was too late for him to turn back and confront the thief because his wallet had already magically disappeared from his pocket.

-Hey! Come back here, jackass!

He sprints with agility to chase after the culprit. The birds also follow the vehicle, trying to reach its front basket. Despite being blinded by the thick smoke from the exhaust pipe, an UNATCO agent like him won't stop. It's time for Plan B - a small dagger hidden inside his right boot, which he promptly throws at the back wheel of the jalopy. The tire deflates successfully, sending the thief tumbling onto the pavement, rolling on the sidewalk until crashing against a wall.

Denton wastes no time and pounces on the intruder, applying a joint lock to restrain them perfectly. However, a child-like yelp escapes from beneath the helmet in a funny Brooklyn accent:

-Let me go! Agh! It hurts!

This takes him by surprise. He widens his eyes as he removes the helmet from the marauder's head, only to discover that it's actually a small girl. She wouldn't measure more than 4' 7.1", and her fragile body is covered in bruises from the recent incident. Yet, her freckles and green eyes shine like jewels in the wilderness of New York, a fog light of lost innocence in the darkness of the night.

-Let me go! -she protests, clenching her teeth-

-Why would I? -he answers, still restraining her on the pavement-

-Argh! Look, man, I got my reasons, okay?! I need da money!

He swiftly handcuffs her wrists as she continues to protest and groan. Paul looks at the motorcycle, miraculously still running, though it now resembles more of a piece of junk than an actual vehicle.

-You need money to fix your bike?

-Uh... yeah, yeah, not your business, fool! -it's clear she is lying-

-Ah... What a pity, little girl, you shouldn't have messed with a cop.

-Screw you! -she shakes her body in a futile attempt to escape, resembling a worm wriggling on the ground-

-Aren't you a bit too young to be roaming the streets? And where are your parents, huh? -he asks, applying more pressure to restrain her. He is literally sitting on top of the child-

-Go to hell, ya moron!

As she continues to struggle under his weight, the doves fly low and land next to her. Paul notices a hint of concern in their eyes as they coo aggressively at him.

"You better not harm her, dude!"

How curious, a little bandit with such loyal companions. With a soft smile, he gently lifts her up by her shoulders - a task made surprisingly easy due to her unhealthy skinniness.

-What an interesting team you are. You and... -he looks at the birds- ...your friends.

-...

Silence hangs in the air as she frowns and looks down. Her long, blonde hair sways in the cold wind as she weakly responds:

-I need da money, man...

There is something more than just hunger driving her, that much is clear. Delicately, Paul lowers the child to the ground and takes hold of her handcuffed wrists.

-If I tell you I can remove the handcuffs and buy you something to eat... would you run away with... that? -he points at the bike-

-I dunno, I... I need da money, I can't go back like dis!

The brief hush is as sharp as the dagger on the wheel. Paul stares at her, slightly tilting his head. There is indeed more to this situation than meets the eye.

-Do you owe money to someone, by chance?

-None of your business, pal.

-Pal? -he chuckles, leaning closer to the bandit- Say it correctly. Paul. Name's Paul.

-Whatever!

-First, promise me you won't escape. C'mon, I am a cop. Trust me.

-Fuck off.

The small key produces a clanky sound as he unlocks her handcuffs, freeing her wrists. Her green eyes meet his brown gaze with surprise. Perhaps she was expecting to be taken to the nearest police station...

-So...? -Denton asks, taking two steps away from her- You can either stay here with me, or you can run away, taking my wallet with you. -he points at the small fanny pack, placed under her right arm- The choice is yours, little girl. You have five seconds.

What seemed like a mundane question from an adult, has turned into a challenge for the young thief and her avian allies. She can run, yes, as she is agile and fast, but her physical condition is deplorable, giving Paul an advantage. Furthermore, her vehicle is currently out of service. However, if she manages to escape his grasp, she can use the money...

-One...

...the money would save her ass, at least for another night. To seal the debt with her boss. She doesn't want to be...

