

## **VALLEY OF THE SUPERSTITIONS**

A Soft Paranormal Thriller by Paul Lambrecht

Alberto Rodriguez, once more, finds himself in a troubling situation. He's been forced out as head of the Archaeology department at Arizona State University, and now has a small office in the basement of the University of Phoenix, where he teaches an online course and puts out a small underground periodical called Modern Pulp.

He has just gotten his hands on a very ancient and potent relic, a koyemsi helmet, sacred to the Pueblo peoples, and which he believes has strange and frightening powers. He won it gambling, the only issue is it was promised to an anonymous buyer, and Alberto believes he is being stalked and he will eventually be killed for it.

He has just been recently approached by an eccentric miner from Globe, Arizona, named Joe Hagan, who claims he has found a strange possibly Mesoamerican glyph, some bones, and the signature of a famous Spanish explorer in a cavern near his property near the Bluebird Mine in Globe. Together they crash a meeting of the North Creek Historical Society, headed by a friend of Alberto, named Stuart Lesdents, who agrees to pay Hagan his asking price for access to the site, \$5000.

Alberto and Hagan explore the site, then something curious happens. Alberto has disappeared with whatever information he discovered at the site, and Lesdents is naturally upset by this.

The last thing Alberto did before he skipped town was call his brother Mateo, who is a professor of Mesoamerican History at the University of Mexico City. In his message he says he's in trouble, multiple malicious parties are coming after him, and he's clearing his head in Santa Fe. He requests that his brother come up to Phoenix and get a hold of the helmet, so that Alberto, if he's caught, has a bargaining chip for his life.

Before he hangs up he tells his brother one more cryptic thing. This time it's real, I've found evidence that everything I was investigating is really real. Please, come be a part of this.

Concerned for his brother, but used to this type of drama, Mateo decides to go. The next day he gets on his Vespa motorscooter and heads up the highway, a journey of nearly a thousand miles, through very hostile terrain.

As he nears Phoenix, Mateo notices many odd things about the southern Arizona Sonoran desert countryside. Past the desolate and abandoned border crossing, there are many miles of exploded minefields. Following these enormous dust storms rage, thrown up by huge weather-making machines near Tucson. Mateo emerges on the other side of one of these yellow storms in a transfigured world. On the other end, on cacti ribbing either side of the interstate, convicts are hanging limply crucified. The rumors are true. The evil sheriff here, Vick Taylor, has been indulging in his own unique brand of harshly punitive frontier justice.

Mateo says a silent prayer. He is soon pulled over by one of Vick's deputies, who is first and foremost astounded at the audacity of a Mexican national traveling up to Phoenix on a motorscooter. He checks out Mateo's passport and allows him to proceed but warns him it probably isn't all that good of an idea.

That night, Mateo sleeps in the little Yacqui Indian hamlet known as Guadalupe or Mini-Mexico, which has remained outside of Vick's jurisdiction. The next morning he awakes to search out his brother.

His first stop is at the storage locker where Alberto has left him the Koyemsi helmet.

In the back of the musty cannabis-smelling locker, Mateo finds it on a velveteen pillow. It is an earthy red mud color and very beautiful. As Mateo admires it, he is silently joined by a dark elegant man who introduces himself as Stuart Lesdents.

Lesdents has followed Mateo from Alberto's apartment, and wants to know of Alberto's whereabouts. Mateo claims not to know. Lesdents is a friendly guy and he invites Mateo to a soiree at his mansion in the northern foothills. Mateo wants to know more about this whole strange business so he accepts the offer.

Mateo hides the helmet under some clothes in the wardrobe of his hotel room and sets out on the long jaunt north. He is pulled over innumerable times by suspicious deputies, but after saying the password many many times, he eventually arrives at the party, where all of Phoenix's glitterati are out tonight.

