

CURSE OF THE STONE IDOL

a chloe wendleton mystery

rita hsu syers

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A Chloe Wendleton Mystery



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To Erin and Blair

...and always to Killian.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One	7
Chapter Two	19
Chapter Three	27
Chapter Four	30
Chapter Five	33
Chapter Six	35
Chapter Seven	38
Chapter Eight	41
Chapter Nine	45
Chapter Ten	53
Chapter Eleven	58
Chapter Twelve	63
Chapter Thirteen	65
Chapter Fourteen	70
Chapter Fifteen	80
Chapter Sixteen	84
Chapter Seventeen	87
Chapter Eighteen	90
Chapter Nineteen	97
Chapter Twenty	101
Chapter Twenty-One	104

Chapter Twenty-Two	109
Chapter Twenty-Three	113
Chapter Twenty-Four	118
Chapter Twenty-Five	124
Chapter Twenty-Six	128
Chapter Twenty-Seven	130
Chapter Twenty-Eight	133
Chapter Twenty-Nine	140
Chapter Thirty	143
Chapter Thirty-One	153
Chapter Thirty-Two	155
Chapter Thirty-Three	159
Chapter Thirty-Four	167
Chapter Thirty-Five	171
Chapter Thirty-Six	175
Chapter Thirty-Seven	179
Chapter Thirty-Eight	182
Chapter Thirty-Nine	186
Chapter Forty	195
Chapter Forty-One	200
Next Chloe Mystery - Charlotte's Ghost	202

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Mystery of the Crying Ghost - A Chloe Wendleton Mystery
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CHAPTER 1

The monstrous T-Rex leaned toward Will Reed, its massive mouth opened wide to show huge teeth at least six inches long. It roared thunderously, one of its colossal hind legs stomping the ground in frustration.

The beast wanted to eat the small boy that stood fearlessly in front of it, but a steely quality in the boy's eyes made it pause momentarily.

Will Reed gazed up at the T-Rex calmly, utterly unafraid of this ferocious creature that loomed above him. The T-Rex was at least fifteen feet tall.

The T-Rex roared in anger again, but now there was a definite tone of fear in its voice as it pawed the air in front of it. It began backing slowly away from the boy who eyed him so sternly, unwavering, stubbornly standing his ground.

Will Reed never backed down from a fight, and the sooner this fearsome monster understood this, the better.

Slowly...carefully, the boy raised his bow and the only arrow he had left, and prepared to slay the beast. He had no choice. To let it live would mean it would continue to kill randomly and eat poor, unfortunate human beings who had no idea how to protect themselves again this vicious dinosaur...one of the most feared

creatures in all of history.

This one was a man-eater. He had already eaten fifty villages of men, women and children as he chomped his way through the jungle. Finally, a desperate government had called on Will, begging for his help before every human being in their small country was consumed. Will Reed, famed Dinosaur Hunter, was not going to let that happen.

The beast had finally met its match.

Seeing the boy raise his bow and arrow and take careful aim, the T-Rex rushed at him, roaring maniacally. Will Reed stood quietly as the ground shook beneath him, waiting...waiting...it was almost on him, *hold it, Will, steady, wait until you see the whites of its eyes...*

“Will?”

I’ll get you, you beast, and when I do I’m going to hang your head on my bedroom wall, and when Chloe sees it, she’ll.....

“Oh, for pete’s sake, are you daydreaming *AGAIN?*”

Ah yes, that’s right, come to Daddy, you disgusting, smelly, overgrown excuse for a.....

“WILL!”

Will Reed jumped, startled out of his reverie, and turned around.

Maya Roubideaux was standing directly in back of him, screaming in his ear like a banshee. Of course, admittedly he had never *heard* a banshee before, but he knew as sure as frogs were green that it would sound just like Maya’s voice...shrill, piercing, and loud enough to freeze even a charging T-Rex dead in its tracks.

“*Why* are you screaming in my ear, Maya, *I’m right here!*”

“Sure you are. I’ve been calling you for ten minutes. We’re going back to the dig now, are you coming or what?”

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Just then, Chloe Wendleton came over the hill from the dig site, her Golden Retriever, Killian, at her side. She was dressed in khaki shorts and a white polo shirt that had the words “*Montana Dinosaur Dig 2007*” written on it in black letters. Maya had braided Chloe’s long, auburn hair in a French braid, and Will thought she looked beautiful. But then, Will *always* thought Chloe looked beautiful.

Killian was wearing a red bandana around his neck. He drank thirstily from a big water bowl that was filled at all times for the dog. The big Golden Retriever had become the official mascot on this dig, and everyone loved him.

