y, oh Maya! Mimi, Papa, Christina, and Grant really get in over their "skulls" in this Mexican hat dance of a mystery set in the Yucatan Peninsula. When they go to explore ancient Maya ruins, "number" clues seem to abound! But what is someone trying to lead them to...or away from? Snakes...human hearts ...a wall of skulls ...human sacrifice? How creepy can you get, the kids wonder. But in searching for clues, they encounter the wonder that is Mexico, and find themselves laughing at things they never thought could be funny—all along the way!
# Books in This Series

#1 The Mystery at Big Ben  •  (London, England)
#2 The Mystery at the Eiffel Tower  •  (Paris, France)
#3 The Mystery at the Roman Colosseum  •  (Rome, Italy)
#4 The Mystery of the Ancient Pyramid  •  (Cairo, Egypt)
#5 The Mystery on the Great Wall of China  •  (Beijing, China)
#6 The Mystery on the Great Barrier Reef  •  (Australia)
#7 The Mystery at Mt. Fuji  •  (Tokyo, Japan)
#8 The Mystery in the Amazon Rainforest  •  (South America)
#9 The Mystery at Dracula's Castle  •  (Transylvania, Romania)
#10 The Curse of the Acropolis  •  (Athens, Greece)
#11 The Mystery at the Crystal Castle  •  (Bavaria, Germany)
#12 The Mystery in Icy Antarctica
#13 The Rip-Roaring Mystery on the African Safari  •  (South Africa)
#14 The Breathtaking Mystery on Mount Everest  •  (The Top of the World)
#15 The Mystery of the Onion Domes  •  (Russia)
#16 The Mystery at the Maya Ruins  •  (Mexico)
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“Mimi! Papa! Grant's missing!” yelled Christina, racing up to her grandparents. Her long brown hair flew behind her as she ran. Mimi and Papa stood on a street corner studying a map of Cozumel, Mexico. They were hard to miss—Mimi in her favorite red cowboy boots and jeans, and Papa sporting scuffed leather boots and a white Stetson hat.

“He was there one second...and then POOF!...he just disappeared!” Christina exclaimed in breathless bursts. “We were at that antique shop over there,” she continued, pointing
in the direction of a bright blue building. “The next thing I knew... Grant was gone!”

“Don’t worry, Christina, we’ll find him,” said Papa, throwing his burly arm around her shoulders. “We always do,” he added reassuringly. “Well, we’d better find him quickly,” warned Mimi. “Our cruise ship will be departing soon, and you know what the announcement said about no-shows.”

“They get left behind!” cried Christina. Her mind raced. “What if Grant was kidnapped?” Grant could be a royal pest sometimes, but she shuddered at the thought of her little brother in the hands of kidnappers.

“Well, if that’s the case, I pity the poor kidnappers,” joked Papa. “I expect they will soon be paying us to take him back,” he added with a grin.

“Be serious, Papa,” Mimi said. “We have a missing grandchild on our hands in the middle of Cozumel, Mexico.”

“Okay, then,” said Papa, winking at Christina. “Let’s try these side streets. One of us is bound to find him.”

**Shore Leave**

Just around the corner, Grant stood alone in an alley off the main street. He gazed at a spiky, gray iguana sunning itself on a vine-covered, white stucco wall. “Hey, buddy,” said Grant. “Nice to meet you!”

The scaly iguana stared back at him with its beady gray eyes. It began bobbing its head up and down. Grant knew from his *Reptiles of Mexico* book that iguanas communicate this way, altering the number and frequency of bobs to mean different things.

Grant got down on his hands and knees to imitate his new-found friend. He bobbed his head up and down, too. The iguana flicked its tongue in and out of its mouth. Grant did the same. It moved its head from side to side. Grant followed suit. It slowly whisked its gray-and-brown-striped tail back and forth. Grant wagged his behind iguana-style.

“Hey, I can speak iguana!” exclaimed Grant. He had visions of himself starring in his own TV series—*The Iguana Whisperer*.

Just then, Christina and Mimi turned the corner onto the alley. Shocked speechless, the
pair watched the spectacle before them. Grant was crawling around on the ground, bobbing his head, flicking his tongue, and wiggling his behind from side to side.

Christina nudged Mimi and whispered, "Do you think he has heatstroke or something?"

"Hmmm," Mimi replied, "maybe it's Montezuma's Revenge." She crossed her arms and peered over the top of her sparkly, red-rimmed sunglasses.

"Revenge?" wondered Christina. She thought her grandmother might be kidding. Being a mystery writer, Mimi often shared fascinating and sometimes weird facts with her grandchildren. "But, who would want revenge on Grant?" she asked.

Mimi smiled. "Don't worry," she said. "That's just another way of saying he has a bad tummy-ache."

"Oh," said Christina. Then she spied the iguana perched on the wall.

"Arghgh!" cried Christina, stamping her foot. "Hey, lizard boy, snap out of it!" she yelled. "You're going to make us miss the ship!"

Shore Leave

Jolted back to reality, Grant sprang to his feet. The startled iguana launched itself off the wall and landed smack on top of Grant's fuzzy, blonde head.

