

Bernard Besson

The Greenland Breach

A Thriller

Translated from French by Julie Rose

LE FRENCH BOOK 

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Praise for The Greenland Breach

“Original and harrowing.”

–*Cosmopolitan*

“This is a remarkable book that is fascinating, frightening, instructive and fun all at once.”

–*Inter-Ligère*

“Suspense is omnipresent from beginning to end. The story navigates between climate change, subsequent natural disasters, corporate rivalries, murder, espionage, mysteries and love. Besson progressively weaves a web that entraps the readers. Each page make you want to turn the following one quicker to find out what happens next.”

–*Culture et Plaisir par la lecture*

1

Sunday

Greenland, the north face of Haffner Bjerg, 6:30 a.m.

Lars Jensen felt the ground tremble beneath the snow. He straightened up and abandoned his position, petrified by what he was seeing to the west, toward Canada. The last phase of global warming had begun just as a big red helicopter had flown past from the east. It doubtless belonged to Terre Noire, the Franco-Danish oil and gas company that was carrying out geological surveys.

From the rocky slopes of Haffner Bjerg, events were taking an unimaginable turn worthy of Dante. With an ominous crack, the Lauge Koch Kyst had begun to tear away from Greenland and slide into Baffin Bay in the North Atlantic Ocean. A monstrous crevasse a mile and a half deep was opening up in the middle of the island continent. The trench ran for miles, as if an invisible ax had just split the ice cap in two.

Terrified, Lars backed away, forgetting what he had come to the top of the world to do. He'd guessed that his presence on the slopes of Haffner Bjerg had something to do with the death of the Arctic. The advance wired from an anonymous account on the island of Jersey was every bit as incredible as the cataclysm under way.

A mist shot through with rainbows rose from the depths of the last ice age. Behind the iridescent wall, thousands of years of packed ice grated across the granite surface and crashed into the sea, stirring up a gigantic tsunami. He pressed his hands to his ears to muffle the howling of Greenland as it began to die.

It took Lars awhile to get a grip. His hands were still shaking as the thunderous impact reached him. It was even more frightening than the ear-splitting sound. Greenland was plunging into Baffin Bay. In a few hours, the coasts of Canada and the United States would be flooded. He fell to his knees like a child, overcome by thoughts that had never before crossed his mind. An abyss was opening inside him, and this was just as frightening as the one in front of him. It wasn't until his fitful breathing slowed and his lungs stopped burning that he was able to get back to the tawdry reality of his own situation.

He lay down again on the hard-packed snow. With his eye glued to the sight of his rifle, he found the trail that the dog sled had taken from the Large Wound of the Wild Dog. That's where the team would emerge, heading for Josephine and the automated science base that sounded the great island's sick heart. The Terre Noire geologists were known for their punctuality, but at two thousand euros an hour he would wait if had to. Say what you like, the end of the world was good business.

Paris, fourteenth arrondissement
18, rue Deparcieux, 11:30 a.m.

John Spencer Larivière put the phone down and shot Victoire a triumphant look. A look she didn't like.

"What's got you?" Victoire asked.

"North Land's offering me a hundred thousand euros for a mission. I've got a meeting tomorrow with Abraham Harper's wife, Geraldine."

"Where?"

"She'll let me know at the last minute."

"What kind of a job?"

"She didn't say."

"She's obviously going to ask you to investigate their European rivals, Terre Noire, Nicolas Lanier's outfit. I don't like it, John. Don't go looking for trouble. Don't forget you're French. Remember where you come from."

"Still, a hundred thousand euros..."

Victoire moved closer. Ever since John had set up their business, he agonized over not being able to measure up. They were in the red. You rarely saw him smile these days. She slipped her hand into his pants and confirmed what she'd already guessed. "That Canadian woman has an effect on you..."

"She does not..."

"Come here, you idiot."

They had met working in the government intelligence agency Hubert de Méricourt directed. Victoire and John wanted to have a baby, which was why they had quit together to start Fermatown, their own strategic and criminal analysis company. As the descendant of Khmer Rouge victims, the daughter of a French diplomat and a Cambodian, Victoire bore a heavy legacy. After a spectacular nervous breakdown and a period of uncompromising psychoanalysis, getting pregnant had become her obsession. She wanted a son who would look like his father, a good-looking hunk, five feet eleven, with irresistible blue eyes and the blond mane of a movie star. John was a real man with simple ideas, a gentle giant who could massage her feet while getting his Asian dialects hopelessly mixed up.

They left the media room and stepped into the library, settling into the welcoming arms of the black sofa. Their clothes soon lay where Fermatown's rare clients sat. John kneaded that supple body yet again and made Victoire's cheeks glow. She opened her eyes wide and encouraged him with her dancer's hips. They grabbed pleasure by the handful as though it were the last time. Or the first.

Abandoning their old wounds and disappointments, they made sweaty love, falling off the sofa and onto the teak floor. Now they were nothing more than two balls of

rage. Watching as though he were outside himself, John pinned her delicate wrists to the floor and prepared his assault. Wildly, he thrust faster and faster, and, when the moment came, he howled like an animal, shooting into this flesh that was torn, as he was, between two continents and two histories.

Out of breath, they slid next to each other. And then, holding hands and looking up at the ceiling, they started bickering again.

