➔ *Boothia Peninsula, Arctic*

[APRIL 1854]

My men and I had been struggling for days, pulling and pushing two heavy sledges across a section of bumpy Arctic terrain on the Boothia Peninsula, half-blinded by blizzard conditions. Around midnight on the fifth day, exhausted, we stopped in the lee of a hill for a rest and food. I had just finished rewrapping my young assistant Jacob Beads' frostbitten toes, when I heard a high-pitched sound and reflexively reached for my rifle. Moments later, a team of barking dogs emerged from behind a curtain of snow, pulling a man on a sled. I relaxed and lowered my gun.

The Esquimaux driving the dogs appeared to be travelling alone. As he came closer, I noticed something shiny affixed to his sealskin cap. It was a gold band, a sight familiar to me but it looked completely out of place on the clothing of an Arctic native. The gold strip was identical to the bands worn on the caps of British naval officers, and I was immediately curious to learn where he had acquired it. I stepped forward smiling, following the customary native greeting of showing teeth. I had somehow managed to retain all of mine thus far, which is more than could be said of our visitor. I extended a hand toward him, laid the other upon my breast and said, "John Rae."

He responded in kind and announced that his name was In-nook-poo-zhee-jook, but that I could call him In-nook for short. This suited me because I would certainly have botched any attempts to pronounce it properly. Even after living in the Arctic for more than twenty years, I struggled to master the language, and I relied on translators for in-depth communication with the local people. When I recorded Esquimaux names in my notebooks, I tried to spell them out in letters that matched the way they sounded to my untrained ears.

I instructed my interpreter, William Ouligback Junior, to invite the newcomer to join us. Our visitor readily accepted the offer, to which we cheerfully added gifts of pemmican for his dog team. The man's friendly demeanour was engaging, and the conversation soon took on an amiable flow. I noticed that he reached up and touched the band often, as if to reassure himself that it was still there. It was obvious that he was proud of it. I reasoned that, to him, it probably signified a high level of achievement and status.

We shared a meal of roasted caribou meat around a fire prepared by my guide, Thomas Mistegan, and enjoyed conversing about the weather, hunting and other matters. In-nook explained that owing to poor winter sealing conditions many families far in the north, including his own, were very hungry. He and other men from his community were driving their dog teams south, in search of caribou and muskox.

He asked Ouligback about the purpose of our small travelling party. Were we hunting, too? I replied that we were on a journey to learn more about the land. We had begun with a group of twelve men, but various misfortunes had caused us to leave some of them at depots along the way. Our number was now reduced to just five, two of whom had fallen ill and were unable to walk much at all.

I identified myself as a man of medicine, a healer, first. Then I explained my tasks as the overseer of the fur trade in the region, representing the Hudson's Bay Company. He confirmed his knowledge of the organization, so I went on to say that I travelled a great deal, making maps for my employers and for the British government, and working on the latter's behalf to build strong trading relations with the people of the Arctic. We were making more than maps, of course. We were involved in an ambitious British push to open the Great White North of the American continent and use it for access to the Orient. What a paradox that Britain was attempting to conquer massive mountains of ice in the West, in search of faster routes to the riches of the East!

It was complicated for me to describe to anyone my many professional roles at the time: surgeon trained in Scotland, chief factor for the Hudson's Bay Company's fur trade enterprise in the Mackenzie District of the Arctic, certified land surveyor, scientist, naturalist and explorer

who was periodically seconded to the British Admiralty under special circumstances. My duties were many and varied, so I usually told people I worked for the Hudson's Bay Company, and just left it at that.

In this instance, however, I felt that some further explanation was necessary, because our new Esquimaux companion was wearing an item which could prove to be of great interest to thousands of British citizens. I suspected there was a chance that In-nook knew something about the fate of the missing Franklin Expedition, which was last spotted by whalers off the southeast coast of Greenland in August 1845. I did not add that for the past seven years, I had been actively engaged in the massive search for the two lost ships and men. I hoped he would mention the gold band during the course of our conversation so as to reveal something about where it had come from.

I did not bother to mention my other mandate: creating detailed records of the region's flora and fauna for various scientific institutions in England, since that information would have been of little interest to him. It was a certainty that In-nook and his people knew more about what crawled, walked, flew and swam in his territory than any foreign observer could ever learn.