-Two...

...she can't let this happen again. She touches her left forearm, feeling the fresh wounds of her latest ink artwork. The one that indicates her state and role. Her prices as a woman.

-Three...

The thought of facing them again terrifies her. Going back? Is that really what she wants? What if she's sent to that room again, with the scent of drugs and latex that always made her shudder? Didn't she escape to avoid exactly that, in the first place?

"What are you going to do, girl?"

-Four...

She raises her hands, clutching Paul's wallet, and looks at him with a pleading expression.
-I... I surrender...

The UNATCO agent smiles in satisfaction. The little girl has agreed to stay by his side. He places a comforting hand on her back, sensing her tension. Whatever she's going through, it's clearly not easy. Her emerald eyes are becoming glassy, silently screaming for help. The doves observe the moment with interest, as the two humans walk toward the motorcycle, turning it off and pulling it slowly. She doesn't ask questions - she simply follows him.

-Come here. You hungry? We can get pizza if you want...

Her eyes gleam as Paul escorts her in the streets of Murray Hill. The mourning doves follow them, cooing with anticipation, eager to share in the meal. It seems like Paul has found himself responsible for a whole kindergarten after all...

Chapter 2: Safe shelter

The night's noisy due to the landlord's party on the lower floor, as usual every weekend. Luckily no one heard them getting there, or else the bastard would make a fuss over the intruders. Paul lays on the bed, a warm cup of coffee soothing his stomach as he watches the girl sitting on the floor. The old-fashioned TV plays cartoons in the background. She feasts on a familiar-sized pizza with the doves - the three of them seem to have not eaten anything in weeks. She doesn't talk much now, giving in to her instincts, although she claimed her name is Claire. There was no response, however, when Paul asked about her surname. This was a clear indication to him that she likely never had a family or someone to trust in. He grimaces in both disgust but amazement once Claire munches a portion of the pizza and sticks her tongue out to feed one of the doves.

-What's the deal with your feathered friend?

-Finn got a tummy ache days ago, so I'm makin' sure he won't eat too much .

-Tummy ache...? Are you some kind of veterinarian?

-Hmmm, nah, but Tilly told me dat.

-Oh... Right...

He tries to understand this is a common child behavior, in order to comfort herself in the solitude of New York. It is said animals have more humanity than humans themselves, so no wonder why she hangs out with the doves. Leaning an elbow on the bed, he interwings his hands in curiosity as he speaks.

-How old are you, Claire?

-Hmm... -She wipes her mouth with the palm of her hand and begins counting on her fingers aloud, but she confuses the count several times, needing to restart three times- ...Sixteen?

Sixteen? It can't be possible, being so small and fragile... He lets her eat some more because he doesn't want to turn this friendly conversation into an interrogation.

-Why do you need the money, Claire?

-... -she stops eating, looking at him-

-A debt? Is that so?

Her gaze lowers down. That must be enough to answer.

-I shouldn't speak. He told me not to speak wit' da cops. -she whispers as she hides her face, ashamed-

-Who's him...?

The same Claire who had attempted to appear all brave and tough just minutes ago is now scared and hesitant about revealing what she knows. There is something important she holds inside, and Paul knows he needs to hear it from her. Perhaps it could lead to a new case for UNATCO. But how can he convince a child to confess and share the information? This won't be easy at all.

-Look, I am sorry, okay? You don't have to talk if you don't want to.

-Ya ain't gonna get mad at me, right?

-It's okay! Don't worry about that. But I do worry about your clothes. Wouldn't you want to get a new set of fresh ones?

-I...

The doves coo at her, seemingly encouraging her. Paul observes this strange conversation between the girl and the birds, finding it amusing as minutes pass by. Despite being weird, her way to contact birds is part of her nature, he can't deny that. Her emerald eyes sparkle as she blinks, staring at Denton.

-I guess dere ain't no problem.