Lesdents takes him off to a gallery upstairs, later that night, where he shows Mateo another curious relic. However this one is Egyptian. It is an ornate decorative hat covered in the iconography of Osiris, Lord of the Underworld. Mateo is impressed. Lesdents informs him that this Egyptian hat and his Koyemsi helmet actually have a lot in common, but he won't say more.

Mateo leaves later that night with Lesdents's niece Katy, who thinks he is actually his brother, Alberto, and they go back to Mateo's hotel room. That night he has a very strange dream.

He sees a dance circle of Katsinas, or Star People, as they were known to the Pueblo peoples, dancing in a moonlit gully in the desert. A Koyemsi, or mudhead, has guided him to it. Then all of a sudden they have disappeared.

Mateo decides to travel back to Lesdents's castle the next day. There Lesdents offers him a proposition. Go to Hagan's cave, and see what there is to be seen, and bring back photographic evidence. Then together, they can track Alberto's steps. Mateo agrees.

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Hagan takes Mateo into the old mineshaft which leads up to an underground cavern in the limestone. There amid stalactites and stalagmites, Hagan reveals the glyph, the bones, and the explorer's signature.

Mateo recognizes the glyph as belonging to the old Toltec god, Quetzalcoatl, and the signature as belonging to Fray Marcos de Niza, a Franciscan friar who explored the northern Sonoran basin on a mission to Cibola in 1538. The bones he has no idea. It is also odd that the date carved into the stone beneath the explorer's signature is 1558, 20 years after both the missionary and military expeditions north, and also the year de Niza was held to have died.

Mateo takes photographs and brings them back to an astounded and dumbfounded Lesdents.

Lesdents does not understand the full consequence of all this treasure trove but he knows one thing for sure. Alberto has deduced enough to cut him out of the pursuit of this mystery. At this point, Mateo fills in Lesdents that Alberto has gone on to Santa Fe, so this is where Lesdents and Mateo now go.

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They arrive in Santa Fe a couple of days behind Alberto and it does not appear as if he is still in town.

Their first stop in town is the old mission. There a padre gives them a tour of the small church and catacombs. He points out a curious feature in the basement. The largest sarcophagus is not for an abbot or anyone illustrious, instead it was for the mission handyman named Henry Childs, who was kicked in the head by a mule in 1836. Another curious thing are the portraits in the chapel gallery, where some of the past padres were immortalized. One face in particular seems to recur over and over again with subtle variations.

In the plaza outside Mateo is stopped by an old Indian, selling turquoise artifacts. He appears blind, but grabs Mateo's hand skillfully and appears to be reading the lines of Mateo's palm. Then he regards Mateo with his milky eyes, all the while it seems as if time has ground to a halt. At last he asks Mateo if he has been having strange dreams. Mateo says he has, and the old man assures him this is a great gift, and that he has been chosen for a great journey. After a seeming eternity, the old man lets go of Mateo's hand grabs up his marketwares and disappears through an alley. There was something very strange about the old man; Mateo noticed a slender breathing tube leading from the old man's nostril into what looked like a hump on his back. Then Mateo notices a turquoise dreamcatcher in his hand. He keeps it hid from Lesdents.

Their next stop is an attorney off the plaza where Lesdents wants to check about this Henry Childs. The attorney turns pale white. Just the other day another little brown man had come on the exact same errand. He tells them that Childs was an alias for a man who had appeared to leave a number of items to supposed heirs over hundreds of years. All these items were contained in a safety deposit box at the Old Bank of Santa Fe.

At the Old Bank, they are notified by the manager that the box had been opened days before and that it was now available for rent, but had not been cleaned for hundreds of years.

Lesdents asks to see it. There traced into a layer of dust and dirt and grimy yellow page corners, is a reproduction of the Quetzalcoatl glyph, the initials “A” and “R”, the date 5/2/12 and the letters “PHX”.

It looked like Alberto had beaten them there and tracked whatever he was looking for, apparently this mask object, back to Phoenix.