“With a hundred thousand euros, we could redo the kitchen and get new cars.”

“A hundred thousand euros and a bullet in the head. Don’t go there, John.”

“I’ll send Luc to Le Havre. That’s where Terre Noire has its lab. I saw something on television. They’ve sent one of their ships to inspect the lava that spewed into the ocean the last time Eyjafjallajökull erupted in Iceland. It wouldn’t hurt to find out more.”

“This is way beyond us. Everything about the North Pole reeks of ashes and disaster.”

“I want to go there.”

“You just want to prove to yourself that you can still stick your neck out and act like an idiot. You’re worried about what your former colleagues think—all those people we wanted to get away from.”

“I’m sick of sitting around reading CVs all day. I didn’t start Fermatown to fact-check biographies and trawl through social networks looking for witnesses.”

“Typical man. Too proud to ask the agency to pay us an hourly rate.”

“You’re starting to annoy me!”

John bounded to his feet and ran upstairs to the bathroom. Victoire was right, and that put him in a foul mood. Ever since Afghanistan he had failed at everything. He couldn’t even get her pregnant. He punched the railing of the staircase to the third floor. He had inherited this rambling four-story duplex and garden from an aunt. The property was situated between the rue Déparcieux and the rue Fermat, just outside the village on the rue Daguerre.

This poisoned chalice of a gift had won Victoire over and tipped the scales in favor of her decision to leave the agency. John’s aunt, Alicia Spencer, had been an eccentric American sculptor who had split her time between Montparnasse in Paris and Princeton, New Jersey. She had filled the lawns of Princeton with her creations, melted down and molded in the kiln that took up a whole room on the first floor. John had barely known her, but his aunt’s presence could be felt on all four floors of this place, which was also Fermatown’s headquarters. Pierre de Fermat, the mathematician who’d given his name to the street, had helped baptize the firm John had started, which offered strategic advice and did criminal investigations. Unfortunately, there were a lot more unfinished sculptures and metal-cutting machines within Fermatown’s walls than there were meaty investigations and consultations paid in full and on time. The old house was anxious for clients the same way a taxpayer yearns for a tax break. Victoire was not going to keep him from grabbing their first real job.

The command bridge of the Bouc-Bel-Air, 6:50 a.m.

Le Guévenec went to the screen and peered at it. It had been one disaster after another since they'd left Le Havre. Surely this one would be the last. Terre Noire's geostationary satellite was filming the events live. The Lauge Koch Kyst ice cap, had broken away from Greenland at 6:31 a.m. It had plunged into the ocean, taking the village of Nugssuaq and its two hundred inhabitants with it. The ice had shattered into dozens of floes, each the size of a Paris *arrondissement*. And all that ice was driving a monstrous wall of water ahead of it.

Filmed from an altitude of twelve thousand feet, the *Bouc-Bel-Air* looked like a toy sitting in a puddle, but the camera picked up every detail. The two cages holding the bears saved from global warming were perfectly visible, as were the lifeboats and the yellow submersible attached to the rear deck.

The giant wave moved at a terrifyingly speed. White spots in front of it caught the captain's eye. "What's that?"

"Icebergs, Captain."

"That big?"

"Yes..."

Despite its powerful engines, the *Bouc-Bel-Air* could not escape the disaster. The shock wave was moving faster than the ship and would inevitably catch up to it. "How long before impact?" Le Guévenec asked in a controlled voice.

"Five minutes. Maybe six," the first mate replied.

He didn't have a lot of time to decide how they would die. The barometer, which had been stuck on good weather for hours, annoyed him, but he didn't let it show. Every shipwreck hides something incongruous, some overlooked detail nobody cares about.

Le Guévenec stroked his cheeks and thought about Isabelle. It didn't surprise him that he didn't feel anything. He was going die as he had lived. Stupidly and without hate. Was he capable of feeling anything real? Even death didn't move him. What would he feel in the face of that horror? Was there anything more terrible than this indifference to everyone and everything? Le Guévenec didn't like himself much, and he wouldn't be sorry to go. Professional honesty and a seafarer's exactness were his only reasons for deliberating. He made his decision.

"Port side, all the way!"

The captain of the *Bouc-Bel-Air* would face the wave head-on. The ship meant for scientific research groaned from top to bottom and in less than three minutes managed to point its bow at its destiny. Le Guévenec brought his binoculars to his eyes and stared death in the face. The mates around him were silent. Each sailor, pupils dilated and lips

dry with fear, had his eyes fixed on the horizon. “It” finally appeared. Right in front of them.

“My God...”

An ocean above the ocean was hurtling toward them. Sharp crests like the peaks of the Alps shook convulsively between roiling crevasses. The mass was driving mountains of ice. The monstrous icebergs created by the cataclysm crashed against each other ahead of the massive wall of water.

The men on the bridge copied the captain and attached their safety belts to the metal rails. An immense, white pyramid, jagged with deadly edges, sailed past a few yards away on the port side before disappearing.

Day turned to night. The wail of the wounded ocean filled the crew with horror. The ship plunged bow-first into the valley of water that separated it from hell and kept going down. Then it steadied and straightened with an ominous sluggishness. Straight ahead, less than five hundred yards away, the enormous steamroller came barreling toward them.

