

To  
Lynn Q. Marzulli & Lenore C. Marzulli,  
my parents, who pointed the WAY



*The Unholy Deception*

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*Prelude:*  
*Somewhere in the Middle East*

**T**here are evil spirits here—bad jinn—I can feel it, the aged shepherd thought, pressing his back against the stone that towered above him.

He gazed into the night sky and called out the names of constellations, trying to ease his fear, then muttered a prayer to Allah.

*Yes, bad jinn in this place,* the old man thought, running his hand over the face of the stone, feeling its weathered surface. His father had told him that the jinn had erected these gargantuan rocks in a semicircle in the time before the great flood. On certain nights the jinn were said to visit, and woe to any traveler who found himself there when they did.

*Allah protect me and this fool of a nephew,* he thought as he listened to the tinkling of bells from his goats. He looked at the sky again and whispered another prayer. It was through the carelessness of his nephew, now fast asleep, that they found themselves in this unholy place. The young man had allowed his small herd of goats to wander beyond their traditional grazing area and out to where these giant rocks stood. In the morning they would leave this place to the jinn and other spirits.

Far in the distance, a single light caught his eye. The old man sat upright and grabbed his staff. He watched as the light moved toward him, growing larger all the time. And then he heard it, the sound of many swords in the air. It was

an expression his father had used to describe the sound of a helicopter. His father had been just a boy when he'd first heard a helicopter and had thought it was an evil jinn, come to get him.

The old man wondered what a helicopter was doing out here in the wilderness.

His nephew stirred.

*The boy will never be any good,* he thought, rising to his feet.

"Uncle?" the boy asked.

"For the love of Allah, get up and make sure the goats don't loosen their tethers."

"Uncle, what's that noise?"

"Many swords in the air," he snapped.

The boy watched the growing light as the helicopter grew closer.

"What is it going to do, Uncle?"

"What?" the old man grunted, pretending not to hear.

The helicopter descended, and as it did, a brilliant beam of light shot out from under it, playing over the vast expanse of desert sand.

"Let's get out of here!" the old man yelled.

"Uncle—"

"Get the goats! Untie them, you worthless son of a jinn!"

The boy hurried to the goats.

The old man grabbed his staff tighter and offered another prayer to Allah.

"I have them all, Uncle," the boy cried out.

The old man took one last look at the helicopter, then ran to join his nephew. He grabbed the tether of the lead goat and headed into the darkness, away from the giant rocks. Away from the helicopter and the bad jinn.

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Flying close to the desert floor, the helicopter began to crisscross over the large outcroppings of rock from which the goatherd and his nephew had retreated. Its spotlight played

over the area, but kept returning to one large megalith of stone, the one in the center of the half circle. The chopper hovered over it for a moment, then began to descend. It landed, creating a sudden sandstorm from its whirling blades.

The engine shut down, a side door opened, and a dozen men clothed in gray jumpsuits scrambled out. A few moments later, artificial lamps were switched on and the area at the base of the rock was illuminated in garish light.

One man worked a sonar device. He walked, holding the wand in front of him, listening for any reaction in his headphones as he monitored the display screen.

He passed over an area in front of the megalith. The needles jumped, and his headphones responded with a constant chirping. He backed away a few steps, then moved forward, checking the same area. The needles jumped again and the chirping resumed.

"I think I've located it here," the operator called. He took a canister of spray paint from a pouch on his belt and marked a rectangle ten feet square in fluorescent orange. Moments later, the rest of the men began to dig. They worked in shifts of four. Each group would dig for exactly two minutes. Then they were replaced by the next four, who would continue for another two minutes, and they in turn would be replaced by the next group of men. As the sand and debris were removed, the hole in the desert floor began to deepen. Aluminum panels, held in place with hand-pumped hydraulic cross braces, were used to shore up the sides.

When they had reached a depth of ten feet, one of the diggers struck something solid with his shovel. He cleared away a portion of the sand from the object. The three other men in his crew dropped to their knees and brushed away the sand with their hands, while those from other crews helped, using brooms to sweep away the remaining sand. Soon an outline emerged of a large square stone.

The supervisor took out his walkie-talkie. "I think we've found it, sir."

The man's walkie-talkie crackled. "You *think* you found it or you *did* find it? Which is it?"

The man hesitated and looked down at the uncovered stone. He swallowed hard and replied, "Did, sir."

"Splendid. We'll be right down. See that all is ready, Mr. Sanders," came the reply.

Sanders shouted to the men, who began to construct a ladder down into the pit.

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Arthur Bernstein, archaeologist, was sweating. He was nauseous, too, from the erratic flight of the chopper. He pawed at the collar of his shirt, trying to loosen it, and popped a button off in the process. He attempted to wiggle his toes in his boots, then realized, to his consternation, that his feet were swollen and numb. He took a deep breath and hoisted himself up, using the strap hanging from the roof of the chopper that he had held onto during the flight. Two of his hand-picked assistants, Jim Gleason and Bob Haney, both experienced archaeologists, eyed him.

He nodded at the men.

"What did he say?" he called to Mr. Wyan, the leader of the expedition, who handed the walkie-talkie to an assistant.

"They've found it, Dr. Bernstein," Wyan stated.

Bernstein forgot about his swollen feet and shuffled his way past crates of equipment until he came alongside Wyan, who towered over him. "Are we going down, then?" he asked, wiping another gush of sweat from his forehead.

Wyan smoothed back his dark slick hair. "As soon as you're up to it, Doctor," he said in a derogatory tone.

Bernstein wiped his forehead and signaled Gleason and Haney to join him. "We're ready, Mr. Wyan," he said, shifting his bulk from one leg to the other.

Wyan looked at him with cold, unblinking eyes. Bernstein felt his nausea increase as those eyes bored into him. He looked away. *He's got the eyes of a shark—merciless, he*