On the flight back, Mateo has a second dream. In it his brother is walking alone down a street at night when a little carload of hunchbacks in robes drives past then stops. They bang on Alberto with hard-looking long flutes, then they toss him into the back of the trunk and squeal off, tires smoking.

Mateo returns to Alberto’s apartment to find it ransacked. Similarly, Lesdents’s castle gallery has been robbed of the Osiris spear.

Mateo is familiar enough with Alberto’s habits to look for him at the casino. There he finds his brother’s car.

Inside he is “recognized” by a drunk reporter for the Arizona Republic, who’s been gambling for days on end. He is surprised to see Mateo, after seeing him led out just hours before by a bunch of little robed hunchbacks.

Mateo is horrified by this, and tries to get more info out of the hapless reporter, to no avail. Just then he is sighted by these curious hunchbacks who take off after him through the casino. Mateo escapes to the lot and blasts off on his scooter. The hunchbacks give up chase and Mateo after losing them returns to Alberto’s vehicle.

In the front seat in a Crown Royal velvet pouch, Mateo discovers a strange vial labeled, “Pulque 231”. He puts it in his pocket and zooms back to his hotel room in Alberto’s Jeep.

He takes all the relics in his possession now, the helmet, the dreamcatcher and the vial and puts them together in a knapsack. Then he makes a phone call to Lesdents’s niece Katy, the girl from the party who he had hit it off with nights before, and who still thinks he is actually his brother Alberto.

As she works for Positive Associations Incorporated a known government contractor on R & D for classified military special operations, and Mateo wants these relics studied for any strange properties.

Katy agrees to help him, and he meets her the next morning on PositSoc's corporate campus. She takes him to an extra-specially secure building where she introduces him to her friend Trent, an engineer.

Trent agrees to analyze the objects in his lab and is immediately convinced he has something really crazy on his hands. He conducts a few experiments and suspects the relics are in telepathic communication with one another, and possibly even the humans who carry them. Also using a lab mouse he proves that the relics are capable of spontaneous DNA cell repair. He is about to figure out even more when the lights go dim, the doors locked, and the klaxons of alarms go off.

The building is being raided. Trent rigs an improvised phosphorus bomb to go off as deputies storm into the lab through the great steel door. Katy and Mateo use Trent's badge to escape out the back of the building, still in possession of the relics.

They rush to Katy's car and manage to get out as deputy patrol car after car file into the building.

They flee to Katy's apartment, which is already swarming with cops. Mateo directs them to Mini-Mexico where they wander aimlessly around the little Indian cemetery and then end up in the Una Luna Cantina, resigned to pretty much whatever fate will have them. There will be no escape from Maricopa County for them.

On TV's inside the bar they see their photos plastered all over the news bulletins. The bartender seems sanguine about the possibility of holy hell visiting on them. Finally, the deputies arrive on a tip and surround the bar. The bartender has his shotgun ready, a martyr's death. Mateo and Katy flee to the roof of the bar where Lesdents's helicopter is awaiting them.

He looks much aged in the day or so since Mateo last saw him. They chopper out to Lesdents's castle where already Vick has massed a small army outside Lesdents's wrought-iron gates. It is just a matter of time until they are captured.

Inside on the TV, a short video is playing on a loop with a gloating terrifying Vick standing near the bloody body of Mateo's brother Alberto. He is folded over a wooden sawhorse and appears to be on his last legs.

It is Vick's attempt to lure them out before the castle is taken. In the background of the video image, Lesdents notices the distinctive spire of Weaver's Needle, an extinct volcano in the Superstition Mountains. Lesdents knows they are at Taylor Ranch in Tortilla Flat, Arizona.

As they are trapped, their only sensible option is to try and escape again via helicopter, but this time Vick is expecting it.

They are escorted far east across Mesa and Apache Junction then north over the Superstitions and east across Canyon Lake. There they are forced down and marched into meet the evil sheriff on his own terms.

Mateo and his brother are finally reunited.