Terror set their bodies on fire and disfigured their faces. The huge thing filled the world. It seemed to pick up speed. The water blew the windows and doors out and tore up everything that wasn't welded to the deck. Le Guévenec stopped thinking and felt himself swept away, with the boat attached to his belt, in a gigantic whirlpool of icy black mud. The descent into the underworld took a long time. The roiling water shook his body and made his limbs useless. He was nothing more than a dislocated thing at the bottom of an ice-cold vat.

Death tasted of salt. Standard for a seaman. But it wasn't exactly what he had imagined. Why all the dull, metallic sounds? Le Guévenec felt something move beneath him and found himself lying on the bridge of the *Bouc-Bel-Air*, chucking his guts up like a tuna on the deck of a trawler. The sea was full of debris and flowed around him like lava. He dragged himself toward the bulkhead, his hands gripping the safety rails, and managed to pull himself up.

The vessel had survived, but it was a mere shadow of its former self. The barometer, still indicating good weather, was the only thing that seemed to be intact. The darkness suddenly lifted, and a blinding light lit up the heap of ruins. Le Guévenec could see the first mate's bare feet sticking out from under a gangway. The door was gone. The officer was no longer moving. Le Guévenec shook one of his legs and then examined himself. He was all there. The *Bouc-Bel-Air* was pitching on a calm sea. He snapped open the ring that held him to the rail and crawled toward the bare feet.

The first mate's head had hit the side of the gangway. Blood was running from his half-open mouth. No hope. Le Guévenec got up and started taking his clothes off. There was no one else on the bridge. The others had been swept away. His survival depended on finding dry clothes in the cabinet above his bed, and fast. He went downstairs to the lower deck. Dread took over when, half-naked, he opened the door to his cabin.

Still in shock, he didn't immediately comprehend the drama that rushed at him. The boatswain was there, holding his severed forearm, oozing blood. Le Guévenec recognized the watch, which he had seen on the Spaniard's arm when he'd caught him in the hold some time back trying to hide a box.

The boatswain, whose hair had suddenly gone white, stared at him like no one had ever stared at him before. His inhuman cry matched that of the polar bear, which had gotten out of its cage. Le Guévenec saw a big red stain spreading on the bear's fur. He grabbed the mutilated man, pulled him into the cabin, and locked the door.

He seized a cloth and handed it to the victim. Blood was spurting fitfully from the open fracture at his elbow. The pale white bone stuck out like a leek from the torn flesh. It took some cajoling to persuade the boatswain to let go of his detached forearm and put it on the sink.

Le Guévenec removed his belt and tried to tie a tourniquet around the severed arm. But then, in the bathroom mirror, he saw the wounded man's back, and he almost vomited. The bear had literally boned the poor bastard, whose pink lungs looked like delicate sponges, still breathing on either side of his exposed spine. He saw them suddenly slow, then stop. Le Guévenec passed his hand over the dying man's forehead, the same man who had betrayed his trust. "Everything's going to be all right."

He laid his body on the floor of the cabin and closed his eyes, then picked up his cell phone. After several seconds, he reached Terre Noire's headquarters on the Champs-Élysée and spoke with the president's personal secretary. "This is Le Guévenec, the captain of the *Bouc-Bel-Air*."

"You're still alive?"

"Tell Monsieur Lanier we're in distress."

"We're sending you help from Nuuk. Who's screaming like that?"

"A bear."

"How are Romain Brissac and the other scientists?"

"I'm going down now. There might be other survivors."

"What about the ice cores?"

"I'll worry about them later."

Le Guévenec hung up and dumped his wet rags before putting on his ceremonial uniform, the only dry clothes he could find in the waterproof cabinet. He slipped an oilskin over his fisherman's jersey, then wiped his feet and put on new boots. He cocked an ear before opening the door a crack, his heart beating fast. The bear had disappeared, leaving behind a bloody trail diluted by sea water. He followed the tracks all the way to the command bridge. Blood had dripped over the helm and the navigational instruments, but the barometer was still stuck on good weather. The predator had taken one of the external staircases and gone back to other bear. Le Guévenec saw them a few yards below him, going round and round on the bow. He looked up and saw a launch that had been cut in two by the tidal wave and rammed into a transmission mast on the poop deck.

He gripped the hull and, with what little strength he had left in his arms, made a temporary barricade to keep the bears from climbing back up.

Next, he crawled to the stairs that led to the wardroom of the scientific mission that the *Bouc-Bel-Air* was to take back to France after its Greenland expedition. How many men had survived the tipping of the boat?

After an interminable descent into the icy depths, he managed to force open the door to the dining room. A flickering emergency lamp lit the room. Everything was in disarray. A man with a bandage on his forehead looked at him as though he were from another planet. Le Guévenec recognized him as the mission biologist, who doubled as a doctor. Unable to speak, the scientist pointed to the bodies of two men lying face-down on the floor. The large pool of blood and seawater left no doubt as to their condition.

“What about Brissac?” asked Le Guévenec.

The biologist turned his head toward a scientist who lay in one of the metal chairs around the large table. Romain Brissac was staring at the two dead men. Le Guévenec went over to him. The Nobel Prize-winning chemist sensed his presence and looked up. “How did you do it?”

Le Guévenec didn’t understand the question, but he saw the blood running over the director of the scientific mission’s hand, which he held close to his chest.