“Hey, guys, what’s up?” Chloe smiled at both of them. It was so cool in the shade. The dig was about a half a mile away, in the middle of the Montana flatlands, and it was hot enough to fry an egg out there.

Maya and Will were standing in front of a trailer that was nestled among a stand of ponderosa pine trees. They were both dressed exactly like Chloe. They had come up from the dig ahead of Chloe to have some lunch and check their emails. Chloe stayed behind with the other members of the team. They had just found another nesting site and she was helping to uncover it.

“Will was daydreaming again. I had to call him *four times* before he heard me.” Maya shook her head in disgust as she took a Snickers bar out of her pocket, taking a big bite.

“What is it with you lately, Will?” teased Chloe, “You’re doing an awful lot of daydreaming. How come?”

Chloe, Maya and Will had arrived in Montana four days ago. Professor Cooper Wendleton, Chloe’s grandfather, had already been there for two weeks by the time they arrived. The three children had flown on a plane without an adult accompanying

them for the first time, and they were thrilled. They would be staying in Montana for July and August.

Maria-Luiza, the Wendleton's housekeeper, had decided to visit her relatives in Brazil while her precious Chi Chi was with her grandfather in Montana for two months. Since the house in Bucks County, Pennsylvania where Chloe lived would be closed, Killian, her Golden Retriever, Isis, her Himalayan cat, and Puck, her little ferret, had come with her to Montana. Her grandfather rented a house in the town of Bozeman while the three children were visiting, and all their pets as well.

Will Reed brought his two ferrets, Firefly and Shimmer, the parents of Puck and Snickers, and Maya never went anywhere, other than school, without her ferret, Snickers.

Professor Wendleton joked that there was no room left in the house for him, but he really didn't mind. Six months ago, he had almost lost his precious granddaughter, Chloe, when she and her two friends, Maya and Will, were lost in a series of underground passages and attacked by huge, vicious, mutated rats.

Chloe could have brought the entire school marching band to Montana and her grandfather would not have cared.

This was the first time any of the children had been on a dinosaur dig. Chloe's grandfather was a paleontologist... he studied dinosaurs. He had been asked by the state of Montana to come out and oversee the huge new site of dinosaur bones that had been discovered outside the town of Bozeman. He would be there for July, August, September and October, and had invited Chloe and her friends to stay with him for the months of July and August. The kids were so excited that when they finally arrived in Montana, sleep had been almost impossible...at least for the first two days. There was so much to see and do there!

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Professor Wendleton had introduced them to the four other paleontologists that were there, one woman and three men. There were also six graduate students and an anthropologist.

Anthropology was the study of human cultures throughout the world and throughout time, and the young anthropologist, whose name was Jimmy Howling Wolf, was a full blooded Cheyenne. He was very handsome, with long black hair and warm brown eyes. He was also really funny, always playing practical jokes on everyone and telling funny stories. Chloe and Maya both had crushes on him.

Jimmy Howling Wolf grew up in Montana on a reservation not far from the town of Bozeman, and often brought his younger brother, Little Bear, eleven years old, to the dig. The young Indian boy had become very friendly with Chloe, Maya and Will.

All four children spent a lot of time practicing their archery. Chloe was the best of the three friends, because she had been doing it for so much longer, Maya was pretty good, but poor Will was only fair. He didn't seem to have any talent for archery at all. This bothered him at great deal, since their new friend, Little Bear, was amazing. He had been using a bow and arrow since he was two years old, and could shoot an arrow with deadly accuracy and enough power behind it to bury it in a stone wall. He was also tall, handsome, and in very good shape for his age. Will, who was the smallest of the four children, felt like a child next to Little Bear.

"Anything happening at the nesting site?" asked Maya.

Chloe nodded, taking a cold bottle of water and a sandwich out of the refrigerator, which was always filled with bottled water, snacks and lots of popsicles.

"Yeah, you'll never *guess* what we found," she said, drinking half the bottle of water. It was so HOT out there.

"Unless you found a living, breathing dinosaur, I'm guessing it

was more bones,” said Will.

“Not this time, smarty. We found dinosaur eggs, and two of them had *hatched*.”

“Huh?”

“Jimmy found them. There were two fossilized eggs, one had cracks in it like the baby was starting to hatch when it died, and in the other egg, the baby was *halfway out of the shell*. It was so cool, but sad too, you know? Poor baby.”

“I’ve got to see this. C’mon, Will, let’s go back to the site.”