Vick is sitting in front of a vanity with globe lightbulbs, like from some starlet's dressing room. However his face is missing. In its place there is a shallow shoal of waving green tentacles. Katy faints. Vick laughs then picks up a clear shell which is draped over the scalp of a marble bust of Julius Caesar.

Vick applies the shell to his face and his accustomed appearance is restored.

"It's the Mask of Quetzalcoatl!" shouts Lesdents.

It is the source of Vick's evil powers.

He imprisons Katy, Mateo, and Lesdents in a basement dungeon, while he decides what to do with them.

That night they are awakened from an uneasy sleep by machine gun fire. The ranch is under attack! Deputies come to take them up the stairs and out to waiting convoy trucks. Vick is dressed in full Apache warrior regalia and armed to the teeth. He suddenly levitates in the air and crashes out the skylight, shooting at the attackers.

He comes back in, truly terrifying, face painted, terrible frightening eyes. He shouts at his deputies to take all the prisoners to the base, then utters some curses about the FBI and Napolitano, who are ostensibly committing the raid.

Then he flies off again, and more shooting occurs.

The deputies emerge in the front alley of the ranch near the carriage turn with all the idling trucks and try to provide cover to move the prisoners. But they are all mown down by sniper fire. Mateo sees an opportunity. He frees his mostly dead brother from his bonds with a Kitana blade mounted on the wall. Then, with Katy's help they hobble him to the front door, and perceiving the coast to be clear, take him out to a truck.

Meanwhile, an agent has set fire to the curtains inside the house and smoke now billows out the front door. Mateo runs back to the ranch to see what has come of Lesdents and perceives a terrifying sight, the now much older Lesdents burning into a lump of bright carbon, near the windows, seemingly resigned to this fate.

Mateo rushes back to the truck and steers it down the driveway and back onto the old Apache Trail.

They drive in silence, Katy weeping, and Alberto moaning, on their way back to Phoenix.

A couple miles further, Alberto rouses and starts freaking out wondering where he is being taken. Mateo tells him a hospital and Alberto reacts by madly grabbing at the steering wheel sending them careening into a ditch.

Alberto grabs the knapsack with the helmet and pulquito in it and takes off into the cold night desert. Mateo and Katy have been knocked out.

Mateo and Katy wake the next day dehydrated and beaten up. The hot desert sun has begun to mount and they know they must quickly find shelter and relief. Mateo remembers passing a lake in the dark so they make their way there in the sandy shoulder of the two-lane paved road.

They make it to the lake where there is a marina and many docked boats. Mateo breaks into the mechanic's shed and grabs keys for the boats in the wet slips. They find a suitable boat where they can hide out and Mateo goes out for food. He finds some at the nearby abandoned cantina.

They try to cover their tracks because they know Vick will be looking for them. After a couple of nights laying low in the boat, Mateo notices something odd. The water level in their cove raises and lowers several feet during the night, then raises again by morning.

He decides to investigate. During the night he makes his way to the dam which leads down to the channel to Phoenix's grand canal. Many convoy trucks, similar to the one Alberto wrecked, come from Taylor Ranch to a checkpoint near the dam each night. There they turn into the desert. Mateo goes around to the dam along the lakeside, and there in very faint gray light he sees an amazing sight.

The dam's gates have been closed and all the water in the cove below has flowed down the channel. Convoy trucks churn through the mud of the cove bottom towards an enormous steel door.

Vick has an underwater base!

Mateo sneaks back and tells Katy what he's found. They have a decision to make. Try to sneak into the base and die trying to solve this mystery once and for all, or maybe even stop Vick in whatever his evil plans, or hang out on the boat until they're discovered then perhaps tortured. Their decision is a little easier because the cantina is now reoccupied, by a group of deputies and scary-looking bikers, who appear to be trafficking in frightened half-dressed women.

They decide they will try to sneak into the base on a truck. That night they go back along the lakeside but instead of going down the dam, they go up and over onto the high rocks which overlook the road the convoy trucks take from the checkpoint down to the base.