“You’re hurt.”

“It’s nothing. Take me to the samples.”

Brissac’s mettle was as strong as the *Bouc-Bel-Air*’s tempered steel. He refused the captain’s help and limped toward the gangway. Le Guévenec followed. The ice cores the ship was taking to France were the most precious cargo carried on the high seas since the invention of sailing. The two men went into the wrecked belly of the *Bouc-Bel-Air*. The refrigerated hold containing the samples was locked behind an armored door capable of resisting a rocket attack.

Brissac and Le Guévenec were the only ones who had the code needed to open the room, and each had half of the code. Terre Noire didn’t put all its eggs in one basket. The stakes in terms of potential energy were a million times higher than all the nuclear arms on planet. Brissac and Le Guévenec entered their halves of the code. After a few troubled seconds, the door opened, and they anxiously stepped inside.

The flooding and the break in the main electrical circuit had set off the automated lighting system in the refrigerated hold. The blinding light contrasted starkly with the darkness the rest of the *Bouc-Bel-Air* had been plunged into. Exhaling clouds of condensation, the two survivors advanced and found dozens of cylinders securely clamped to the walls. They leaned over the cylinders of ice, each a good ten inches in diameter. Recovered seven thousand seven hundred and nine to seven thousand seven hundred and nineteen feet below the surface of Greenland’s ice sheet in the region of Avannaq, the samples contained the archives of the world’s climate for the last hundred

and fifty thousand years. Glaciologists had never before been able to go back further than a hundred and twenty-three thousand years.

“They’re intact.”

Le Guévenec turned to Brissac. The scientist was mesmerized by the find they’d brought out of Greenland’s depths. Right there in front of them, the collected ice held the secrets of the Eemian period, the holy grail of glaciologists and climatologists. Beginning a hundred and thirty-one thousand years ago, the Eemian period was characterized by a sudden warming of the planet that lasted fifteen thousand years. Hippopotamuses frolicked in the Rhine River valley. The water level was eighteen feet higher. Whole regions like the Paris Basin, the south of England and Denmark were submerged. And then, suddenly, the Earth had reverted to ice before warming up again eight thousand years before Christ.

“You don’t look so good.”

Through the fog of his own breath, Le Guévenec could see the bluish tinge on the face and the dark circles under the eyes of the world’s most famous and most controversial climatologist. Heart attack. Luckily, the *Bouc* was equipped with defibrillators.

“Where in God’s name are they?”

Paris, Montparnasse, The Indiana Club, 12:30 p.m.

The patrons turned their heads toward the couple who had just walked through the door. Victoire was sporting a short tartan kilt and a pink shirt she’d bought at the Silk Road, a fashionable shop on the rue Daguerre. Her dark eyes, laughing and intelligent, didn’t know how to sulk. John, who was wearing white pants and had a navy blue sweater draped over his shoulders, followed in her wake, displacing a mass of air in proportion to his bulk. The pair were stunning and always aroused curiosity. Even fondness. Every Sunday at the same time, the founding members of Fermatown would come to the Indiana Club to play pool. Luc, the third partner, dressed in black, was sitting under a green light at the last table. Standing at his side, a sculpted young Adonis in tight jeans and a mauve polo was staring intently at the colored balls.

The son of a technology whiz from Lyon, Luc had followed in his father’s footsteps. After his father’s business went bust and he’d died a tragic death, Luc had allowed Hubert de Méricourt to scoop him up. But Luc was uncomfortable in the official intelligence milieu because of his bisexuality and unconventional ideas. He asked for clearance to go somewhere else, where he could think and work outside the box.

Méricourt gave permission, and because he admired him, he put Little Luc, as he was called despite his six-foot-two height, in touch with a celebrity in the field—John. Luc and John met at the Invalides, in the ground-floor office that was the lair of the head of France’s shadow diplomacy.

“Little Luc,” Méricourt had said, “let me introduce you to John Spencer Larivière, who’s just come back from Afghanistan. He’s like you. He wants a bit of fresh air. Team up with him. You won’t regret it.”

A little surprised, John didn’t waste any time trying to figure out exactly what Méricourt’s interest in this professional marriage might be. Luc flourished in John and Victoire’s company, demonstrating outstanding talents.

Concentrating on his shot, Luc had stopped breathing. His cue slid between his fingers. The ball rolled straight toward one of the sides before changing direction and hitting another ball the same color, immediately propelling it into a corner hole.

“Bravo.”

“Not bad, huh?”

Luc tossed a lock of black hair out of his dark eyes and looked up at the two other members of Fermatown.

“I’ve got something to tell you,” John whispered.

“Don’t worry, he’s German. He doesn’t understand a word of English.”

“Where’d you find him?”

“In Berlin, at a hackers’ conference. He’s a totally harmless geek. Eh, Hermann, you’re harmless, aren’t you?”

The young German cracked an approving smile. There was no ambiguity about the fascination the visitor from across the Rhine felt for the tall, dark young man who was teaching him how to play pool. And a few other things. Victoire didn’t let any of her annoyance at the unexpected presence of the stranger show, but she led Luc to the other side of the table so the guy couldn’t overhear her whispering. Luc leaned in close.