"Yaaaah!" Grant screamed. "Get it off! It's going to eat my brain!" Grant spun around in circles, pawing the air around his head.

THUD! Grant landed, bottom first, in the dusty alleyway, sending the iguana flying through the air. It landed on a soft patch of grass and scampered off into the bushes.

"You have some serious explaining to do, young man," said Mimi. "But right now, we have to vamanos!"

"Vama-what?" asked Grant, dizzy from his iguana encounter.

"It means 'Let's go' in Spanish!" shouted Christina, as she pulled Grant up by his arm and led him toward the main street.

Spotting Papa, the trio ran to him.

"Mission accomplished, I see," boomed Papa. "Glad to see you're okay, kiddo."

"We're going to miss the ship!" wailed Christina. "This way!"
The Mystery at the Maya Ruins

The group raced to the pier, arriving out of breath. They were too late! The massive ship had pulled away from the dock. A rolling wake rippled behind it.

“What are we going to do now?” exclaimed Christina. “All of our stuff is on board!”

In the small space between two metal shipping crates just unloaded onto the docks crouched a man wearing a shiny white suit. He waited in the shadows, watching their every move and listening to their every word!

2

When in Rome...

“Unless we can swim super-fast, catch hold of a giant ship with our bare hands, and climb up the side, I'd say we were stranded!” exclaimed Grant.

“If you hadn’t wandered off, we wouldn’t be in this mess,” shouted Christina.

“Well, if you hadn’t dragged me over to that shop to look at boring old junk, I wouldn’t have wandered off!” returned Grant.

Christina shot back, “Well, if you hadn’t—”

“Quiet down,” Papa commanded. “I’m on the phone with the cruise line now.”
After a few minutes, Papa clicked off his phone. "The good news is they put our luggage in storage on the ship. The bad news is the ship doesn't return here for another five days."

"So, what are we supposed to do until then?" Christina whined. "All we have are the clothes on our backs!"

"Well," said Mimi with a twinkle in her eye, "‘When in Rome...’" Her voice trailed off, as she began scrolling through her phone's contact list. She dialed a number.

"Wait, we're in Rome? As in Rome, Italy?" asked Grant. "Let's get some pizza!"

Christina sighed. "Grant, we're still in Mexico. ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do’ is just an expression. It means you do as the locals do."

"Oh!" Grant replied. "So, does that mean no pizza?"

"Nope, no pizza," said Christina.

"Listen up, children," Mimi said above the din of the screeching seabirds. "A dear old college friend of mine lives just north of the Yucatan Peninsula. It's a short plane ride but we'll need

When in Rome...

to leave pronto! Papa, put that ten-gallon hat of yours to good use and hail us a taxi!"

In the taxi, Grant said, "I had a yucky tan once. Well, it was more like a really bad sunburn." He rubbed his neck as if remembering how much it hurt.

"No, Grant. It's not 'yucky tan'," said Christina. "It's you-kah-tahn! The Yucatan Peninsula is where we are now. We'll be flying to an island just north of the peninsula, right, Mimi?"

"That's right, Christina," Mimi answered. "My friend moved to the island after retiring."

After a weaving ride through mid-day traffic that left everyone a bit woozy, they rushed to the ticket counter at the small airport.

"I am so sorry," explained the clerk, a middle-aged man with gentle eyes, "but our pilot just took off."

"But, sir," said Mimi. "I just called you twenty minutes ago to book the plane!"

"The man who came here before you said the reservation was for him," the clerk explained. "Is there nothing you can do?" Mimi asked.
"No, not unless you carry a valid international pilot’s license for a small plane, Señoral," the man half-joked. "We have two planes, but only one pilot."

"Well, it just so happens..." said Papa, stepping forward and plopping his license down on the counter. "I never leave home without it!"

Soon, they were flying over white sailboats dotting the clear turquoise waters of the Caribbean Sea.

"Look, there’s the island," announced Papa. "It looks so mysterious," said Christina.

"Don’t say ‘mysterious’," groaned Grant. "It sounds too much like ‘mystery’! And mystery means solving clues when I’d rather be eating!"

"Don’t worry," said Mimi. "We’re just going to relax for a few days—just until the ship returns to Cozumel. I’m sure there is no mischief waiting for us on such a small island."

"Famous last words," said Papa with a hearty laugh. He banked the plane down toward the small airstrip below. "Hang on, crew! We’re in for a bumpy landing!"

---

3

Welcome to Casa Iguana!

Papa helped Mimi and the kids down off the wing of the plane and onto the sunbaked runway. "Carole, it’s been ages!" exclaimed a trim, dark-haired woman.

"Esmeralda!" Mimi said as they hugged. "Thank you so much for meeting us here! Has it been ten years already?"

"At least," the woman replied.
The Mystery at the Maya Ruins

"It was mighty kind of you to help us find a place on such short notice!" said Papa.

Esmeralda laughed. "So glad you could 'drop in'. It must be nice to have a pilot in the family!" She winked at Mimi.

She turned to the children. "You must be Christina and Grant. You will have to meet my grandchildren, Eva and Miguel. They are here on vacation, too. You know," she said with a smile, "your Mimi is a favorite of theirs! They have read all of her mysteries!"

