

**APOCALYPSE
BABY**

**VIRGINIE
DESPENTES**

TRANSLATED BY SIÂN REYNOLDS





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NOT SO LONG AGO, I WAS STILL THIRTY. ANYTHING could happen. You just had to make the right choice at the right moment. I often changed jobs, my short-term contracts weren't renewed, I had no time to get bored. I didn't complain about my standard of living. I rarely lived alone. The seasons followed one another like packets of sweets: easy to swallow and differently coloured. I don't know quite when it was that life stopped smiling on me.

Today I have the same pay as ten years ago. Back then, I thought I was doing all right. Once I passed thirty, the spring went out of things, the impetus that carried me along seemed to ebb away. And I know that next time I find myself on the job market, I'll be a mature woman, without any qualifications. That's why I'm clinging on for dear life to the work I have now.

This particular morning, I arrive late. Agathe, the young receptionist, taps her watch with her finger and frowns. She's wearing fluorescent yellow tights and pink heart-shaped earrings. Easily ten years younger than me. I ought to take no notice of her impatient little sigh when she thinks I'm taking too long to take my coat off, instead of which I mutter an

indecipherable apology, head straight for the boss's door, and raise my hand to knock on it. From inside his office comes the sound of hoarse screaming. I step back, alarmed. I look at Agathe questioningly, she pulls a face and whispers, 'It's Madame Galtan, she was waiting for you outside, before we opened this morning. Deucené's been getting it in the neck for twenty minutes now. Go in, go in now, it'll calm her down.' I'm tempted to turn on my heel and rush downstairs, without a word of explanation. But I knock at the door, and they hear me.

For once, Deucené doesn't need to glance down at the files strewn across his desk to remember my name.

'Ah, this is Lucie Toledo, you've already met, she was just...'

He doesn't get to the end of the sentence. The client interrupts him with a shout. 'So where were *you*, you stupid cow?'

She gives me two seconds to digest the verbal assault, then carries on, turning up the volume. 'You know how much I pay you not to let her out of your sight? And then she dis-app-ears? In the metro! In the MET-RO, I don't believe it, you managed to lose her in the metro! Then you wait half the day before leaving me a message. The *school* let me know before you did. That seem normal to you? Could it be you think you've been doing your job properly?'

This woman is possessed by the devil. I can't have reacted enough in her view, she loses interest in me, and turns back on Deucené. 'So why was this gormless halfwit the one you had following Valentine? You didn't have anyone brighter on your books?'

The boss looks daunted. Up against the wall, he covers for

me. 'Let me assure you that Lucie is one of our best agents, she's got plenty of experience on the ground and...'

'You think it's *normal* to lose a girl of fifteen, on the journey she does every morning?'

I had met Jacqueline Galtan when we opened the file, ten days or so earlier. Impeccable blonde bob, stiletto heels with red soles, she was a cold woman, well-preserved for her age, very precise with her instructions. I hadn't guessed that as soon as she was crossed, she'd develop Tourette's syndrome. In her anger, lines start to appear on her forehead. The Botox is fighting a losing battle. A drop of white froth appears at the corner of her lips. She's marching round the office now, her bony shoulders shaking with rage.

'So just HOW did you lose her, you bloody idiot, in the METRO???'

The word seems to excite her. Facing her, Deucené cowers in his chair. I feel pleasure watching him shrink back, since he never loses a chance to act the hard man in company. Jacqueline Galtan improvises a monologue, delivered at machine-gun speed: it's directed at my ugly mug, my scruffy clothes, my total inability to do my job, which heaven knows is not very difficult, and the lack of intelligence that marks every damn thing I do. I concentrate on Deucené's bald head, speckled with obscene brown spots. Short and paunchy, the boss isn't very sure of himself, which tends to make him ruthless towards his subordinates. Right now, he's paralysed with panic. I push forward a chair and sit down at the side of his desk.

The client stops to draw breath, and I seize the chance to join in the conversation.

‘It happened so fast... I had no idea Valentine was likely to disappear. You think she’s run away?’

‘Ah, how helpful, now we’re actually talking about it! It’s precisely because I’d like to know the answer that I’m paying you.’

Deucené has spread out a number of photographs and reports on his desk. Jacqueline Galtan picks up a page of a report at random, between two fingers, as if it were a dead insect, glances quickly at it and drops it again. Her nails are impeccable too, bright red polish.

I try to justify myself. ‘You asked me to *follow* Valentine, to report on where she went. Who she met, what she was up to... But I wasn’t at all expecting anything would happen to her. It’s not the same kind of assignment, do you see what I mean?’

Now she bursts into tears. That’s all we needed to put us totally at ease.

‘It’s just so awful, not knowing where she is.’

Deucené, looking apologetic, avoids her eyes, and stammers, ‘We’ll do everything we can to help you find her... But I’m sure the police...’

‘The police! You think the police give a damn? All they’re interested in is getting the media involved. They just have one idea – talk to the press. You really think Valentine needs that sort of publicity? Think that’s a good way to begin her life?’

Deucené turns to me. He’d like me to invent some line of enquiry. But I was the first to be surprised that morning, when I didn’t find her sitting in the café opposite the school. The client is off again.

‘Right, I’ll pay. We’ll do it my way, a special contract. Five thousand euros bonus if you bring her back in two weeks. But the other side of the bargain is, if you *don’t* find her, I’ll make your life a hell on earth. We have connections, and I imagine an agency like yours doesn’t want to have a lot of, let’s say, *unwelcome* inspections. Not to mention the bad publicity.’

