

# BACKLASH

*VENOM AND VENDETTA*



A JADEANNE STONE MEXICO ADVENTURE

# ANA MANWARING

# BACKLASH

# **Praise for Ana Manwaring's JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventures**

## **Coyote**

*Recipient of the Literary Titan Silver Award for Fiction 2022*

### ***Literary Titan Review***

The author has sent her characters on a heart-pounding mission in the fourth installment in her series. The ensemble cast and suspenseful story remind me of the consistently entertaining *Fast and Furious* series... [*Coyote*] successfully brings together action and adventure in this explosive thriller set against the unique backdrop of Mexico.

### ***US Review Kat Kennedy***

This novel, with its backdrop of human trafficking, is a riveting read that puts one into the center of Mexican culture with its descriptive narrative of landmarks and cuisine.

## **Nothing Comes After Z**

*Recipient of the Literary Titan Silver Award for Fiction 2022*

### ***Literary Titan Review***

*Nothing Comes After Z* is a riveting crime thriller with a strong female protagonist. I appreciated the grounded nature of the crime and how it relates to some headlines we see in the news today. Before she can safely leave Mexico and return to her life, she has to uncover some hard truths and catch the perpetrators. I enjoyed how well the emotion is weaved into this action novel because it ensure we're invested in the protagonist and we're biting our nails when the action intensifies. Author Ana Manwaring knows how to create a storyline that easily sets up the hard-hitting action.

***M.M. Chouinard, USA Today bestseller of the Jo Fournier Mystery series***

"A well-written, engaging story with a bad-ass protagonist I loved spending time with. Bring on more JadeAnne!"

## **The Hydra Effect**

***Lisa Towles, Bestselling and multi-award-winning author of Hot***

### ***House, Ninety-Five, The Unseen and Choke***

“*The Hydra Effect* sizzles with action, tension, and peril. Great writing combined with regional flare and international intrigue make this sequel a delightful ride!”

### ***Jan M Flynn, award winning author***

“JadeAnne heads to Mexico City for a break from her partner and now ex-boyfriend. But her sharp intelligence, curiosity and inability to stay in her own lane land her in a snarl of trouble. In short order she’s evading cartel thugs, uncovering a human trafficking network and confronting high-level Mexican politicians with questionable connections, all in a lushly realized setting one can just about smell. And taste—JadeAnne might be in the middle of a gunfight, but she’s never immune to the temptation of a good plate of tacos al pastor. She and her loyal dog Pepper are a team you can’t but cheer for.”

## **Set Up**

### ***Heather Haven, multi-award-winning author of the Alvarez Family Murder Mysteries***

“This is a blowout of a story. It starts on the backroads of Mexico in the middle of the night—just a woman, a dog, and Mexican Banditos—and escalates from there. If you are looking for a fast-paced, action-filled thriller about the adventures of a young PI and her lethal but well-trained dog, this will be your cup of tea. Or should I say Margarita? Jack Reacher step aside. You have met your match in JadeAnne Stone.

### ***Judy Penz Sheluk, Amazon international bestselling author***

“In her debut mystery novel, Author Ana Manwaring offers up more twists and turns than a Mexican rattlesnake. Fast paced, with well-crafted characters and a strong female lead, there’s plenty to like about this world of power, politics, and Mexican money laundering. I especially enjoyed the strong sense of place, which Manwaring uses to great effect. Well worth adding to your TBR pile.”

### ***Kirkus Reviews***

“With a likeable duo and a vivid, appealing setting, this adventure series is off to a promising start”

## **Praise for Ana Manwaring’s Memoir of Living in Mexico**

## **Saints and Skeletons**

*Recipient of the Literary Titan Gold Book Award 2023*

### ***Literary Titan Review***

Saints and Skeletons is a captivating and introspective work that encourages readers to embrace life's complexities. Ana Manwaring's unflinching honesty and willingness to bare her soul are both brave and inspiring. This memoir stands as a testament to the transformative power of storytelling and the remarkable human capacity for growth and resilience.

