

Two girls.
Separated by two thousand years.
Linked by one treasure.

Becca doesn't want to go on the family vacation to Israel. Too far and too hot. Being dragged to an archeological site at Tel Maresha was not on her summer agenda. But to her surprise, in the ancient underground caves Becca finds something unexpected that will spark her curiosity about the past.

. . .

More than two thousand years earlier, amid rising tensions among the people around Tel Maresha, Rebeka's family makes a painful choice to leave their home and friends and head to Athens. But in the hurry to flee, Rebeka loses something precious, and she's desperate to find it before leaving her home forever.



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The Treasure of Tel Maresha



BY TAMMAR STEIN
ILLUSTRATED BY BARBARA BONGINI



To real life friends Delaney and Zoë – TS

To my family, who always supports me
in life and work. – BB

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CHAPTER ONE

THE CAVE

My name is Becca Goldstein, and this is the story of how I became famous.

It's okay if you've never heard of me. There are all kinds of famous. There's rock star famous. Movie star famous. Fancy chef famous. I'm not that kind of famous.

But if you ask any archaeologist in Israel about me, they'll know who you're talking about.

I never set out to be famous. In fact, when my parents told me we were taking a trip to Israel, I didn't even want to go.

After the long flight, I was still in a very bad mood when we arrived for our vacation.

On the second day of the trip, our tour bus stopped at an archaeological dig in the middle of nowhere. A sign announced that we were in Beit Guvrin, a national park.

“Mom,” I said as the people in front of us disembarked, “can I stay on the bus?”

It was so hot outside. It was like standing inside an oven. The sun gave me a headache, and the sweat made my skin break out in a rash.

“Really, Becca?” my mom said grabbing her backpack as she stood to exit the bus. “This is



such a special trip, and you've done nothing but complain."

I wanted to explain that I never asked to go to Israel. I wasn't interested in ancient history. I wanted to be back home with my friends.

But I didn't know how to say any of those things. Instead, I followed my family down the narrow bus aisle. I rubbed the friendship bracelet Zoe had given me before I left for this trip. Zoe was really good at making friendship bracelets. She could make all kinds of cool patterns, and she made me one with lavender, turquoise, and navy blue zigzags because those are my favorite colors. Zoe knew how to make spiral staircase, ladder stitch, diamonds, and a heart pattern. I could do only diagonals and chevrons. She was supposed to teach me how to make the other designs this summer, but . . . I was in Israel instead.

The gravel parking lot overlooked a wide, dusty-looking plain. I could see a few trees and lots of thorny shrubs, so different from the lush green trees and rolling hills of Massachusetts.

“Shalom! I’m Iris, your guide,” chirped a woman wearing khaki pants and an I D I G ARCHAEOLOGY shirt. “Welcome to Tel Maresha!”

Our guide had curly hair in a thick braid down her back and bright blue eyes that twinkled with excitement. She spoke with an American accent.

“What do you think of this place?” she asked, pitching her voice so that everyone in the group could hear. “If you were house-hunting a few thousand years ago, would you think this was a good place to settle down?”

No one said anything.

“There’s an ancient saying about what matters most in a house,” she said. “Location, location, location.”

A few people laughed.

“That’s true now, and it was true then. So, what does a good location in the ancient desert have?”

“Water!” someone called out.

“Correct! Anything else?”

“Food!” my mom said.

“A good school district,” our dad added.

“Ha, good one. Now look around,” Iris said, pointing. “Over there is a stream that runs year-round. That means water. Does anyone know what those trees are?”

“Olive trees?” Mom guessed.