“We’ve been sought out by Geraldine Harper, the head of North Land, Terre Noire’s rival oil and gas prospectors. We came to talk to you about it. We don’t know what she wants yet, but she’s ready to put a lot of money on the table.”

Luc raised an eyebrow and smiled. He moved farther away from the German and set up his shot. Fermatown ran like clockwork, but because of the financial crisis, clients were thin. Luc didn’t want to return to the boulevard de la Tour Maubourg and ask Méricourt for his old job back. “I know why Geraldine Harper called John,” he said.

“Why’s that?”

John and Victoire stared at their colleague in disbelief. Luc chalked his cue and raised it over the green baize. He aimed it at a corner of the large room and shouted to the bartender, “Sound, maestro!”

All three of them looked at the Indiana Club’s plasma screen, where images of the latest global catastrophe were being relayed over and over again. There was footage of a ship drifting in a field of ice. The East Coast of the United States and Canada was holding its breath, waiting for the wave to hit. No one had prepared for this, unlike the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull or the fires in Russia. Panic was spreading from one city to the next all along the Atlantic seaboard. Luc let John and Victoire immerse themselves in the

situation and then added his own commentary. “It happened this morning, while you were so busy...”

Victoire lowered her eyes. Luc made her laugh, but sometimes he disconcerted her. He was like her, blended, double-edged, more or less fitting in. His expression turned serious.

“The ship’s red and black. Those are Terre Noire’s colors. It’s called the *Bouc-Bel-Air*, and it’s probably going to sink. CNN reckons it was heading back to Greenland after prospecting in the Barents Sea. It seems that one of the people onboard is Roman Brissac, who won the Nobel for chemistry and has some hard-hitting ideas about global warming.” Luc took a breath and cut to the chase a little smugly, “I guess North Land would give anything to know what the *Bouc-Bel-Air* is carrying. That’s what she’s going to ask you.”

“Little Luc, you’re a genius!”

“How much is she offering?” Luc asked.

“A hundred thousand euros,” John replied.

“You can ask for double that. The world’s falling apart, and whatever the *Bouc-Bel-Air* has in its hold must be priceless.”

“Victoire won’t hear of it. She thinks it’s a lousy deal. Terre Noire is a Franco-Danish company. She doesn’t want us working for its rivals, the Canadians.”

Luc studied Victoire. That sweet smile was like the surface of a lake, one whose depths he rarely saw. Despite the confidence she inspired in him, he still hadn’t managed to figure her out.

“We didn’t leave the agency to live off our government pensions.”

Victoire shrugged her shoulders.

“Let’s go and get some air.”

Luc took leave of his German and joined the others outside on the rue Froidevaux. They turned into the rue Fermat. They walked past No. 9, one of the two entrances to Fermatown, and found themselves back in the village. On Sundays and holidays it was closed to cars from one end to the other. Passing La Bélière, the restaurant where Luc played piano on Wednesday nights, they waved to Colette and Krisna, who were posting the daily specials on the sidewalk. At the corner of the rue Gassendi, John looked up hopefully at the building that housed the studios of Jean-Luc Miesch, the director of *Streamfield*, who’d promised him a role. In her final years in Montparnasse, Alicia Spencer had redesigned the studio facade in a fanciful style that reminded him of the *Sagrada Familia* in Barcelona.

Flanked by Luc and Victoire, John walked in the middle of the road, freed of cars but cluttered with Velibs, Paris’s popular rent-a-bikes. Geraldine Harper’s industrial espionage mission for North Land and the hundred thousand euro advance rendered them speechless, puzzled, and suspicious. At the rue Boulard, John was the first to break the silence. “She didn’t exactly say it’d be espionage...”

“Like that’s the kind of thing you spell out on the phone,” Victoire shot back, laughing.

“I’m going to buy some cheese, and then we’ll go home. We’ve got work to do. We’ll have lunch another time.”

They stopped in front of the *fromager*. John had saved the cow above the sign one night, when some kids had set upon the beast. They were planning to put it in their truck and sell it to a collector. In three punches, Commander John Spencer Larivière, fresh from the hills of Afghanistan, had KO’d the three hoods before allowing himself to be arrested by the local cops. Ever since this valiant exploit, the members of Fermatown were served first in the shops of the Daguerre.

“And what would the lady and gentlemen like today?”

“Three small Chavignols.”

“I’ll put a little bottle of Chardonnay in with that, like the other day. On me.”

“Thank you,” John replied, avoiding Victoire’s gaze.

Believe it or not, John had discovered Chardonnay in the American army canteens in the middle of Taliban country. He’d brought the habit back to Fermatown, much to Victoire’s dismay. Her taste in wine was a tad more sophisticated.

Avannaa, the north face of Haffner Bjerg, 8:50 a.m.

Lars Jensen stopped to contemplate the wall of mist rising from Greenland’s ripped insides. Looking through the scope of his rifle, he drew a bead on the strange green pyramid six hundred feet below that was supposed to lure the target. Since he had arrived, no one had come out of what looked like the entrance to a sort of man-made cave on the brink of the Large Wound of the Wild Dog. The structure brought to mind some sort of catheter sticking out of the sick icecap.

Large pools of water resembling man-made ponds stretched north from the foot of Haffner Bjerg. Dark moldy-looking splotches clung to the edges of the lakes. Neither the wind nor the cold could chase away the smell of putrefaction coming off these fermenting cesspools. Lars had had plenty of time to observe the phenomenon, protecting his nostrils with a mask he’d picked up during the last outbreak of bird flu.