### ***Nannette Rundle Carroll, Author of The Communication Problem Solver***

"Your writing is so immediate! I feel like you brought me along on the trip."

### ***Lisa Towles, Bestselling and multi-award-winning author of Salt Island, Hot House, The Ridders, and Ninety-Five***

"There are so many things I loved about this engrossing memoir. If I knew nothing of the author beforehand, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that she's a lifelong poet and an award-winning crime novelist. Too often, you find a book with beautiful language that plods forward slowly and deliberately, or a crime novel with lots of pace and adventure but lacking in soul. This book has it all - beautiful execution along with interesting peril that the author faced on this adventure of a lifetime. Love story, travelogue, and survival story, this book is an exciting chronicle of a gutsy woman's search and personal transformation across unfamiliar lands. But the best part is the fictional JadeAnne Stone series that evolved from this experience. Highly recommended for readers seeking meaningful adventure."

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# The JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventures

Set Up (2018)

The Hydra Effect (2019)

Nothing Comes After Z (2022)

Coyote (2022)

Other books

Saints and Skeletons

A Memoir of Living in Mexico (2023)

To

Harold R. Miller

Thanks for sharing your Nam vet buddies and all your experiences in  
Saigon as it fell.

*Y muchas gracias por nuestros viajes a México.*



## Acknowledgements

My deep gratitude for the special folks whose support, consideration, care and hard work have guided this series. Especially to Lisa Towles for... everything! And to my 9:00 p.m. writing partner, William Bruce Johnson, IT consultant, brainstormer extraordinaire, and brilliant company for late night writing.

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I've dedicated the book to Harold R. Miller, but want to thank him again for sharing what he could of his top secret assignment in Vietnam and introducing me to two of his 'Nam vet drinking buddies, Jim Bell and Tony Lazzarini. A few beers, and you three had given Quint his service, rank and big trouble! Thank you.

As always, a special shout out to my editor, Cindy Davis, The Fiction Doctor. You're curing me of all my bad writing habits. I can't imagine doing this without you. Or you, Lisa Orban, my publisher at Indies United Publishing House. You keep me laughing!

Finally, I couldn't do this without my husband David Prothero and our family for their love and encouragement. That includes Alfie and Beto Feral who purr while I write and "walk me home" from my studio when the session is done. You're the best!

# BACKLASH

Venom and Vengeance from 'Nam



A JadeAnne Stone  
Mexico Adventure

ANA MANWARING



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# Chapter 1



## The Past is Always With You

**Saturday, September 29, 2007**

Jackman Quint hovered outside the TSA checkpoint at the Denver airport, despondency a blue funk like Tule fog swirling around him. JadeAnne was leaving—going home. He felt his heart cracking open. After he'd finally found his daughter, lost to him before her birth, JadeAnne was flying back to her home in California. He hadn't expected to feel like this.

Obscured behind the snaking line of travelers inching through the TSA checkpoint, he watched JadeAnne slip back into her shoes, scoop up her small carry-on, and take her boyfriend's hand. They headed into the wide hall toward the train to Concourse C. Quint tracked them until they were swallowed by the crowds. His eyes stung. He already missed her—even the dog. Would she come back? He shuddered, gulping to stifle his sorrow, then swiped away the visible signs of emotion from his face. *Get a grip, soldier.*

Irritated at acting like a broken-hearted teenager, he exhaled striding toward the drop-off area in front of Jeppesen Terminal East. Horacio would be navigating back around the airport loop to pick him up. He couldn't keep his partner waiting any longer, or risk a ticket and police interest. It would be gamble enough driving back to El Paso in the shot-up SUV, and Nader, one of the traffickers, was still in the wind.