In-nook was an enthusiastic listener and conversationalist; I could see that we would get along well. I explained to him that our plan was to rest for several hours, then pack up our supplies and continue our westward journey to the coast of the Boothia Peninsula. Would he care to join us for a day or two? Our stock of food provisions was plentiful, and we would be pleased to have his company. He agreed to travel with us for a while, after which he would take his leave to continue hunting. Would he be willing to sell us a dog to help us on our journey? I asked. Alas, he was unable to do this because he needed the full team to move the large amount of meat he hoped to acquire for his people.

He assisted us, though, by carrying our infirm men on his sled, and I was grateful for his kindness and cheerful company. I was growing more worried about our young fellows, Jacob Beads and James Johnston, who were in poor condition. I had lost only one man in all my years of leading expeditions in the Arctic: Albert One-Eye's senseless drowning five years earlier in the rapids of the Coppermine River still

haunted me. I was doing my best to treat Beads' frostbite and Johnston's loss of strength during this journey, but it was obvious they were struggling and needed rest. With In-nook's help we made better progress; the two young men were able to stay off their feet while we travelled together.

On the second night, after we finished our supper, In-nook enjoyed a smoke with my men by the fire. Our bellies were full and the mood was relaxed. According to my timepiece, it was almost two o'clock in the morning; the sun would be fully above the horizon in less than an hour. I decided it was as good a time as any to inquire about the gold cap-band.

I referred to William Ouligback by his nickname. "Mar-ko, I wish to pay a compliment to our companion about the shiny band he is wearing on his hat. It is most impressive." In-nook smiled when he heard the translation; he reached up and touched it, clearly flattered.

"Where did he acquire such an interesting ornament?" I asked.

Ouligback translated my question, and then In-nook embarked upon a tale which caused the interpreter to sit up straight, his eyes widening with growing surprise. I listened closely as the slow process of storytelling and translation took shape.

"He says the shiny band came from a man who was seen marching in a group of many, many Kabloonans — white men — dragging a boat on a sledge. They looked cold, tired and hungry. It is said that all of the men perished on their journey across the ice."

A shadow suddenly crossed my heart. *Dear God. A group of white people that large in number must have come from Sir John Franklin's travelling party.* I envisioned starving, ill-dressed and ill-equipped British naval men, stumbling across the frozen landscape in a desperate search for a rescue that never happened, doomed to die ahead of their time in a windswept, icy-cold and barren hell. *Did the Esquimaux have the answers to the nine-year mystery of what happened to Sir John Franklin, his ships and crew?*

My mind leapt towards an obvious question: *Why didn't the Esquimaux people help the poor travellers?* I almost blurted out my thoughts but restrained myself because I did not want to insult our guest. I hoped

the answer would be revealed without prompting, so I looked down at my hands and held my tongue. I didn't dare risk losing an opportunity to gain information about the mysterious marching group. I carefully chose the words of my next question: "How did In-nook come to be in possession of the shiny band?"

"He says his cousin gave it to him. His cousin saw the men."

I filed this startling information away in my memory for further investigation. Did In-nook's cousin steal the band from a white man marching to his death? Had there been some kind of confrontation? That notion was doubtful. I respected the generous nature of the Esquimaux in that region, so I set aside any thoughts of native violence against the weakened white men. There had been rumours about the Royal Navy's occasional ill treatment of the Esquimaux, but it would have been imprudent to speculate about what may or may not have occurred between the two groups.

"Does our friend know in which direction the Kabloonans were travelling?"

In-nook pointed towards the south, and Ouligback translated his reply: "It is said they were dragging a boat filled with objects on a sledge and marching towards the mouth of a large river, that they were seen about twelve long days' journey to the southwest of where we are now."

I knew of an infamous river that flowed northward from deep in the mainland and emptied into the Polar Sea, in the general region to which he referred. The Great Fish River was widely feared because of its dangerous rocks and innumerable rapids, but sections of its swirling waters were open and teeming with fish throughout the year. Earlier explorers such as Sir George Back had charted it on British maps of the Arctic when he, John Franklin, John Richardson and a large party of men were searching for a route from the mainland to the Northwest Passage to the Polar Sea. The river was later renamed Back's Fish River by the British government, in honour of the admiral who produced a great number of meticulous, delicate sketches and paintings of the region. I wondered if the group of men In-nook's people observed had been marching in search of the river, which would have led them south to possible rescue. Its waters would have provided them with continuous