The dark-green blotches were seething with tiny, nearly imperceptible bubbles. Greenland was rotting before his eyes. His cell phone rang and flashed the number they’d agreed on. Lars adjusted the angle of his scope to see the trail. A few minutes later, a dog sled appeared in his line of fire. He took a deep breath, wedged the butt of his rifle against his shoulder and waited a few seconds. The driver raised his hand above the team of dogs and signaled for them to slow down.

Lars gently pressed the trigger with the index finger of his right hand. The shot left the barrel with a dull sound, and he felt the recoil against his shoulder. He took another breath. The Inuit had rolled backward. With one leg strapped on, the poor man was being dragged behind the sled like a dislocated puppet.

Lars aimed at the passenger stretched out in his anorak. The second victim was still unaware of the drama unfolding. The second shot had a less spectacular effect. The man's head just rolled to the side. The third bullet followed immediately, more for form's sake than real necessity. Lars knew the first two hits were final.

The dogs surged ahead, then stopped outside the entrance to the pyramid. The barking stopped and was soon replaced by heart-rending howling that rose all the way to Haffner Bjerg despite the gusting wind. Lars aimed at the leader of the pack, a magnificent animal, and fired. As it crumpled to the ground, he fired ten more times.

After a three hundred and sixty-degree survey, he fired up the snowmobile and left his shooting point. His employers were very specific about the next step in the plan. Straddling his vehicle, he raced down the slope and was at the scene in less than a minute. He approached the passenger he'd just shot, lifted his hood and removed his sunglasses with gloved hands. He took a photo of his victim and sent it to the email address they'd given him. He did the same with the Inuit.

In terms of cryptography and data protection, his client was at the top of his game. Nothing to fear on that front. What worried him was the completely unexpected nature of the circumstances, which no one had given him the lowdown on. He looked toward the west, still stunned by what he'd seen. Columns of water and mist rose to an unimaginable height, blocking the horizon like an enormous wall. The men he'd just killed knew the reasons behind these natural events. Lars would have liked to know, too.

His dead victims, who hadn't expected anything, looked tranquil. The eyes of the passenger were a transparent blue, nearly colorless. They were fixed on the sky. A frozen red stain branded his forehead, a forehead that looked intelligent. Too intelligent, no doubt. Lars envied them for leaving the planet before he did, and he told himself that he'd done a good deed.

Paris, 18 rue Deparcieux, 1:30 p.m.

John, Luc, and Victoire walked back to Fermatown via the rue Deparcieux, parallel to the rue Fermat. Surrounded by a garden visible from the sidewalk, the huge house usually cost a fortune to heat. But winter hadn't arrived this year. Global warming had saved Fermatown's finances.

The sun had set the neighborhood ablaze. Spring would be a scorcher. John told himself there had to be a way to accept Harper's offer. There was no point resorting to espionage to find out what Terre Noire was hiding. Ninety percent of all corporate information was freely available to the public. Especially in France. All you had to do was ask the right people the right questions and search the appropriate databases. As was his habit, John quickly glanced up and down the street before putting his key in the lock. He asked Luc close the door behind them and bent down to pick up Caresse, the Persian house cat, "Come here, gorgeous."

They took the spiral staircase up to the second floor. When they reached the big room, Victoire asked the touch screen wall to light up and display the news channels. Hubert de Méricourt had requested that Fermatown to test this latest technology before installing it in the agency's offices at the Invalides. The prototype was nine feet high and six feet wide. The wall responded to fingerprint and voice command. It could show television channels, web sites, newspapers and documents from databases and had a host of apps.

Forgetting the cheese and wine, they stood glued to the screen. After inundating Baffin Island and the Labrador coast, the Greenland tsunami was heading for the mouth of the St. Lawrence River. Boston and New York were filled with scenes of panic. The most predictable of catastrophes was taking the world by surprise. Several Canadian ports had been submerged by a wave more than twelve feet high. The number of victims was still unknown, but a Quebec channel was already talking about dozens of deaths and extensive damage. Photos of two faces kept popping up on the news channels: the climatologist and Nobel Prize winner Romain Brissac, and Loïc Le Guévenec, captain of the *Bouc-Bel-Air*.

"Shall we?" Luc asked.

"Go ahead."

Of the three of them, young Luc was the trailblazer, clearing their way by looking at problems from unexpected angles. More than a few times, John and Victoire had been impressed by Luc's unusual approach to situations that the cautious administrators at the Invalides would never have thought of. In general, the administrators hated creativity. With a flick of his hand, Luc erased all the TV screens.

He brought up a mauve background. Like a croupier at a blackjack table, he fanned out the photos of Loïc Le Géuevenec and his ship, taken both before and after the catastrophe.

"Let's start with the captain. If we stick to the facts, we have a man who must know a hell of a lot about what's behind the disaster and the secrets of the North Pole. These are two subjects that would interest Mrs. Harper, since her husband runs North Land, the rival large oil exploration company."

"Looks like a real fun guy, the captain."

Victoire approached one of the photos that Luc had just posted and pulled up some more pictures. The touch screen wall brought up several shots taken from public and private databases in the merchant navy.