Anyway, public displays of emotion weren't his thing. The first time he'd lost her—the last time he'd cried—it was either buck up or bitch up. He wouldn't be anybody's bitch. At least JadeAnne and Dylan were safe. He blew his nose on his Starbucks napkin. No, he wasn't going to start blubbering now. He dropped the empty coffee cup with the soiled napkin into a receptacle then pushed through the revolving door onto the wide sidewalk crammed with luggage and travelers scurrying to check-in to

their flights.

But the question, *would she return to their home and business in Mexico City?* pecked at his thoughts. Would she? A series of honks startled him back to the airport. A man, scooting out of a black SUV, its side riddled with bullet holes, gesturing.

“Quint. ¡*Queent!* ¡*Aqui yo!*”

Quint waved his arm, and broke into a jog, shoving his sadness into a dark crevasse of his heart to inspect later. They had a long drive ahead. The sooner they dumped the SUV with his contact on the border, the sooner they could get back to Colonia Roma. Work would take his mind off JadeAnne.

Horacio held the shotgun door open. A sudden sharp crack rang through the departure area, sending Quint diving into the SUV, ducking below the window. Horacio slammed the door behind Quint and stumped around to the driver’s side, sliding his ogre bulk behind the wheel.

“Thanks, H. What was that? Backfire?”

“*Tal vez.*”

“Well, they’re off. Let’s get out of here. Dump this SUV. You okay to drive?” he asked, straightening up, nodding toward the makeshift dressing under his partner’s shirt, covering the bullet wound from the attack two nights before.

“Only hurts when I laugh, *jefe.*” He grinned, shifting into drive as the ping of metal on metal rang out. Then another.

“What the hell—”

“Get down, *jefe,*” Horacio shouted. He floored the gas pedal, cutting off arriving travelers to honks and shrieking brakes.

The vehicle shot into the left through-lane then the curve as the rear window spider webbed, but held. H laid on the horn as they blasted away from Denver International to loop onto Peña Blvd.

Quint craned around in his seat. “Can’t see a damned thing out the rear. Anything chasing us?” He peered through the side mirror. The white peaked roofline of DIA, like a giant circus complex, receded into the endless blue sky spread over the prairie.

“Nothing going as fast as we are,” Horacio said. “The sniper wasn’t in a vehicle. Not a moving vehicle.”

“Parking garage?”

“*Sí.*” His answer slipped into the sibilance of air breaching the cracked glass.

“Get off the road at the next opportunity.”

“On it, *jefe.*”

The SUV’s body might look like hell, but the engine hummed. Quint wouldn’t have considered anything less of his El Paso contact. They’d

worked together several times. Quint knew from experience Gonzo was a pro: ran a tight ship, regardless of his outward appearance as a gangbanger. He would be pissed. Quint resigned himself to buying Gonzo a new vehicle. But only if he agreed to help catch the bastards who shot up the car: Nader and the criminals operating the human trafficking ring. They'd form a joint taskforce—as it were.

Quint stiffened. “*Oye H*. If Nader followed us here, do you think he followed us to the Medina’s?” After everything...what if Nader had snatched the teen they'd rescued? Sold her back to the cartel.

“We weren't followed, Quint. Nader knew the plan from the start. He was watching the airport.” He tapped the gas and spun around a slow-moving truck carrying bottled water. “He's acting alone. I shot the fourth man. The other two are dead—”

“He'll have a new crew.” Quint dropped his head into his hands. Muttered, “I was a fool.”

“*No te castigues por eso*, don't beat yourself up. What's his angle, do you suppose?”

“I haven't a clue. I thought we were something like friends. He was my CO back in 'Nam.” Quint paused, looked out the window at the interstate businesses rushing past. “Take that second exit in a half mile—Tower Road—” He pointed north. “Sign says there's a Walmart Superstore.” He paused, peered through the side mirror again. A Denver City patrol car was coming up fast. “You see that? Exit now!”

Horacio grunted and swerved off the highway as the patrol's lights came on.