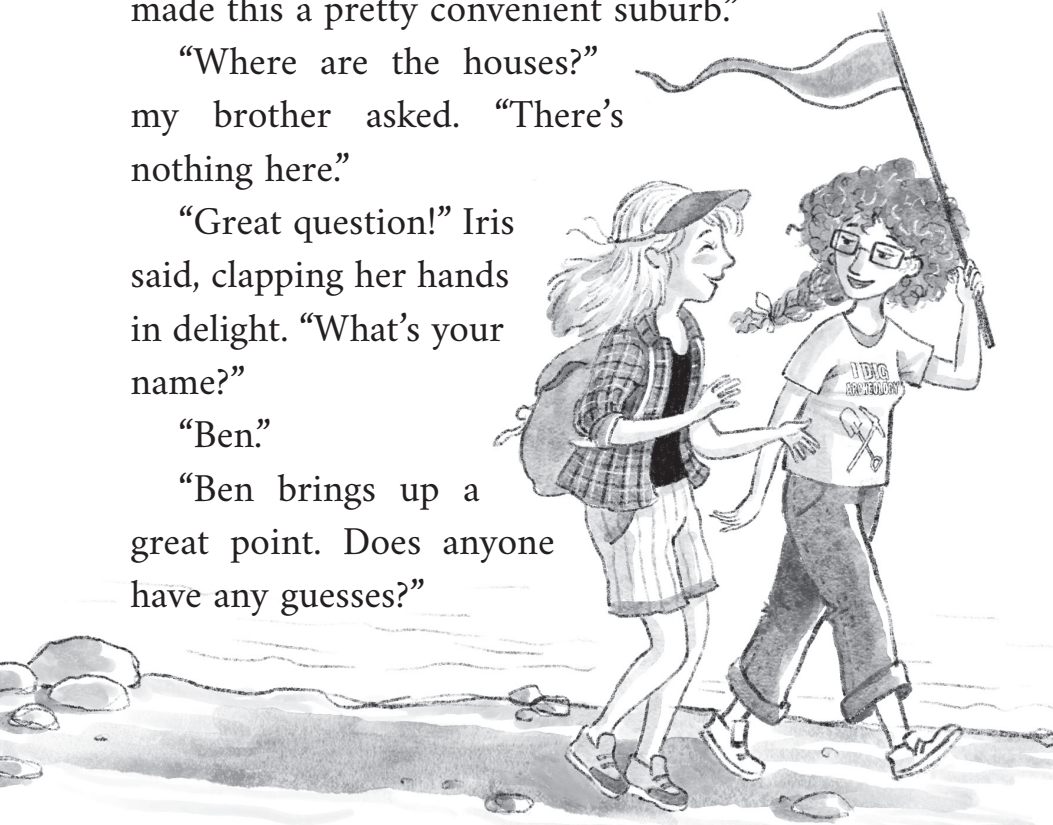
“Yes! And the bigger ones? Anyone?” When no one answered, she said, “Those are carob trees. This soil is also great for growing barley and wheat. So, we’ve got food and water covered. Maresha is about a day’s walk from Jerusalem, which in ancient times made this a pretty convenient suburb.”

“Where are the houses?” my brother asked. “There’s nothing here.”

“Great question!” Iris said, clapping her hands in delight. “What’s your name?”

“Ben.”

“Ben brings up a great point. Does anyone have any guesses?”



Ben looked pleased with the compliment.

“It was too hot, so they moved away?” I meant to sound funny, but no one laughed. Instead, my mom glared at me.

“Hmmm . . . interesting idea,” Iris said. “What’s your name?”

“Becca.”

“Well, Becca, you’re not wrong. It is really hot out here! And it was really hot twenty-two hundred years ago. To find out the answer to Ben’s question and to Becca’s observation you’ll need to follow me.”

Iris began leading us away from the tour bus. I shot one last look at the great big bus with its powerful air-conditioning. Then I followed her down the narrow path toward some canopies in the distance.

“Under our feet,” Iris said, stomping her foot, “are more than five thousand man-made caves. How do we know the caves aren’t natural? There are chisel marks on the walls.”

“Why did they make so many caves?” someone asked.