"Everyone," Mimi said, "this is my dear friend, Professor Esmeralda Zapo."

"Mucho gusto, nice to meet you all," said the woman. "Please, call me Professor Z. That is what my students at the university used to call me."

"Professor Z was a marine biology professor at La Salle University in Cancun," explained Mimi.

"Yes, I'm retired now," Professor Z said, "but I couldn't quite give up my passion for ichthyology."

"Are you one of those doctors who puts people to sleep before an operation?" asked Grant.

Welcome to Casa Iguana!

"No, Grant!" said Christina. "That's anesthesiology. Professor Z is an ichthyologist. She studies fish," explained Christina.

"That's right, Christina," Professor Z remarked. "I'm actually doing some fascinating work on whale sharks. But I'll tell you more about that tomorrow. I think you'll like the hotel—especially you, Grant. It has a cool name. At least that's what my grandchildren tell me."

"What's it called?" asked Grant excitedly.

"Casa Iguana," replied Professor Z. "That means House of the Iguana. And it's right on the beach!"

The color drained from Grant's face. Christina couldn't keep from giggling.

After a short ride on the golf-cart taxi, the gang arrived at Casa Iguana. Bright pink and red bougainvillea flowering vines spilled from giant flowerpots at the entrance to the hotel. The kids piled onto the comfortable sofas in the waiting area.

"Okay, you're all checked in. Christina, here is the key to your room—room 18,"
The Mystery at the Maya Ruins

Professor Z said, "You're right across from your grandparents."

She gave Mimi the address to her home and promised to meet them the next day for breakfast.

Christina unlocked the door and placed the key on the bedside table. A small light was on. The air conditioner hummed softly.

"Grant, are you looking for iguanas under the bed?" asked Christina.

Grant was on his hands and knees, peering under the bed. "I'm sure this place is called Casa Iguana for a reason!" he said.

"You've got iguanas on the brain," said Christina, kicking up her legs and landing perfectly in the middle of her bed.

She grabbed her backpack and dumped its contents next to her. She found her journal and opened it.

Plop! A jade stone fell into her lap. "Hey, what's this?" she exclaimed. She held the shiny green stone up to the light. It was jagged on two sides.

Welcome to Casa Iguana!

Grant popped up from the floor. "You found an iguana?" he asked, looking around wildly.

"No, I found this in my backpack." Christina said. "I bet it's jade!"

Carved on the front of the stone was the head of a strange-looking feathered snake.

Christina flipped the stone over. On the back were some unusual symbols.
The Mystery at the Maya Ruins

"Can I see it?" asked Grant. He took it and held it up to the light. "Oh, this was in that shop you dragged me to."

"You saw this there? But, how do you remember this one stone? You weren't even in the shop for very long!" cried Christina.

"Look at it! It's cool! Snakes—feathers—shiny green stone! All the stuff I love!" Grant said. "I saw a guy pick it up and study it with a magnifying glass. Maybe he put it in your bag."

"What? Why would anyone do that?" Christina huffed and took the stone back from Grant.

"How would I know? He had it last," Grant wailed. "If you don't want it, I'll take it."

Christina quickly closed her hand before Grant could grab it back. "No way!" she said. "If it really came from that shop, then it doesn't belong to us! We'll have to return it as soon as we get back to Cozumel."

"I guess," pouted Grant. "It's got to be mythological!" Christina said.

"What? Mytha-what-ical?" asked Grant, scrunching his brow.

Welcome to Casa Iguana!

"Mythological," Christina repeated. Grant turned to look in the mirror. He repeated the word, stretching his cheeks down with his hands. "Mythological...mythological...mythological," he repeated softly. "What's mythological?"

"It's like folklore, legends, fables...you know, stories from a long time ago," Christina answered. "I noticed these strange symbols on the back," she said. "I wonder what they are."

"Oh, those are Maya symbols for numbers," said Grant.

"What makes you think that?" asked Christina.

"All the dots and lines," he said. "I found a book about the Maya numbering system on the plane over here."

"On the plane?" Christina asked. "And I thought you were just wasting your time fogging up the window to draw weird faces on it," she said.

"I'll prove it to you," Grant replied. "And anyway, those were Maya numbers, not faces!"

He wrote the equation on a piece of hotel stationery. "There!" he said, pointing to his
math. "The dots are worth one and the lines are worth five. The bottom symbol is in the 1's place, and the top symbols are in the 20's place."

"You mean the 10's place, right?" asked Christina.

"No, the Maya had a 20's place," Grant explained. "The top number is 3 plus 5 plus 5 plus 5. That's 18. Since it's in the 20's place, you multiply it by 20."

"I see," said Christina. "The bottom is just 5, right?"

"Right!" said Grant.

Welcome to Casa Iguana!

"Then, what do you do?" asked Christina.

"You just add the 360 from the 20's place and the 5 from the 1's place," explained Grant.

"365?" guessed Christina.

"Yep! Believe me now?" asked Grant.

"Yes! I'm impressed! I guess the iguana didn't eat all of your brain!" joked Christina.

Grant rubbed his head, remembering the iguana attack.
Isla Holbox

The next morning, Professor Z and her grandchildren met Mimi, Papa, Christina, and Grant sitting outside at the café.