“I’ll come back, too. Here Killian, you want this?” Chloe held out half a turkey sandwich to the big Golden Retriever. Wagging his tail enthusiastically, Killian ate the sandwich in one bite.

Eating the other half of the sandwich, Chloe joined Maya and Will as they made their way back to the nesting site.

The dinosaur eggs that Chloe saw were called fossils. A fossil was the prehistoric remains of a plant or animal which had been preserved when they died, and then buried under layers of sand and mud. Over time and great pressure, the sand and mud became rock. All flesh on the animal or the soft leaves of plants were replaced by stone, and what remained was an exact copy of the original animal or plant.

The study of these fossils is called *paleontology*. Chloe’s grandfather, Professor Cooper Wendleton, was a paleontologist because he studied the bones of dinosaurs and other prehistoric creatures.

Chloe, Maya and Will, accompanied by Killian, walked back to the nesting site. There they found everyone huddled around the dinosaur eggs.

“Oh, there you are, Chloe, I was wondering what became of you,” Professor Wendleton said. He smiled at his granddaughter.

“Bring Maya and Will over here so they can get a good look at

curse of the stone idol

these eggs.”

The dinosaur egg, about the size of a cantaloupe, was lying in what was once a huge nest of eggs. The petrified egg, or fossil, was about five inches long.

“Oh, the poor thing,” said Maya. The baby dinosaur had died as it was trying to get out of its shell. Preserved in stone, it would remain half in and half out of its egg forever.

“Wow,” breathed Will, fascinated, “it’s so cool. Professor Wendleton, this is a great find, right?” He had already decided to be a paleontologist when he grew up. Will was extremely intelligent and had skipped two grades in school. He had already learned much more about dinosaurs than Chloe or Maya.

Professor Wendleton nodded. “That’s right, Will, it is. Can any of you tell me what kind of dinosaur this is?”

Will said, “I think it’s a baby hypacrosaurus.”

Maya gave him a disgusted look. “Show off,” she muttered under her breath. She didn’t have the slightest idea what kind of dinosaur it was.

The only baby dinosaur she had ever seen coming out of its egg was the baby velociraptor in the movie, *Jurassic Park*...and it wasn’t even real.

It was really annoying that Will knew so much more about dinosaurs than she did after only one week here. Of course, he’d been fascinated with dinosaurs long before they came to Montana. Before they met Chloe, he would bore her all day with descriptions of different dinosaurs that he read about in books. Maya didn’t much care about old dinosaur bones, especially when they were millions of years old...but it *was* sad that the baby whatever-it-was-called had died so young.

“That’s exactly right, Will,” Professor Wendleton told him, “it

is definitely a baby hypacrosaurus. Can you tell us why you thought that?"

Maya rolled her eyes, sighed, and walked away. She headed towards a ridge some distance away, where she could plainly see Jimmy Howling Wolf talking to the six graduate students. She'd rather listen to him any day.

"Well," Will Reed said, glancing around to make sure Chloe was listening, "it's got a duckbill, so I knew it was one of the duck-billed dinosaurs right away, and the crest on its head means it was Hypacrosaurus. I know it lived in the Late Cretaceous Period, about seventy million years ago, and a full grown one would be about thirty feet long."

"Exactly right, my boy. And what did hypacrosaurus eat? Human beings?"

Will chuckled. "No sir, hypacrosaurus was a plant eater. He was more like a big cow than a T-Rex."

Professor Wendleton was very pleased that Will knew as much as he did. He turned to Chloe. "Now Chloe Cee, tell me, do you know what hypacrosaurus means?"

Chloe nodded. "It means Near-Top Lizard."

"Very good, you really have been paying attention. Can either of you tell me how much hypacrosaurus weighed when he was full grown?"

Chloe answered him. "About six thousand pounds."

"Excellent! Well, you two have definitely earned a popsicle after all that!"

Will said, "I'll go get them, Chloe, and I'll get one for Maya too."

Chloe grinned. "Hey, I'm going to walk to the ridge and tell Maya she doesn't get a popsicle because she didn't want to hear

curse of the stone idol

about the baby dinosaur. She'll be SO mad! I'll see you there."

Jimmy Howling Wolf was telling the graduate students and Maya about some of the ancient cultures he had studied.

As Chloe came up to them, she heard him say, "...used to sacrifice human beings, but thankfully that stopped a long time ago. But at one time they were definitely into sacrificing humans instead of goats or sheep."

Maya made a face. "Gross! Sacrificing human beings? How could anybody want to do that?"