“They used the limestone that they dug out of the caves to build their houses. Then they used the caves for storing food and goods. There were water cisterns for storing water. There were oil presses down there. They even kept live pigeons. But as soon as we descend down the ladder to one of them, you’re going to understand the most important reason the caves exist.”

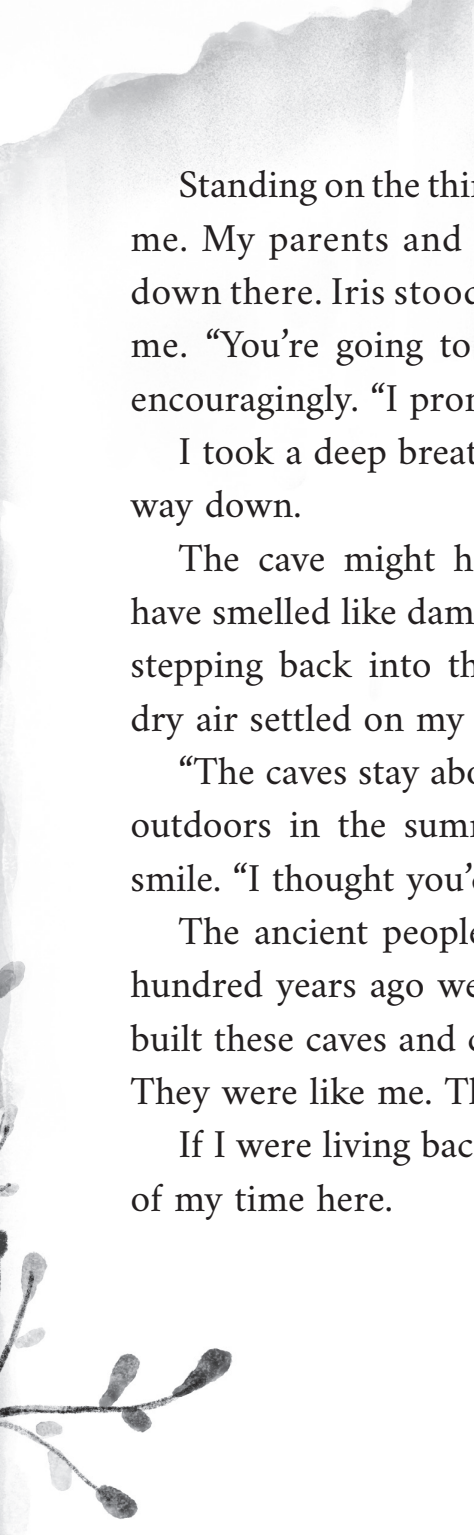
It wasn’t until Iris pointed it out that I noticed a large hole in the ground. There was a mesh canopy over it and the top of a ladder sticking out. I peeked down into the hole. Just a string of electric lights illuminated the gloom below.

Iris went down first, and one by one our group followed her down the sturdy ladder.

I hesitated. It felt weird, almost scary, to leave the surface and climb down into an ancient cave. *Was it safe? Were there bugs down there?* I rubbed my friendship bracelet, wishing I were with Zoe instead of at the top of a creepy hole headed underground.

“Come on, Becca,” Ben urged me. “You’re holding everyone up!”





Standing on the third rung, I looked down behind me. My parents and half the group were already down there. Iris stood at the bottom, looking up at me. “You’re going to like it down here,” she said encouragingly. “I promise.”

I took a deep breath and climbed the rest of the way down.

The cave might have been dimly lit. It might have smelled like damp and dirt. But it also felt like stepping back into the air-conditioned bus. Cool, dry air settled on my skin, and I sighed in relief.

“The caves stay about thirty degrees cooler than outdoors in the summer,” Iris said to me with a smile. “I thought you’d appreciate that.”

The ancient people who lived here twenty-two hundred years ago were brilliant. No wonder they built these caves and connected them with tunnels. They were like me. They hated the heat!

If I were living back then, I would have spent all of my time here.