As she utters the last words, she raises her eyes to look straight at Deucené, quite slowly, a very elegant movement, like in a black and white film. She must have been practising that gesture all her life. She looks again at the page from the report. The files on the table are all mine. Not just the ones I put together all day and all evening yesterday, but ones they must have gone to fetch themselves from my computer. They can do what they like to someone like me: obviously they’ve been checking to see I’ve brought everything out, and haven’t forgotten or hidden anything. I spent hours selecting the most important documents and sorted them into categories, and they’ve made a total mess of it, of course everything’s out there now: from the bill at the café where I waited to the least interesting photo I took of her, including ones where all you can see is a bit of her arm... It’s their way of telling me that even if I spend twenty-four hours on a dossier making sure it’s cast iron when it’s asked for, I’m deemed incapable of judging what’s important and what isn’t. Why should they be deprived of the pleasure of being sadistic to someone, when I’m right there, available, at the bottom of the food chain? She’s right to call me a halfwit, the old hag. If it makes her feel better. Yes, I’m the halfwit, who gets paid peanuts, and has just been on duty for almost a fortnight trailing a

nymphomaniac teenager, who's hyperactive and coked up to the eyeballs. Just for a change. I've been working almost two years for Reldanch, and that's the only kind of assignment I ever get: snooping on teenagers. I was doing it as efficiently as anyone else, up to the moment Valentine disappeared.

That particular morning, yesterday, I was a few steps behind her, in the corridor of the metro. It wasn't difficult to pass unnoticed in the crowd of commuters, because the kid hardly ever took her eyes off her iPod. As I made for the exit, an older woman, heavily-built, suddenly collapsed in front of me. And my reflex was to stretch out my arms as she fell backwards. Then, instead of just lowering her to the ground and hurrying on, so as not to lose my quarry, I stayed with her for a minute until some other people arrived. I'd been trailing Valentine for most of two weeks. I was sure I'd find her in the café next to this crammer she attended, stuffing her face with muffins and Coca-Cola, like she did every morning, with some of the other kids from the school, but sitting a little back from them, calmly keeping her distance. Except *that* day, Valentine disappeared. It's always possible something has happened to her. Obviously, I wondered whether she'd spotted me and taken advantage of the accident to lose me. But I'd never felt she was suspicious. Still, after long experience of trailing after teenagers, I'm beginning to understand what makes them tick.

Jacqueline Galtan looks down at the photos on the desk. Valentine giving a boy a blowjob, on a park bench, hidden from passers-by by a waist-high shrub. Valentine snorting a line from her exercise book at 8 a.m. Valentine, having done a bunk, jumping on the back of a scooter ridden by a perfect

stranger she'd stopped at a traffic light, late at night... I didn't have a colleague working with me on this job. So because of budgetary constraints, I'd been teamed up with a notorious crack addict, who'd work for any rate at all, as long as he was paid in cash every night. I suppose his dealer had let him down, but anyway he'd never turned up to relieve me, and his voicemail was full, I couldn't reach him. Nobody thought it was a matter of urgency to replace him. You had to be under the kid's window, in case she did a runner, and at the school gates next morning as well. In fact, it was lucky I was actually there when she disappeared. Most of the time, I had no idea what she was up to.

At the beginning of the assignment, I'd used classic tactics: I'd got another kid who helps us out sometimes to offer her an irresistible smartphone for a very good price, so-called 'fallen off a lorry'. Mostly when we're dealing with teenagers, we just tell their parents how to fix their child's mobile. But Valentine didn't have a mobile, and she didn't deign to switch on the one I'd sent her way. That didn't help. I don't often have to track a teenager without a good GPS installed.

The ancestor lines up the photos, looking thoughtful, then swivels her gaze on to me. 'And you wrote these reports, did you?' she says quite affably, as if we'd had plenty of time to digest her tirade. I stammer out a few words, she isn't listening. 'And you took the photos too? Well, you did a good job before you screwed up.' Blowing hot and cold, the way of all manipulative people: first the insult then the compliment, and *I'll* be the judge of the tone of our exchanges, thank you very much. It works too; her recriminations were so unpleasant that the compliment is like a shot of morphine on

an open wound. If I dared, I'd roll over and let her scratch my stomach. She lights a cigarette. Deucené hasn't the courage to tell her it isn't allowed, and his eyes dart around looking for something to offer her as an ashtray.

'I assume you will take *personal* charge of finding her.'

Yippee, brilliant: she's just using me as a punchball. I wait for Deucené to tell me the name of the agent who will take over the case. I've never done missing persons, no experience. But he turns to me.

'You're already familiar with the file.'

The client approves, she's smiling again now. The boss gives me a conspiratorial wink. He looks relieved, pathetic jerk.

An insect crawls along the top pane of the window in the broom cupboard I have to use as an office. It has huge antennae.

I take out my card index. I don't store much on my computer. If I'm shot dead tomorrow and they come and search through my things, and find my notes, they'll probably think I've invented a system of coded language that would make Enigma look like child's play. The truth is that when I try to read it over myself, I wonder what I meant to say. Luckily, I've got a good memory, and I usually end up remembering what I intended to note down, more or less. I have this set of index cards covered with weird signs, sometimes mathematical (as if I know anything about algebra).

Since I've been working here, I've got really fed up at being assigned these teenagers. A kid can't smoke a joint in peace