A warm shower awaits her. The steam envelops her dwarfish frame as she gets distracted by the bath sponge and scrub. Paul hears her laughter and her ramblings about random nonsense, but at the same time, his heart breaks with the realization that this may be her first experience with a proper cleaning. Unlike his little brother, who is likely resting in his comfortable bed in Switzerland after a good bath and strong meal.

-I hope my clothes are warm enough for you, Claire. -he asks, gently knocking on the bathroom door- Is everything okay?

-Yes, yes!

When she emerges from the bathroom, she is wearing a black "I ♥ NY" sweater and gray Bermuda shorts, surprisingly long enough for her legs, although she could use a belt. Denton chuckles at her ridiculous yet clean appearance...

-Here, let me help you, kid.

...but piercing a new hole on his belt and combing her gold cascade are not enough for Paul to shake off his discomfort. As he examines her scalp, removing her lice, new questions arise in his mind. What about her parents? Does she have siblings? What is her story? What are her origins? So many questions, so many lice. It's surprising that she agreed so readily to stay with him. Other homeless kids would have escaped after a rough encounter. But not her. She seems to be pleading for help. She yawns, rubbing her delicate eyes.

-You tired? The bed is yours.

He tucks her into the bed, with the TV still playing cartoons at a low volume to help her fall asleep. It's a delight for any child. Paul even improvises a nest for the doves with a shoebox and a pillowcase.

"Comfy, comfy, we appreciate it. See, Claire? He seems to be nice, after all..."

Chapter 3: Hell's Kitchen

The sudden flash of light wakes us up, revealing the moonlit balcony. To our surprise, we see slippery Claire extracting ten thousand dollars from Paul's safe-deposit box. She managed to break into it while he was deeply asleep, not even stirring from his snoring. We watch in complete silence, a mix of shock and disappointment filling our hearts. We approach her cautiously, peeking at her hands from time to time, scolding her. She flinches in pain but remains silent, determined not to make any noise. Meanwhile, Paul continues to snore, completely oblivious to what is happening.

“Are you crazy?! It’s been a while since you ate properly! And he offered you clothes! Are you going to pay him like that?”

This kid doesn't want anyone to get caught up in her mess. She believes she caused all of this and must solve it by herself, she said it several times. But will she ever be able to truly be free again? She only needs to go to Hell's Kitchen, just like she always did... No, no, let's not dwell on that. We see her shake her head, trying to push away thoughts of the possible fate that awaits her. If only she hadn't lost that bag last month...

As she gazes at a sleeping Denton for the last time, her lips quiver in a sad smile, a feeble attempt to comfort herself. With a heavy heart, she quietly escapes through the balcony. We follow her, not to join her but to stop her. If only she could pay attention to us now...

“Oh, dear, what made you change your mind?”

2 in the morning. Hell's Kitchen is contradictorily freezing, and Claire's thin ankles tremble with each step she takes. Her bulky fanny pack hides inside the sweater as she steps around the Underworld Tavern, its worn-out red lights casting a crimson hue over her entire body. A deteriorated woman in tattered clothes lies on the sidewalk, her tired eyes fixated on Claire. She speaks slowly, an unusual odor emanating from her mouth.

-Hey kid, what're ya doin' here? Ya da one who works for JoJo? Ya got somethin' for me tonight

We land on a nearby trash bin, observing the scene as Claire remains silent, simply staring at the woman.

-Uh, he ain't in da bar, if ya lookin' for him. I heard ya owe him money...

-Dat's none of your business. -Claire approaches the door to open it-

-And I also heard what ya doin' for Johnny... - the woman continues, snorting and spitting out the remnants of cocaine from her nose- At ya age, I was like ya know? And look at me now, I'm a total success, ya know?

As the insane woman bursts into laughter due to her intoxicated state, heavy footsteps make their presence known behind them. Then, a sarcastic clap. The brokest Brooklyn accent you could ever hear in your entire life sends shivers down in every spine possible. We're sure Claire's guts must be trembling. Oh, poor darling...