"Buenos días! Good morning!" said Professor Z. A boy and a girl around the same ages as Grant and Christina stood beside her.

"Good morning to you, too," said Mimi. Papa stood up to greet them.

"Christina and Grant," Professor Z said, "I'd like you to meet Eva and Miguel, my grandchildren. They are staying here on the island with me for the summer."
The Mystery at the Maya Ruins

"Hello!" said Eva. She was about the same height as Christina, but she had jet-black hair and bright brown eyes. "After we finish eating, we'll show you around town. And we brought some clothes for you to wear while you're here. I hope you like them!"

"Thanks!" Christina said. "So, you heard we missed our cruise ship?"

Eva looked at Grant and giggled. "Yes, we heard." "What's the name of this island, anyway?" asked Grant.

"Isla Holbox," said Miguel.

Eva explained, "Well, it's spelled H-O-L-B-O-X, but it's pronounced 'Holbosh.' The x makes a sh sound."

"Holbox means black hole!" said Miguel. Miguel was a whole foot shorter than his older sister, but he had the same jet-black hair and big brown eyes.

"Black hole?" Grant repeated. "Like the ones in outer space?"

"No," said Miguel, smiling. "Actually, the water on the south side of the island is kind of black. That's where the name comes from."

Isla Holbox

"Isn't negro the Spanish word for black?" asked Christina.

"Yes," said Eva, "but Holbox isn't a Spanish word. It's Mayan. Mayan is the language of the native people who lived in this area of Mexico before the Spanish colonized it."

"Do you speak Mayan?" asked Grant.

"Only a few words," said Miguel.

"Grant speaks another language," Christina announced. "It's called Iguanan." She stuck her tongue out at Grant and wagged her back end iguana-style.

"Aaaah! I'll get you!" Grant shouted, jumping out of his chair and chasing after his laughing sister.

"Wait for us!" Eva and Miguel shouted, running after them.

The kids strolled along a sidewalk lined with brightly painted buildings. A light breeze took the edge off the summer heat.

"Your grandmother is an ichthyologist?" asked Christina.

"Yes, she is," Eva replied. "She's doing research on whale sharks."
The Mystery at the Maya Ruins

"Is a whale shark a mix between a whale and a shark?" asked Grant.

Eva laughed. "Actually, whale sharks aren't whales at all," she said. "They're a type of shark, and sharks are a kind of fish. The whale part comes from their size."

"They're the largest fish in the world," Miguel added.

"Are they dangerous?" asked Christina.

"No, not at all," replied Eva. "They're very gentle. They eat mostly plankton. They come to the tip of the Yucatan every year around this same time. It's their favorite feeding ground."

"Well, I wouldn't get too close to their big mouth," warned Miguel. "You might get sucked in!"

"Hey," Eva said excitedly, "we're going out on the boat later on today, if the weather holds up. Grandmother's research team is planning to dive with the whale sharks, and we're going with them."

"You should come," Miguel suggested.

"Count me in!" said Christina.

"Me too!" said Grant. "We'll have a whale of a time!"

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5

Boat Bumps and Tattoos

The crystal clear water of the Caribbean Sea lapped at the boat, rocking it gently from side to side. Dark clouds were forming on the horizon. Christina noticed a small kayak not far from where they were anchored.

The man in the kayak wore a shiny, white suit and a fisherman's hat. He waved nervously, adjusted his hat, and quickly looked away.

BAM! BAM! The boat rocked wildly.
"Hang on, everyone!" shouted Papa. He caught Grant mid-air.

"Papa, we're being attacked! Iguanas can't swim, can they?" asked Grant.

"I guess we'll soon find out," answered Papa, still hanging on to Grant.

"It's coming for the boat again!" shouted one of the scientists.

"It can't be!" cried Professor Z. "It is! It's Oliver!"

Everyone scooted to the starboard side of the boat. An enormous whale shark with giant spots on its back scooted past their boat, bumping it gently.

"He's come to say hello!" cried Professor Z.

"You named him Oliver?" asked Christina.

"Yes! Oliver is the largest whale shark ever sighted in these waters," Professor Z explained.

"How big is he?" asked Grant.

"About 40 feet long, and he weighs more than 10 tons," she said. "We've wanted to put a tracking device on him for some time now."

Christina asked, "Why would you want to do that?"

"We want to track his movements, so we can monitor his migration patterns. It might help us protect him and other whale sharks like him," Professor Z explained.

"Grandmother, is someone trying to hurt Oliver?" asked Eva.

"Let's just say it's better to be safe than sorry," Professor Z replied. "Besides, they are fascinating creatures worth protecting. And, they're important to the ecosystem of this area."

"We're ready," announced Emilio, one of Professor Z's assistants.

The kids pulled on their diving masks and snorkels and slid off the side of the boat and into the water, following Emilio.

"Emilio will attach an electronic tracker to Oliver using this long pole," Professor Z shouted to them. "It has a special code, so only we can track"
him. Remember,” she warned, as they bobbed on the surface of the clear blue water, “you can swim up to Oliver, but you can’t touch him. Do you understand?” The kids all nodded in agreement.