“He’s not very talkative, but he looks honest. If I had a dangerous and confidential mission, I’d give it to this Breton,” Victoire said, studying Le Guévenec’s face.

“You’ve always had a thing for sailors,” John quipped.

“French marines pulled my parents out of the South China Sea. Le Guévenec looks to me as steadfast as a stone monument in a storm.”

“We need to find out what he knows. This guy’s the key,” said Luc.

“If he’s still alive,” John replied.

Luc asked the wall for the latest images of the *Bouc-Bel-Air* and opened a window dedicated to news flashes. It quickly became apparent that the ship was listing but hadn’t sunk. Luc selected a bright color from the bottom of the screen and moved a red arrow to another part of the screen where he opened a site dedicated to Terre Noire. North Land’s French rival often made the news in relation to Earth sciences. He brought up satellite photos of Le Havre and asked for a display of the group’s profile, based on annual shareholder reports. The role played by the captain and his ship quickly became clear. Le Guévenec was employed by the maritime branch of Terre Noire, whose headquarters were on the Champs-Élysées. Luc displayed the phone numbers and picked up one of the disposable cell phones that Fermatown kept in reserve for tricky operations.

“I’m calling Terre Noire.”

“You’re crazy!” Victoire cried.

“If we want to know what the *Bouc-Bel-Air*’s got in its bowels, we might as well ask the captain. Then we won’t be going around in circles. John can take the recording and see if Harper’s interested in the conversation. We’re not going to spy on the guy. We’re just going to talk to him... Comfort him.”

John shook his head, but ever the good manager, he stood back. Luc amused and interested him. Victoire looked dubious.

“Let him be,” he told her.

Luc switched to speaker phone and waited for someone to pick up. First he got a recorded message: “You’ve reached the offices of Terre Noire. A member of our staff will answer your call momentarily.”

Luc waited to get a human being on the line and when he did, was both courteous and authoritative.

“Hello, could you please transfer me to your crisis team?”

“What are you talking about?” sputtered the woman on duty. “It’s Sunday.

“I understand,” Luc responded. “My call is urgent. Please put me through.”

“Just a moment, I’ll connect you to someone.”

John and Victoire sighed in relief, and Luc motioned to them to be ready to take notes and pull up information on the screen.

“This is Isabelle Després. Who’s calling please?”

“This is Marc Racine. It’s about the events in Greenland.”

“Call back later. We’re not giving out any information just now.”

“I don’t want to ask you anything. I’m calling with urgent information for Captain Le Guévenec.”

The person on the other end of the line hesitated.

“What kind of information?” she asked in a shrill voice.

“Medical. His health depends on it. I’m his doctor, and I’ve just seen my patient’s condition on television.”

“Hold the line.”

The trio heard whispering brought on by Luc’s request. Terre Noire’s headquarters seemed to be in a shambles.

“What kind of medical information?”

“I’m his attending physician, and I’m bound by professional confidentiality. I’ve got a plane to catch in half an hour. Give me a number quickly where I can reach Captain Le Guévenec. He’s in danger of dying.”

The three people at Fermatown were crowding around the phone in feverish anticipation. On the other side of the Seine, on the Champs-Élysées, another team, caught off guard, was attempting to make a decision in a hurry. In a few minutes someone responded by giving the cell phone number of the *Bouc-Bel-Air*’s skipper. Luc thanked him and started to breathe again.

He entered the number on the wall with his index finger and made the call by pressing the last number twice. Then he pulled a webcam up, just in case Le Guévenec appeared.

“If he shows, *you’re* the one who’ll have to play doctor,” Luc told John. “I’m too young, I’ve got no credibility.”

John accepted the challenge and stepped up to the virtual window. Victoire plastered her hands against her cheeks and listened to it ring. She couldn’t believe what was transpiring. Those two were going to drive her nuts. How could a soldier like John let this kid lead him by the nose?

A face the color of cement appeared in the middle of the touch screen. The captain of the *Bouc-Bel-Air* seemed out of breath. John planted himself squarely in front of him.

“Who are you?” asked Le Guévenec.

“Marc Racine. I’m a doctor. Headquarters has permitted me to call you to offer remote medical and emotional monitoring. How are you feeling?”

“Bad, exhausted.”

“What do you need?”

“To get back in touch with Nicolas Lanier as soon as possible. I have some extremely serious things to tell our president. It’s unbelievable. Nobody can be bothered to get him for me!”

“We’ll take care of it. What else can I do?” asked John.

Caught off guard, Loïc Le Guévenec stared at the man speaking to him.

“Reassure my wife, Isabelle. I still haven’t had time to warn her. If *I* tell her everything’s OK she won’t believe me. But if *you* tell her...”

“Could you give me her number?”

John chose another color and wrote the number the captain gave him on the wall.

“Be careful. Her nerves are more fragile than mine.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll send someone to see her immediately.”

“Thank you. Call me back later, I’m very busy.”

The image of the captain vanished, along with his voice. The three members of Fermatown moved away from the wall, amazed by what they had accomplished. In less than ten minutes, they had gotten to the heart of the matter.

“Now what?” asked Victoire.

“Luc will call Isabelle Le Guévenec and try to find out what’s eating her husband. If we can satisfy Geraldine Harper’s curiosity, we collect the jackpot!” declared John.