-Yeah, yeah, dat's a good one, old hag. But enough chit chat, dere's somethin' I want here.

His rough, calloused hand reaches Claire's ponytail and forcefully drags her toward a nearby building. He pays no heed to her screams and pleas to let her go. The door of the brothel slams shut, denying us entry.

“Damn it! Stay strong, Claire, we will seek help!”

Chapter 4: The whorehouse

After agonizing five minutes of being dragged by Johnny, Claire is finally thrown into a filthy bedroom, the musty and old smell of the mattress assaulting her senses. Johnny looms over her, his massive frame casting an intimidating shadow. His dark clothes don't help at all - he really looks like the mere product of your nightmares.

-It's been weeks wit'out ya. I wanna tink ya were gatherin' da money for JoJo, ya know? -he taunts with a sly smirk-

-Who da hell called me...? -another voice echoes outside the room-

JoJo Fine in person puts in an appearance, his pernicious eyes and inked forehead shining brighter than a toxic amphibian. He ridiculously carries fake mechanical augments, but these look realistic enough to scare a child. Once he steps in the room and spots Claire, he clenches his fists.

-Until ya finally decided to come back, huh. Ya got da money?

She slowly unfastens the fanny pack to take out the bills, but JoJo has no patience, snatching the fanny pack from her in a violent motion.

-Gimme dat.

He swiftly grabs the bills and starts counting one by one. But once he finishes counting, his face darkens, bloodshot eyes narrowing as he stares at Claire. In a fit of rage, he fiercely slaps her across the face.

-10 damn thousand bucks. Dis don't even reach half of da debt. Ya know how to count, by chance? Huh?!

Johnny remains a passive observer, not intervening in the punishment inflicted upon the unlucky girl. He takes a seat on a nearby chair, lighting up a cigarette, relishing the sight and reveling in Claire's yelps of pain. He doesn't flinch at all when her nose starts bleeding and her pale skin slowly turns purple.

-I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'll bring all da money, I swear! -she says between sobs-

-Bitch, ya don't even know how to read, ya expect me to bring more money? Nah, Claire. Time's ovah. I gave ya lots of chances.

The force of his kick sends Claire crashing onto the mattress, her chest aching from the impact. Before JoJo walks to the door, he stares at Johnny.

-It's all yours now. I don't wanna see her no more, she's such a pain in da ass. I ain't gonna lose more of mah stuff, no way.

-It was a pleasure doin' business wit' ya, JoJo.

With slow steps, Johnny approaches Claire, running his fingers through her hair.

-Looks like da filthy kid finally took a shower. Too bad it won't last long. -he smirks- Business has been low wit'out ya, ya know? It's been a while since ya were here for da last time...

-Please, Johnny, no... I had enough wit' JoJo. -she pleads for mercy, as she touches her bruised face

in tears-

-Now, now, it's too late to beg, ya shoulda considered before escapin'. Let's see how much ya remember of dis job.

Claire knows Johnny won't show any mercy as the homeless prostitute and drug runner she is. Just as he is about to unfasten his belt, a deafening sound reverberates from the front door, accompanied by terrified screams from the other girls of the brothel.

-What da...? Ya bettah not have called da police, ya stupid bitch!

Startled by the commotion, Johnny delivers another slap to Claire, leaving her dazed on the mattress. Fear grips her, but the adrenaline coursing through her veins urges her to get up and escape. She manages to crawl towards the door, peeking through a crack to witness a fierce confrontation between the two miscreants and a group of men she has never seen before, but she assumes they are soldiers by their helmets, facemasks and strange retinal augmentations. The sound of screams and gunfire fills the air, causing Claire to yelp and instinctively cover her head with her trembling hands, horrified by the chaos unfolding before her.