There Mateo perceives his chance. Teetering on the edge of a large flat rock is a talon-shaped stone. As Mateo approaches it he realizes it is special and has a unique purpose.

He instructs Katy to wait closer to the bottom of the hill near the road. As the line of convoy trucks pass, Mateo waits until there is only one more, then attempts to push the rock onto the road below and block the last truck's progress. Unfortunately it won't budge. Their window is slipping!

With one last mighty shove, there is the sound of shrill ghostly chirping, similar to the sounds of the old Indian in Santa Fe, a wind comes up and the talon-shaped rock falls and crashes directly into the truck's cowling.

The shocked deputies emerge from the cab and heft the stone off the hood. Meanwhile, Mateo and Katy slip into the back of the truck amid explosives, fuel, drill bits, and other mining equipment.

Soon they are inside Vick's underwater base. Once the truck has stopped they quickly sneak out and run to the sides of what is an enormous rotunda-shaped cavern. There is very little light except for around a command center of treads and a hydraulic lift near the mouth of an enormous hole drilled into the earth. Katy and Mateo slowly make their way to the lift where they are shocked to see Vick, in his terrifying Apache cross-dresser guise, and Trent the engineer from PositSoc in earnest discussion in the lifted command center.

Obviously Trent was persuaded to help in the excavation of whatever Vick was doing here.

Vick now takes off and flies down the long tunnel. Using his dreamcatcher, Mateo tries to send telepathic messages to Trent to come out of the command center and use the Portapotty near which Mateo and Katy have hid themselves.

Finally he does and after his initial shock, tries his best to explain what Vick is up to.

Vick has found an underground vault, supposedly filled with relics and technology like these others, and possibly even Montezuma's missing treasure hoard. The only problem is it is sealed with a strange door covered in glyphs and imbued with strange spirits and paranormal properties. Apart from entering through this door, the vault is surrounded in an impenetrable substance.

Therefore Vick has spent billions and decades trying to surreptitiously drill to this door and find a way to unlock it all without having his designs observed by the US federal government.

The drill is close to the vault now, says Trent. Tonight or tomorrow. Suddenly Vick screams back out the tunnel and Trent scampers off into the Portapotty then back to the command center lift without another look their way.

Katy and Mateo try to hide amongst the little sleeping bag village of the sorry staff of involuntary mole-people.

By this point Vick has managed to read Trent's mind and he knows the intruders are there. He decided its good fortune indeed to have a Mesoamerican scholar on his team, in order to decode the door riddle and gain entrance to the vault.

The next day the drill boring machine does break through into the antechamber of the vault door. The door is a glowing jade-green, and spirits within the door are channeling sounds and words, warnings and imprecations, into his mind through the dreamcatcher.

Mateo and Trent try to decipher the door mechanism. Many of the glyphs refer to a strange tale of pre-human history and ancestry, where there appeared to be an ancient race of superior giant beings who were wiped out in a flood. Mateo can trace the chronology forward to about the year 1000AD when he imagines the door was built. It seems likely to him now that Aztecs probably did build the vault to house Montezuma's gold to keep it safe from prophesied foreigners, and haunted the door with the spirits of many human sacrifices.

Mateo at last realizes what is going on. As Mateo is short, he tells Trent to reach up as high as he could alongside the post of the door where there was a small plate. Trent touches the plate and a small truncated box emerges from the center of the door.

Trent is amazed. It's thumbplate technology just like at PositSoc.

On top of some improvised scaffolding, Mateo analyzes the box which emerges when the thumbplate is depressed.

The box is decorated on its front with a couple glyphs. One is for the Toltec Priest Quetzalcoatl and the other is for a human heart.

Mateo gasps.

It is a blood key. Who ever has the correct DNA from the proper lineage can open this door with his living heart. Only one problem, the possessor of that heart kind of needs it to live.

Vick has read all his thoughts throughout. There is no hiding this news.

**...END TEASER PLOT SUM**