“Follow me!” shouted Emilio, before disappearing below the surface.

The kids watched as the huge creature meandered along under them. Its massive gills flapped open and closed as it moved silently through the water.

Emilio motioned for the kids to dive a few feet deeper. Kicking their flippers as hard as they could, the gang caught up to Oliver’s face. Peering back at the kids was a giant black eye.

Emilio easily attached the electronic tracker to Oliver’s side. He motioned for the kids to go up. Slowly, Oliver turned and started out for deeper waters, swishing his tail goodbye.

The kids popped up to the surface. “Awesome!” they cried in unison. They high-fived each other excitedly.

One by one, Emilio pulled the kids out of the water and into the boat. Christina waited patiently for her turn to be pulled out.

---

**Boat Bumps and Tattoos**

Dark clouds billowed overhead. The wind picked up speed, making the water choppy and dark. The kayak that Christina had noticed before was being pushed closer to their vessel by the wind. A shiny, white suit jacket was draped over one side, but the man was gone!

Christina dove under the water’s surface to see if the man had jumped in. She suddenly felt very protective of Oliver. A school of brightly colored fish scurried past her.

**SPLASH!**

“Grant!” sputtered Christina, as she made it to the surface. Grant had plunged back into the water.

“Sorry, Christina!” apologized Grant. “I slipped!”

As Emilio reached out his hand to Christina, she spied a small red tattoo on the inside of his wrist—a tattoo of a feathered snake, just like the one on the jade stone!
The kids made it back to Casa Iguana seconds before the sky cracked with lightning. Grant munched on a mango in their room.

"I'm telling you, Grant, the two have to be connected!" Christina said.

"Nah! Just because some guy has a tattoo of a feathered snake on his wrist doesn't mean there's some big mystery to solve," he said between juicy bites.

"But the stone—it has that same exact symbol," Christina said.
"I'll bet it's a common symbol in Mexico. There is something weird about Tattoo Guy, though," Grant said.

"Weirder than the snake tattoo? OK, tell me," Christina challenged.

"Well, today, on the boat, I didn't really slip," admitted Grant.

"You didn't slip? You mean you fell on me on purpose?" asked Christina.

"No! And it wasn't on you, it was next to you!" he said defensively. "Emilio was pulling me out, but then he let go, and I fell back in."

"Emilio let you fall in? Aha! Probably so I wouldn't see Kayak Man swimming around," Christina reasoned.


Christina told her brother about the man in the white suit and fisherman’s hat. "All of it—the jade stone, Emilio the Tattoo Guy, and now Kayak Man—they’re connected for sure!"

Just then, a note slipped under the door. Grant hopped off the bed and picked it up. He showed it to Christina.

"Is this some type of clue? What do you think it means?" Christina said.

Grant wasn't listening. He was sprawled on the floor, peeking under the hotel door into the hallway.

"What are you doing? Looking for more iguanas?" Christina asked.

"No, I'm looking for shoes," said Grant. "If we know who left the clue, we can just ask them what it means. Saves time, right?"

"Oh, Grant!" said Christina. "Everyone's waiting for us at the café!"

Papa met the kids at the café entrance. "What an experience you all had this morning swimming with the whale sharks!" he exclaimed.

"It was so fun, Papa!" cried Grant between smoothie slurps. "Oliver was super gigantic!"
The Mystery at the Maya Ruins

He has a huge mouth that goes like this!” He demonstrated by pulling and stretching his face. Everyone, including the waiter, laughed at Grant’s facial contortions.

“Professor Z, Eva mentioned that the Maya used to live in this area of Mexico,” Christina said.

“Yes, they did,” replied Professor Z, still giggling from the show Grant put on. “The Yucatan Peninsula was inhabited long ago by the Maya people. For many centuries, they ruled the area. In fact, they’re still here!” she said.

“What do you mean?” asked Grant.

“Well, Grant, you’re looking at a real live Maya right now!” she replied.

“Whoaaaaa!” said Grant. “You mean you’re a real live Maya?”

“I certainly am,” Professor Z said with a big smile.

“Does a feathered snake have anything to do with Maya culture?” asked Christina.

“Oh, does it ever!” Professor Z answered. “The feathered serpent was a religious symbol to the Maya. The feathers represented the ability to fly like a god and the serpent represented the ability to move among the people.”

A shiver ran down Christina’s spine at the mention of snakes moving among the people.

Professor Z continued, “The Maya built a huge pyramid dedicated to the feathered serpent god. You can see their pyramid at the Chichen Itza ruins on the mainland.”

“And at night,” Mimi said, “they put on a light show. Tomorrow is July 16, the start of the Maya New Year. So, if you kids are interested in a little sightseeing, tomorrow should be pretty special.”

“Well, this sure sounds like an adventure in the making for you kids!” said Papa.

“Yessss!” exclaimed Grant. He high-fived Miguel in excitement.

“Great!” exclaimed Professor Z. “My niece Izzy has her own tour business. She graduated from my alma mater with a degree in archaeology, so she is quite the expert on Chichen Itza!”
Itchy Chickens!

The next morning, Mimi and Papa joined the kids on the 30-minute *Nine Hermanos* ferry ride from the island of Holbox to Chiquila on the mainland. Professor Z’s niece, Izzy, met them there.