Jimmy smiled at her. "The earth is very old, Maya...at least four and a half billion years old. What would not be tolerated today was a very common occurrence thousands of years ago, and if the study of anthropology has taught me anything, it is tolerance for the ancient beliefs and practices of prehistoric human beings."

Rob, one of the grad students who was studying to be an anthropologist like Jimmy, said, "Hey Jimmy, have you ever come across anything supernatural in the ancient cultures you've studied?"

"Supernatural in what way, Rob?"

"Well, did any of them believe in things like ghosts, werewolves, things like that?"

"Oh, many of them believed in ghosts. I don't think werewolves were high on their list however," he chuckled. "As a matter of fact, did you know there were ancient people that lived right here in Montana, long before my ancestors, who had some pretty strange beliefs?"

"You mean they were here before Native Americans?"

"It would seem so. We have very little data to go on, they didn't leave much behind. But my people, especially the old ones, still talk about a race of creatures, half-man and half-beast, that lived here when much of Montana was a great, inland sea with many small

islands, and on the beaches you could find deep caves that went down into the bowels of the earth. These ancient people lived in those caves.”

“Did they practice human sacrifice too?” asked Chloe. She loved the way he talked. Jimmy Howling Wolf was the most interesting young man she had ever met. Well, of course she didn’t actually *know* many young men, but he was definitely one of the most interesting. She just knew it. When he was talking about a subject that he liked, his face would light up and his dark eyes would shine. He was so cute! For the first time in her life, Chloe wished she was older than ten years old...no, *eleven* pretty soon, the end of August she would turn eleven!

However, Jimmy Howling Wolf was twenty-seven years old. She sighed.

“I’m sure they did, Chloe. As I said, there is very little record of them, other than drawings on cave walls we’ve found, and stories handed down from generation to generation. My grandfather heard stories from his grandfather, and so on. Every once in awhile someone will discover an artifact that does not belong to any known culture, past or present, and when this happens, we assume it came from these ancient people.”

“You said they had some strange beliefs. Like what, for instance?”

“Well my grandfather’s grandfather was told by *his* grandfather that these ancient people worshipped strange beings, and in turn for their worship these beings would do whatever was asked of them.”

“Strange beings? Were they aliens from another planet, or animals, do you think?”

Jimmy shook his head. “No one knows. It’s just another story handed down through generations of my people, the Cheyenne. It

curse of the stone idol

was said that these half-men, half-beasts had the power to control the creatures that walked the earth at that time. “

“How did they do that?”

“They did it with magic, Maya.”

“*Magic*,” whispered Maya, fascinated.

“Oh, come on, Jimmy,” laughed Rob, and the other graduate students joined in the laughter.

“I’m just telling you what the legends say. I didn’t say I believed any of it. But there’s no doubt that those ancient people were a bloodthirsty, superstitious lot. The cave drawings prove that. They show men and women being tortured in terrible ways, but other pictures show people kneeling, their arms raised, praying to something. They’re all facing a huge stone figure of some sort. It’s in many of the drawings, but no one knows what it is. Some sort of god, I suppose.”

“Are there any drawings on cave walls around here?”

Jimmy Howling Wolf nodded. “Many are near my reservation, in the caves there. We think our reservation stands on ground that was once the shoreline of an inland sea, and that may explain why there are so many caves. And just last week, Little Bear found a series of caves about four miles from here, right where the Alamo-goochie Mountains begin, that have never been explored. I didn’t even know they were there, and I grew up here.

“How did he find them?”

“He and some of his friends were looking for new nesting sites like the one discovered here. Little Bear’s dog, Shane, actually found them. He wandered off and they could hear him barking and he wouldn’t stop, Little Bear thought he was hurt. He followed the barking and saw Shane looking up at the mountain. Then Shane started digging and whining. Little Bear saw that the dog had un-

covered a small hole in the side of the mountain. He and his friends dug a little more, and all of a sudden a section of the mountain caved in.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Little Bear didn’t explore them because he didn’t have a flashlight.”

“Can we explore it?”

“We can, but I think I’d better go first. I did a lot of spelunking back in college and I want to make sure the caves are safe.”

“What a funny word...*spelunking*! What does it mean?” asked Maya.

“It means the exploration and study of caves, just a fancy name for a very old sport. People have been exploring caves since...well, since human beings *lived* in caves, I suppose. Anyway, I intend to explore them tomorrow. If everything looks okay, we’ll plan a cave party and do a little spelunking!”

Everyone laughed and clapped their hands. Jimmy had a way of making everything he did seem like a great adventure. He was just that kind of human being.

But the cave party never took place, because Jimmy Howling Wolf disappeared the next day.
