A weed bed, he told himself. It's only a bunch of weeds waving with the current of the river. But then, he felt something brush ever so lightly against one of his legs. He stole a glance over his shoulder to see how Isaac was doing ... and it was then he saw it. Emerging from the waters only a few feet behind his friend rose a large, black object. At first glance it looked for all the world like the arched back of a gigantic fish or a dolphin. Then, just as quickly, the creature vanished beneath the waves without a sound or splash.

Caleb Weybourne is sent to spend the summer in the far reaches of northern Canada with his anthropologist father, who hopes to prove the existence of the Mahkneejosh, the great water monster of Ojibway legend. Together with two intrepid local boys, Isaac and Eli Cobby, he spends his days in the sun fishing and hiking. When a reward is offered for information leading to the arrest of Kibo, a sinister fugitive, the boys decide to go on a scouting mission along Red Marsh Lake.

Will they find Kibo's hideout? Is his father's enigmatic Ojibway guide a shaman? And just what is the thing in the water out on Red Marsh Lake?

Suspenseful and fraught with danger, Mystery at Red Marsh Lake is an action-packed coming-of-age story blending friendship, loyalty, hope and the irresistible call of adventure.

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## MYSTERY AT RED MARSH LAKE

## NATHANAEL REED



## Prologue

The night outside was pitch black, with nothing to illuminate the wilderness but the dim light from the train's windows. Caleb gazed out into the darkness, forcing his mind away from the hard vinyl seats and the constant lurching. Once again he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the glass. Self-consciously, he reached up and ran his fingers through his blonde, unruly hair. His mom always said that his green-blue eyes were the most expressive she'd ever seen – that was until she had upped and walked out on them a few days ago.

Folding his arms across his chest for warmth, he turned his gaze to the passing darkness outside his window. Almost within arm's reach the unending forest flashed by – the tall, dark silhouettes of pine, spruce and birch. A shiver passed through him as he adjusted himself once more on the uncomfortable seat.

*Clank-clank. Clank-clank.* The ever-present clatter of the train passing over the rails hammered into his brain. *Clank-clank. Clank-clank.* It had been a day-and-a-half since he'd left his home in the city for the wilderness of the north. Thirty–six hours of stopping at every hamlet and outpost, no matter how remote or how small, rattling their way further and further into

Canada's deep and inscrutable interior. Now, on this last stage of his journey he found himself a reluctant passenger on this ancient train, with no heat, a squalling baby and no earthly chance of getting any sleep.

He turned and glanced back at the four passengers who had remained with him through the past eight torturous stops. The most obvious of the four were a young, frazzled woman and her discontented baby. The two were seated at the very back of the car, snuggled up in a thick Hudson's Bay blanket, the mother enjoying a temporary lull in her child's persistent protests. Three seats ahead of them was a grey-bearded, grizzled old prospector accompanied by two ancient backpacks, dilapidated suitcase and a single canoe paddle propped up on the seat beside him. The last of Caleb's fellow passengers was a much younger man, stylishly dressed in a navy blazer and a thin black tie – probably a government official or a salesman from the big city.

Barely had Caleb turned his attention from his four companions when the baby awoke and began wailing at the top of her voice. He groaned. How could one small child keep crying for so long? Several hours ago Caleb had asked the conductor if he might switch cars. The next car, he was told, was off limits, filled with supplies destined for the general store in Chismo – the town to which Caleb was headed and the train's last stop.

Now Caleb turned in his seat, searching for the elusive conductor. Where had he disappeared to? In fact, Caleb was sure the man hadn't made an appearance since punching their tickets several hours earlier. He was probably back in the caboose sound asleep.

It was no use. If he continued to sit and listen to the crying baby for one more minute, he would totally lose it. His nerves were beyond frayed. Quickly he slid from his seat, no longer caring how upset the conductor might be, made his way to the front exit and crossed over to the neighboring car. For a few minutes of peace he would just take his chances. It was packed with supplies and colder than a refrigerator, but at least it would be quiet.

He stepped into the darkened car and gently closed the door behind him. The distant moon shining through the car's windows provided the only light. Caleb felt his way down the aisle until he came to a seat without any boxes or parcels, then sagged gratefully into it. He closed his eyes, tucked himself into his fleece-lined jacket and got as comfortable as he could as a deep sense of weariness washed over him. The quiet of the car felt wonderfully luxurious. Just a few more hours and his long journey would be over. He could feel his heart rate ease and his breathing slowly settle.

It was then, just as sleep was edging its way into his exhausted brain that an unusual sound stirred him back to consciousness – a faint, rustling sound emanating from somewhere in the darkness ahead of him. He sat completely still for a long minute, not even daring to breathe, every sense now on high alert. Was it the conductor? Instinctively he cleared his throat, and immediately regretted it, for an even deeper silence now seemed to fill the car.

A shadowy shape slowly emerged from among the boxes and crates across the aisle from him. He could feel his own breath catch as the strange, ghostly figure hovered briefly before him in the blackness, then in the next instant it was upon him – a large rough hand clamping down hard over his mouth.

For several terrifying seconds the face remained only inches from his own, barely distinguishable in the dim moonlight. Even so, Caleb could see that the man's features were dark and angular, with a wide nose and a razor-thin mouth. Long, stringy black hair fell down around his face, hanging almost to his eyes.

"Say one word and I'll snap your neck like a chicken's." The hand slid from Caleb's mouth and the man moved his face even closer to Caleb, his cigarette breath wafting over him. It was then that Caleb saw the feature he would never forget – one of the man's eyes was milky white, lifeless, yet somehow penetrating at the same time.

"Get out of this car right now," the man whispered.