“Drop it. You’re acting like kids. You’re nuts. This whole thing has smelled fishy from the beginning!” Victoire said, aggravated by the two men.

She felt like she was on the edge of an abyss, with two idiots in tow, about to leap into a trap set by either a jealous rival or a foreign secret service.

“Why would North Land suddenly take an interest in us? We’re nothing on the geostrategic chessboard.”

“That’s precisely why: We won’t arouse suspicion.”

John had his stubborn look on. The one he wore trudging up and down the hills of Afghanistan, she imagined.

Avannaa, the north face of Haffner Bjerg, 9:50 a.m.

When his phone vibrated after he’d sent the pictures of the two dead men, Lars knew his instincts were right. The mission wasn’t over yet. Something told him it was as rotten as the icecap’s breath. The cataclysm had definitely changed the deal. His contact was bestowing another two hundred thousand euros on him for an extra job he already regretted accepting. Who said he was just a killing machine?

After making sure the money had been transferred to his account in the Channel Islands, he started the snowmobile and reluctantly sped downhill. The unbearable smell

forced him to put a wool balaclava over his mask. He pulled up to the pyramid, which was made of plastic and reinforced with steel plates. An opening on one side served as the entrance to a tunnel that plunged into the depths of the icecap. He took a few steps into the milky light coming from the transparent walls. The tunnel was big enough for a large snowplow. He placed a hand on the wall of ice and continued inside. The sloping floor led to a bend. The light along the archway was green. He quickly saw why. Translucent algae was growing on the ice, clinging to the curved walls here and there. But most of it lay dead on the ground. The sight of all these dying plants made his skin crawl.

He kept going, past tall racks of long plastic tubes that contained ice. There were hundreds of tubes. Terre Noire was taking samples from the deepest part of the ice sheet to remove any doubt about the coolings and warmings of the planet and the consequences. After passing the tubes, he found himself in front of a transparent cupboard six feet tall and twenty inches deep. Computer screens blinked behind fogged glass.

Electrical cords in all colors ran out of the cupboard, connecting it to both the floor and the roof. Measuring instruments that looked like seismographs sat cheek to jowl with tape recorders and supercomputers. All of this hardware was surely hooked up to Terre Noire's land and sea laboratories, which sounded Greenland's innards around the clock. On the seismograph, he found the exact time and path of the cataclysm. The graph paper wasn't even big enough to register the violence of the shock. A few yards from the cupboard, a kind of turbine hummed softly, surely there to power the whole system. The tunnel continued farther into the guts of the continent.

He found the box where they'd said it would be and gently lifted the tarpaulin. The machine was in its slipcover, next to maintenance tools. Teams came here to read the instruments and hack away at the archway, which regularly buckled and warped. The tunnel was subject to immense pressure, judging by the outgrowths that poked like fingers up from the ground and down from the roof. Some had been sawn off. The walls exuded a sticky liquid like bleached blood. On either side, a thin trickle of water ran downward to the icecap's wounded guts. He was walking inside a cadaver whose lymphatic fluid was draining into a monstrous invisible orifice.

Although the hardest bit remained to be done, Lars was relieved to get out of the tunnel. He went to the snowmobile and unfolded a clear plastic jumpsuit that he put on over his clothes. Then he pulled the chainsaw out of its cover. The motor started without a hitch. The two men and the eleven dogs spurted geysers of blood and flesh as he cut them up. The snow all around the sled turned scarlet. Lars remembered a wild chant he had sung on the beaches of Jutland. He started singing the first verse to loosen up a bit.

The cutting up of the two men and the team of dogs took an hour. There was no one on the horizon. Once the work was done, Lars checked his cell phone to see if the information on his snowmobile's biometric radar was right. Throughout the operation,

the system hadn't recorded any source of heat within a five-mile radius. No witness, utter solitude. After he burned the plastic jumpsuit and tossed the saw in the flames, he started the snowmobile again and left the doomed slopes of Haffner Bjerg. Another mission was waiting for him in Nuuk.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bernard Besson, who was born in Lyon, France, in 1949, is a former top-level chief of staff of the French intelligence services, an eminent specialist in economic intelligence and Honorary General Controller of the French National Police. He was involved in dismantling Soviet spy rings in France and Western Europe when the USSR fell and has real inside knowledge from his work auditing intelligence services and the police. He has also written a number of prize-winning thrillers, his first in 1998, and several works of nonfiction. He currently lives in the fourteenth arrondissement of Paris, right down the street from his heroes.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Renowned French translator Julie Rose has translated over thirty books and plays in a career that has included teaching French language and literature and interpreting in Paris for top-level foreign delegations. She has worked in the print media as a writer and critic and in theatre and film as a dramaturge and script editor and brings an innate understanding of drama to her work as a translator of some of France's most highly prized writers, both classical and contemporary: Racine, Molière, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas père, André Schwarz-Bart, the André Gorz of Letter to D. fame, cultural critic Paul Virilio, Jacques Rancière, Chantal Thomas, Hubert Damisch and many more. Best-known these days for her critically acclaimed translation of Victor Hugo's masterpiece, *Les Misérables*, Rose has always been an avid reader of crime fiction. Rose lives in Sydney, Australia, her hometown, after many years in Paris, the south of France and Hong Kong.

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