In the midst of the pandemonium, both Johnny and JoJo struggle fiercely against the troops, groaning in frustration as their wrists are handcuffed. The chaos provides the perfect moment for Claire to make her escape from the bawdy house. No one would notice her sneaking out amidst the mayhem. As Claire pants heavily, her footsteps carrying her away from Hell's Kitchen and into the desolate surroundings of Midtown, she spots the abandoned church of St. Francis of Assisi. The once sacred place now serves as a haven for junkies and rebellious teenagers, but tonight it stands empty and cold. She steps inside, the scent of solitude and impending decay filling her senses. Taking refuge in one of the screeching pews, she imitates her small friends, taking deep breaths to calm herself down.

-My goodness... -she sighs, gazing up at the ruined stained glasses-

The few remaining artworks, still intact within the destruction, shimmer with the light of the full moon. They unveil stories from thousands of years ago, tales of people who bore the consequences of society and sin in their flesh. Yet, the vibrant colors within the stained glass convey hope and promise of rebirth.

-What was I thinkin' about? Dis man offered me help, and I stole his money, which I lost forever... I'm ungrateful. -the more she thinks aloud, the wetter her green eyes become- I don't know what to do. I need a sign...

Crystal pearls touch her freckled cheeks as she mourns over her negligence, running her fingers through her golden cascade, staring at the stained glass of Francis. The cold breeze embraces her, caressing her left arm, as infinite thoughts about her stupidity invade her. The opportunity of freedom she wasted due to her manipulated soul, to the belief she had to return to the lion's den to settle her pending matter. Did she really think they would let her go after this? How naive she was...

-I need a sign... -she repeats-

The cold breeze intensifies, this time with a soft cooing. Claire widens her eyes and turns her head back, only to spot her buddies, who are quickly flapping towards her. A joyful gasp escapes from her tender lips, reaching them with her hands. Her only friends and companions are there with her, fixing her shattered heart, until a warm hand touches her shoulder.

-You okay?

Paul's voice resonates in her ear as he takes a seat beside her on the pew. He gazes at the little girl with the birds, realizing she is unable to meet his gaze. The guilt she feels for losing his money is palpable. While losing money can be harsh in today's world, Paul understands that it pales in comparison to Claire's well-being.

-How did ya know...? -she asks in a whisper, hugging her doves-

-I am a cop, remember? -Paul smirks and reaches her sweater, touching its label. A small, black square appears in his hands-

She blinks thrice, not understanding what she's seeing.

-Tracking. I knew you were going to run away, Claire, and I don't blame you. You were scared. -Paul reassures her with a gentle voice- I am surprised the troops didn't find you in the brothel.

-Da troops...? Wait, ya sent 'em?

Denton opens his coat, retrieving his ID from an inner pocket. It's a shiny card bearing his photo and the UNATCO logo.

-I am a cop, you know that, but I work for UNATCO. You heard about them?

-I ain't sure...

-It's like a cooler way to be a police. You help people and all, of course, but you fight against stronger foes. -he thinks Claire will understand in that way-

-Are JoJo and Johnny strong foes, den?

-They are, sugar, they are.

Paul smiles as Claire scoots closer to him, sliding up her left sleeve, revealing a map of her past and identity on her skin. Letting him touch her skin and examine her tattoos, Paul witnesses the designs you would usually find in a feminine and romantic woman, yet there is also the infamous crown tattoo with Johnny's name in it. He grimaces with a tight pang on his chest, placing his hand over this inkwork, hiding it from their eyes.

-I swiped ya money 'cause I owe it to JoJo, ya know? And he made me work for Johnny.

-So that's what happened...

-And I'm freakin' worried. If they get caught, they're probably gonna dodge prison real soon.

-What do you mean? -Paul asks as he places an arm around her, embracing her-

-JoJo's got a buddy... A guy who does favors.

-Hmmm. Do you know his name?

-I think it's Leon. Sorry, I don't know much.

-Don't worry, Claire.

Those few words hold significance for Paul. Claire has unknowingly provided a clue to something deeper. Whoever this Leon is, he must possess valuable information. However, that concern will have to wait for another day. For now, Paul smiles, continuing to ruffle her golden hair affectionately.