He reached out, grabbed Caleb by the front of his jacket and hauled him to his feet. "If you tell anyone I'm here, I'll look for you and find you, and when I find you, I'll bury you so deep they won't uncover your bones for a hundred years." One

Caleb stumbled down the aisle, groping clumsily for the handle of the door and scrambled back to his former seat.

What on earth was that man doing up there anyway? Did the conductor know he had a stowaway on board his precious train? Caleb's mind grasped for anything that might help explain what had just happened. Was it possible that the man was joking, having a good laugh at how he had scared the city boy half to death? He shuddered. Not a chance. That guy had meant every word he said – and then some.

Caleb turned and glanced back at the other passengers. All of them now seemed fast asleep, even the baby. He sat there in the stillness, collecting his thoughts, settling his heart rate and calming his jangled nerves. He pulled up the collar of his jacket and leaned back against the window, knowing sleep would be a long time coming. He glanced down at his watch. 4:30 a.m. The train was due to arrive in Chismo at 8:00 a.m. – a long, mind-numbing three-and-a-half hours from now.

Chismo. What kind of village was his dad calling home for the summer anyway? Judging from the villages they had been passing through, he suspected that Chismo wouldn't leave him overwhelmed by its amenities. His dad had already warned him that the town was really small, without even a road connecting it to the outside world – just this one solitary rail line. And a good many of the people who lived there were Ojibway.

Thoughts of his dad made Caleb's blood pressure rise. Professor Weston Weybourne was an anthropology professor who had never let his family get in the way of his four-monthlong excursions into the middle of nowhere every summer. Excavating the relics of ancient civilizations meant him having to spend long weeks out in the field, and that was an unfortunate part of his dad's job. Caleb knew his mom had never gotten used to him being away so much, and this summer's expedition had been the final straw. A few days before his dad left for the north, his mom packed up her things and moved across town to live with her sister. Caleb, of course, had been dragged along, sleeping on his aunt's lumpy couch in her cramped, catfilled apartment. In a fit of desperation, he'd come up with the brainwave of spending the summer with his dad, an idea that seemed preferable to enduring months in a hot apartment with his cranky aunt.

His dad, of course, was dead against the idea, but Caleb's mom simply informed her husband that he was going to spend some quality time with his son whether he liked it or not, then as soon as school was out for the summer, she promptly put her thirteen-year-old on the next train to Chismo. Caleb let out a long sigh. It had certainly seemed like a half-decent idea at the time. Now he wasn't so sure.

Finally, he woke to find the sun dimly lighting the car's interior. The treeline beyond the windows, too, had turned from dark, forbidding shadows to a myriad of lonely sentinels lining the tracks. He looked down at his watch then sat up with a start. 7:45. They were almost there!

The first thing he had to do was to let his dad know about the guy who had threatened him. Was the man simply a stowaway, too cheap or too poor to buy a ticket? And why hadn't the conductor made an issue of him being up there anyway? And speaking of the conductor, where had he been for the past several hours? Surely his dad would know what to do. One thing about the professor, he didn't take guff from anyone. For a guy with several university degrees, he was one tough monkey. Yes, his dad would straighten things out in a hurry. He was sure of that.

A moment later he finally felt the train grind to a noisy, shuddering stop. He looked out the window and could see a handful of people standing patiently on the platform looking up expectantly at the disembarking passengers. Where was his dad? He made his way to the exit, clumped down the metal steps, and then once again searched among the waiting faces.

A surge of angry panic welled within him. Yet, why should he be surprised? Wasn't that just like his dad? Agree to spend the summer with him and then not even bother to meet him at the station. He set his duffel bag down and felt a dark cloud of dismay overtake him as he watched the people disperse. Maybe his dad was just a bit late ... surely even he wouldn't just leave him stranded here at the train station. It was then he noticed a boy of about his own age looking his way. He appeared to be Ojibway. His dark hair was cut down almost to his scalp and a pair of black-framed glasses was perched on his nose. Caleb's brow furrowed as the other boy slowly crossed the platform toward him.

"Are you Caleb Weybourne?" the boy asked.

Caleb nodded.

"I've been sent to pick you up."

"My dad sent you?" Caleb asked.

"Yah. He couldn't make it. I'm Isaac Cobby."

"How come my dad couldn't meet me?" Caleb asked, trying to keep the anger from his voice.

"He's off somewhere."

Caleb could tell that Isaac wanted to get going, but still he hesitated, the anger simmering inside him. "He'll be back soon, then?"

Isaac shrugged. "Most likely not," he said. "He and Emmett went upriver yesterday."

Caleb picked up his duffel bag, drew in a deep breath and glanced at his surroundings for the first time. A two-story white building across from the train station caught his eye. The sign out front read: Chismo Hotel.

"Is my dad staying at the hotel?" Caleb asked.

He saw a slight grin pass over Isaac's face. "Not exactly," he said. "Come on, we've got a ways to go."

With that, Isaac turned and led the way across the platform to the dirt road that served as Chismo's main street. Caleb surveyed the few buildings that made up the downtown core. The business section appeared to consist of the hotel, a general store, small café, a combined hardware store-pool hall and a few other shops. Beyond, there were a dozen or so houses and other buildings, and beyond these, a fairly wide river which stretched off into the distance in both directions.

He fell in beside his guide. "Did my dad rent a place on the river?" he asked hopefully.

Again the faint hint of a grin passed over Isaac's face. "Sort of."

"What do you mean?" Caleb asked again, trying his best to keep his frustration from showing.

"Your dad's camped over on Badger Island," Isaac finally said, motioning to the far shore across the river before them.

Caleb felt his heart sink. "He's camping on an island?"

"Yah. And it ain't much of a camp," Isaac replied. "Or much of an island either, for that matter."