“The ‘Lime-O-Zeen’ is here!” cried Grant.

“Ooh, I like that name!” said Izzy, as she helped the kids into her lime-green tour van. Izzy sported bug-eyed sunglasses and a floppy yellow hat.

As Izzy revved her engine, she announced, “Next stop: the ruins of Chichen Itza. Buckle up, sit back, and relax.”
Through the window of the van, the kids waved good-bye to Mimi and Papa.

Grant poked his seatmate Miguel in the ribs as they bounced along in Izzy’s van. “Hey, I’ve got a joke,” Grant said over the clicking of the motor. “Why did the itchy chicken cross the road?”

“I don’t know, why?” Miguel asked.

“So he could get to the back scratcher on the other side!” joked Grant.

“That’s a good one!” said Miguel, laughing. They shared jokes until their sides hurt—not so much from the jokes but from poking each other in the ribs.

“Why did we stop? Is this Itchy Chicken?” asked Grant when the van jolted to a sudden stop in the middle of the jungle. Enormous green plants sprang up in all directions.

“It’s not ‘Itchy Chicken,’” corrected Christina from the back seat. “It’s pronounced ‘chee-chen-eet-za.’ And no, we’re not there yet!”

“Well, Chichen sounds like chicken, and Itza rhymes with pizza,” said Grant. “And, that makes me hungry! Izzy, is this a pit stop for lunch?” he asked.

“Noope, this is no pit stop,” said Izzy, “not unless you want to eat with the monkeys! It’s just a bit of jungle traffic. A tree fell in the road, that’s all.”

Izzy slowly maneuvered the van around the fallen tree. Christina heard a tapping noise outside the van. She turned to look. Through the dusty back window, she could make out the shape of a feathered serpent face. It was staring at her with beady eyes.

“Aahhhhh!” screamed Christina. “Go, Izzy, drive! A snake man is trying to get in!” Soon, all the kids were screeching and yelling.

“Quiet down, kids,” Izzy said calmly. She adjusted her rear-view mirror. “It’s just your overactive imaginations playing tricks on you.

A tall figure with a feathered head scurried back into the jungle. “That was NOT our imagination!” the four yelled in unison.

“Well, it’s gone now,” Izzy said calmly. “It was probably just a monkey.”

The van’s motor and the blasting radio were loud enough to muffle the kids’ conversation.
The Mystery at the Maya Ruins

Christina and Grant told their new friends about the developing mystery.

"Clues?" asked Eva. "You think all of these things are clues? No wonder your grandmother writes such great stories! She has you two to find mysteries everywhere you go!"

"I never thought about it like that!" exclaimed Grant.

"Well, this jade stone just happens to show up in my backpack—a stone that has the same symbol as the tattoo on Emilio's wrist," said Christina. "Then, when I'm looking for Kayak Man, Emilio just happens to let Grant fall in the water."

"And don't forget about the feathered snake guy that just attacked the van," added Eva. "Right!" Christina exclaimed.

"And the 365 note back at the hotel," said Grant.

"And the Maya symbols on the back of the stone adding up to 365," added Miguel. "They've got to be clues!" cried Christina. "And something tells me they're leading us to Chichen Itza!"

Kukulkan, the Feathered Serpent

"Welcome to the ruins of Chichen Itza!" announced Izzy. "You'll find maps in your seat pockets. There are some really interesting facts on the back!"

The kids piled out of the Lime-O-Zeen. Stretching out in front of them was a large grassy area, and jutting up from the earth stood a huge white pyramid.
Grant and Miguel immediately ran toward it, dodging tourists along the way. Christina and Eva hurried after them.

“Don’t...ever...do...that...again!” huffed and puffed Izzy when she caught up to the kids. “You kids are my responsibility!”

“Sorry, Izzy,” Christina apologized. “My brother does this a lot!” She shot Grant an irritated look. “By the way, what does Chichen Itza mean?”

“Maya scholars believe it means ‘at the mouth of the well of the water sorcerer,’” explained Izzy, still out of breath. “We’ll visit the sacred well, or cenote, a little later.”

“So, who ruined it?” asked Grant.

**Kukulkan, the Feathered Serpent**

“Who ruined what?” asked Izzy.

“Chichen Itza,” answered Grant. “You said it was ruined.”

“Grant, ruins are just the remainders of old buildings or places,” Christina explained.

“Right, they’re ruined!” said Grant laughing. “And kangaroos did it.”

“What?” said the others in unison.

“Yeah, ‘roo-ins’—like in ‘Kanga-ruo-ins’,” said Grant.

“There aren’t any kangaroos in Mexico,” Eva said.

“Sure there are!” chimed in Miguel. “They escaped from the Mexico City Zoo and ruined the pyramid!”

“Not you, too!” cried Eva. Grant and Miguel began to hop around like kangaroos, chanting “Roo-ins! Roo-ins! Roo-ins!”

“Boys, boys!” shouted Izzy, shaking her head. “Follow me. Kangaroos have nothing to do with these ruins.”