-You have my word, it all ended. I won't let anyone put a finger on you. I promise, kid.

He wasn't expecting her to snuggle against him, returning her tears in a loud cry. Words aren't necessary - all she needs is a strong hug and the soft cooing of the doves to mitigate her tension. UNATCO is right now handling the situation, escorting the wrongdoers to the interrogation chamber, including the sex workers. But does it matter now? Paul's primary concern is to calm down this young girl who has become so vulnerable and weak in his arms after displaying her pain and suffering. He gently wraps his coat around her, lifting her up with care.

-Let's go home now, Claire. I am going to take care of your wounds.

Chapter 5: A new beginning

An argument and a following punch to the face to his former landlord made Paul move out to another place, fed up with the “no kids, no pets, no nothing” bullshit. It wasn't easy - the housing crisis is no joke - but a trailer park in Alphabet City is much better than living in a whorehouse.

A beautiful nest sits next to the warm electric heater, where its owners are sleeping soundly, emitting sweets coos from time to time. Breakfast is scattered across the bed, as Claire and Paul are yawning and watching the TV, slacking off and enjoying this hideous wintry Sunday. The breaking news on the screen makes her shake her head in silence, because the men who made her life a nightmare got away unpunished. “Not enough evidence”, the Court said. Everything will return to normal to them, even to the other girls she endured freezing nights with.

-You think it's Leon? -Paul asks, opening a small bottle of vitamin pills-

-I bet he is. -Claire takes one of the pills to engulf it with her chocolate milk- I don't really wanna gab about it, Paul.

-Right, right... What do you want to do today?

-Hmm, maybe some readin' practice? Dat program ya mentioned last week seems interestin'.

-The accelerated one? I am glad you are showing enthusiasm on that. You know, my brother is also an enthusiast when it comes to learning.

-Ya brotha...?

It must be a coincidence due to her recovering health, but her cheeks and lips flush with a tender smile.

-Would ya show me dat photo of him again? Please? -her eyes shine as she begs-

-Are you serious? Ah, you are helpless, little one.

After booping her nose playfully, Paul reaches under the bed, retrieving a wooden box where the cherished photos are kept. The specific picture she wants to see shows the Denton brothers during the last holidays, wearing cozy jackets and fluffy earmuffs. A hint of love appears on her freckled face as she admires the young face of the boy, only two years younger than her. Paul rolls his eyes and smirks, amused by this innocent yet sweet crush. It's the first love of a child, far better than the hardships of street life, whether selling drugs or her own body.

-Will he come for Christmas? -she asks-

-He will, as always. And I know he will be pleased to meet you. Trust me! You two would be good friends.

-What was his name, again? -she asks in a whisper, caressing the photo with her fingertips-

-Claire, Claire, Claire, how many times should I answer it until you are satisfied? You already know his name is...

Before Paul can finish his sentence, the telephone rings, interrupting their conversation. He excuses himself and answers the call, occasionally glancing at the mesmerized little girl. It seems to be her lucky day, as he extends the phone to her.

-It's him. Would you like to talk?

Her freckles flee from her face in excitement and she eagerly grabs the handset, jumping off the bed. She pays no attention at all about the mugs, vitamins, and the toast plate on the bed. Her legs tremble in thrill as she wraps her index finger in the cord.

-Hello, hello! Is dis little Denton boy? I'm Claire, small woman of action and future officer! Don't accept imitations!™

Paul raises an eyebrow at her ridiculous introduction, but he knows she can be quite imaginative and creative when she's in a good mood, so he lets her go with it. As he cleans up the mess on the bed, her giggles and high-pitched voice are like music to his ears. He still can't believe that this child was once malnourished and abused. She's a flower that hides a heart of gold and diamonds within her thorns. One of the doves, slowly waking up, catches a glimpse of a tear running down Paul's cheek as he hurries to the sink.

"Our little girl... Look at her, acting like a woman now. I think our job is done here."