Grant and Miguel nudged each other in the side, trying to keep from laughing.
"It’s gigantic!" exclaimed Christina.
"This is the Temple of Kukulkan," Izzy explained.
"Who or what was Kukul...?" began Christina.
"Kukulkan," Izzy repeated. "Among the Maya, Kukulkan was an important mythological figure—a feathered serpent god," Izzy answered.
"Mythological, mythological," Grant began chanting. Christina cupped her hand over his mouth to stop him.
Izzy continued, "One legend was about Kukulkan as a boy. The boy was born a feathered snake, so his sister had to hide and care for him in a cave. When he grew too big, he flew out of the cave and into the sea. Every July, he causes earthquakes to let his sister know that he is still alive."

Grant and Christina stared at each other in disbelief. "July?" Christina mouthed the word, knowing that it was smack in the middle of July right now.

"The Spanish called the pyramid El Castillo when they first saw it. To them it looked like a fortress," Izzy explained. "It was actually a Maya calendar built to honor Kukulkan."

"A calendar?" asked Christina. "But how?"
Izzy pointed at the pyramid. "The four staircases, one on each side of the pyramid, have 91 steps each. Add them up and they equal 364. Then, add the top step, and—"

Christina interrupted Izzy, "You get 365!"
Izzy spotted someone on the lawn and waved him down. "Excuse me, kids, I'll be right back!"

Christina pulled the paper clue out of her pocket and reread it to the others. "365, 91 in 4 directions, a ball of fire warms its top!"

"It’s talking about this pyramid," said Grant, "and 91 means the number of steps!"
"And ‘in four directions’ are the four sides of the pyramid," added Miguel.
"The ‘ball of fire’ is probably the sun warming the top of the pyramid," said Eva.

Christina finished the last part of the clue. "And ‘365’ is the number of steps in all and the number of days in a year."

Christina looked for Izzy among the tourists milling about the area. Many of them
followed tour guides speaking various languages. It was difficult to get a good look at the man Izzy was talking to. But when Christina spotted Izzy, something about her companion seemed familiar. And she noticed that every so often, Izzy stomped her foot and pointed toward the parking lot.

Christina felt for the piece of jade in her pocket. She pulled it out to show everyone. In the sunlight, it was translucent. The Mayan symbols on the back lined up perfectly with the serpent head on the front.

Eva said, “I think the snake head on the stone is Kukulkan. Listen to this,” she added, pointing to an information display. “It says here that at sunset on the spring and fall equinoxes, the body of Kukulkan moves along the steps of the pyramid until it meets its head at the bottom.”

Christina gulped audibly. “It’s a good thing it’s summer, then!” Snakes, spiders, and bats were not her thing AT ALL.

“Oh, no, Christina, it’s just a trick of the light,” said Eva. “It says the steps cast a shadow that only looks like the body of a giant snake crawling down the stairs.”

Kukulkan, the Feathered Serpent

“Well, that’s a relief!” cried Christina.

“Is this Kukulkan’s head?” shouted Grant from the base of the pyramid steps where a giant feathered snake head jutted out. Grant fit his head into its stone mouth.

“Grant! It’s alive!” Miguel joked.

Grant made a face and screamed like he was being eaten alive. He wiggled his leg in the air for effect.

The movement of Grant’s head in the serpent’s mouth dislodged a stone. “Ouch!” cried Grant.

Christina yelled, “Get out of there and stop goofing around, Grant!”
The Mystery at the Maya Ruins

"But, Christina, it really is alive! It's shooting stuff at me!" Grant rubbed his head and scowled at the snake head.

"Look!" shouted Christina. "Another piece of jade!" She picked it up and dusted it off. "It must have been hidden in the snake's mouth!"

The kids looked back at Izzy. She was still standing in the middle of the plaza. When she peered back at the kids and waved, she looked quite upset.

"Eva," said Christina, "I think you're right about the jade clue being about Kukulkan!"

Twisted Snakes

The kids gathered around Christina to study the new jade clue. Like the first piece, it was jagged on two sides. Etched on its surface were two peculiar looking snakes—the bodies were twisted together into a circle until their heads met.

"Gosh, the Maya sure liked snakes—probably as much as I do!" said Grant.

"Let's just hope we don't run into any real snakes on this tour!" said Christina.

She took the first jade piece out of her pocket and fit it together with the second piece.
"They fit like a puzzle!" exclaimed Eva.

Christina took the twisted snake clue and flipped it over to read the new numbers. "Grant, you are the Maya symbol expert. Help us out."

"Okay," agreed Grant. "There are three numbers this time: 2, 7, and 6."

Twisted Snakes

Christina quickly slipped the stones into her pocket when she saw Izzy approaching. "Sorry about that, kids," said Izzy. Her face was flushed and she was biting her lip. "Are you okay?" asked Eva. "Yes, of course," Izzy answered. "It's just a little hot out here, that's all!"

Christina asked, "Who was that?"

"That guy? Oh, he was just one of my old college professors," Izzy said. "But, without the fishing hat," mumbled Christina to herself.

"Excuse me?" Izzy said. "Oh, it's nothing," said Christina. "I just thought he looked familiar—you know, the suit and all."

Izzy seemed caught off guard. "Lots of men wear light cotton suits. It's the style around here in the summer."

Christina scanned the crowd of men and women wearing shorts and jeans. "I guess," she said doubtfully.

"Come on, Miguel," challenged Grant. "Let's see if the Maya really did the math right!"
The Mystery at the Maya Ruins

The boys bolted up the steps of the pyramid's north face. "One, two, three..." they shouted. But, by the fourth step, a guard had grabbed the two boys by their shirt collars. He shouted at them in Spanish to stay off the pyramid.

Izzy apologized to the guard and promised to keep the boys close.

"Boys," Izzy said, gritting her teeth, "you're lucky they didn't throw you in the jail for naughty tourist boys! Tourists aren't allowed to climb the Temple of Kukulkan anymore. It is off limits, understand?" she warned. "Now, I have to make a phone call. I'll be back in a minute." She pulled a candy bar from her back pocket and took a giant bite before heading off in the opposite direction.

She turned back suddenly and said, "Look at your maps and decide where you want to go next. And NO CLIMBING THE PYRAMID!"

Christina motioned the kids into a huddle. "Do the twisted snakes or the numbers 2, 7, and 6 mean anything to you?"

Grant raised his hand.

Twisted Snakes

"Grant, this isn't school, but go ahead," Christina said. "You know what the snakes and numbers mean?"

"Well, I was just wondering if you had any snacks in your backpack," he said. "I think I'm about to pass out from hunger!"

"You're always hungry, Grant," Christina teased.

"Well, I wasn't until I saw Izzy's candy bar!" Grant whined.

Christina pulled out a box of cookies and bottles of water for everyone.

"Thanks for the water and the bosh of cookies!" kidded Grant. He giggled and everyone laughed at his joke.

"Christina, stop littering," scolded Grant, motioning toward a piece of paper near her feet. "This is a World Heritage site, after all."

"I wasn't littering! It fell out of my backpack. There's a difference!" Christina said defensively.

She leaned down to pick up the piece of paper and unfolded it. "It's another clue!" whispered Christina excitedly.
“Come on!” Christina said. “There are too many people here.” The kids sprinted to a quieter corner of the pyramid. Christina unfolded the clue. She read it out loud:

The eye of a needle in the lita ancient rubber, skulls on sticks.
The Mystery at the Maya Ruins

"I know this one!" cried Grant. "The vendors are selling bubble gum and they have sewing supplies for sale. Come on!"

"Hang on!" Christina said and caught the back of Grant's t-shirt. "What about the skulls on sticks and the letter L?"

"They probably sell those too!" he said.

"There you are!" said Izzy, marching up behind them. "You kids really need to learn to stay in one place! So where are we off to next?" she asked.

"Rubber and skulls?" suggested Christina. "Oh, you mean the Great Ball Court?" Izzy guessed.

The kids grew wide-eyed. "Yeeeeses!" they said in unison, nodding their heads emphatically. "That's what we mean."

"Hmmm," grunted Izzy, looking the kids up and down.

To their surprise, Izzy tore off running. Her floppy, yellow hat bounced up and down.

It was hard to keep up with her. They could hear her laughing. "Follow me!" she cried.

The Eye of the Needle

The gang stood at one end of the Great Ball Court. Carvings depicting scenes from the games were etched along the high walls. Izzy was nowhere in sight.

"Izzy, are you here?" shouted Eva.

"Eva, are you sure this is the Great Ball Court?" Christina asked, opening her map.

"Christina," whispered a voice.

Christina looked around. "Did you hear a voice call my name?"

"I hear Izzy's voice, but I don't see her," said Eva.

"Grant," came the whisper again.

"Izzy, where are you?" shouted Miguel.

"She's got to be here somewhere," said Eva. The group of kids turned in quiet circles.

"Miguel," whispered the voice. "Eva."

Suddenly, a ball came flying hard past Christina's ear. "This isn't funny, Izzy!" Christina cried.

"Ooh, a ball!" said Grant. He chased after it. In a flash, a colorful feathered serpent came swooshing by the kids. It grabbed Christina's pink backpack.
"My bag!" shouted Christina. "Catch him!"
Thinking quickly, Grant rolled the ball as hard as he could. It crossed the thief's path, causing him to trip and fall. The backpack came free from his grip and skidded to a stop at Eva's feet.
"Got it!" cried Eva.
The thief took off running to the other end of the court.
Just then, they heard a cry.
"Izzy!" they shouted and darted off to find her sitting on the ground, dazed and confused.
"Izzy!" everyone shouted together. "Are you okay?"
"I'm fine," said Izzy. "Some guy in a costume just ran me over!"
"You know, it looked a lot like the feathered serpent guy that tapped on the van window in the jungle!" cried Miguel.
"Now, do you believe us?" Grant asked Izzy.

Snakes and Skulls

"Was that you whispering our names earlier?" asked Christina.
Izzy nodded. "Cool trick, huh? I was hiding down there when I whispered your names. For some reason, you can hear a whisper from one end of the court to the other. No one can give me a good explanation as to why, though."
Grant tossed the ball they found high in the air. "This ball is pretty heavy. Do you know what it's made of, Izzy?"
"It's made from the sap of rubber trees," replied Izzy. "Wait! Where did you get that?"