Quint nodded. “Okay then.”

“We need gas,” Horacio said, inching the vehicle toward the right-hand lane through the thickening morning traffic on the exit.

“We'll probably find a station nearby. Let's get to that Walmart.”

Horacio turned right and made the first left to parallel the highway. Tower Road intersected in several blocks. Besides the usual gastrointestinal distress cluster of Burger King, MacDonald's, and Taco Bell, they saw two of Denver's finest squatting on Walmart's coat tails.

“Turn left!” Quint growled.

H turned and stepped on the gas. One of the patrols turned on his lights and made a U-turn on Tower chasing after the SUV. H blasted through another left, circled the block to double back into a neighborhood. The scent of tortillas and chilis wafted through the window. Horacio sniffed. “Maybe we should eat before hitting the Interstate.” He pulled into the parking lot behind a restaurant, a ramshackle-looking affair tucked into the edge of an equally downtrodden housing district, and backed the SUV between two jacked-

up pickup trucks. They slouched down as the patrol cruised past.

Quint chuckled. "Good work, H. Yeah. it's a long drive. Let's eat." He nodded his head toward the back door as a pair of mestizo-looking men in cowboy hats and boots sauntered out. One carried a cup to go. Quint heard a snippet of Spanish as they passed by.

Horacio squeezed through the narrow door opening only after shedding his jacket. A tight fit, but no one looking for it would see the SUV.

"H, if you eat two orders of *huevos rancheros*, you aren't going to fit back into the vehicle."

Horacio bellowed his infectious laugh. "True dat."

Quint snorted. "True dat? You been taking English lessons from Chucho? Speaking of Chuch, I should call. See if everything is okay at the office."

"Mrs. P will keep him in line, *jefe*."

"True dat," Quint retorted, grinning as Horacio pulled open the back door to the enticing steam. Quint almost felt at home. *Damn. I'm getting too comfortable in Mexico.* There was no telling where Senator Aguirre's op would take him. So why was he obsessing over Jade's return?

Three orders of *huevos rancheros* later, with a thermos full of black coffee and two paper cups, the men eased out into the weedy parking lot. Quint felt better. Maybe his emotional weakness had been brought on by hunger. One of the trucks was gone, but the other remained, protecting the bullet-ridden side of the SUV. Probably belonged to the two guys in the corner flirting with the middle-aged proprietress. Regulars. If he was staying in Colonia Roma to finish his work for Senator Aguirre, Quint needed to find a local breakfast dive with good food and a cheerful staff.

Reading his mind, Horacio said, "You know there's a place two blocks from the office even better than this one for breakfast. A lot cheaper, *tambien*."

"Well, this is the U.S. Everything costs more."

They pulled up to pump 6 at the EXXON Mobil on Tower Rd. "Grabbing supplies, H," Quint said. "I'll pay inside. Keep your eyes open for the cops. Last thing we need is to be delayed explaining the bullet holes in the side of this SUV."

When he'd finished filling the tank, Horacio putted over to the Tower Liquor. Quint clambered in. He held up a bag of hot chili Cheetos and a Coors. "Snacks. Ever try the Rockies' best? Made from pure Rocky Mountain spring water."

"Ay, that piss water? *No gracias*."

“Good thing I got these.” Quint grinned and pulled two bottles of water from his shopping bag, settling them into the cup holders. “By the way, I called Medina. Warned him to be careful.”

Horacio slowed for a red light. “I thought you might. What did he say?”

A low rider pulled up in the left lane and stopped next to them. Four gangbangers stared at the side of the SUV. The kid riding shotgun cocked an air AR-15 making like he was blasting them. Quint heard the laughter over the booming bass. Horacio finger-blasted back. The light turned green; the kids roared ahead, fingers cocked. Another patrol car appeared from nowhere and raced up behind the gangbangers.

“We’re drawing attention. ¿*Qué piensas?* The *entrada* to I-25 is coming up.”

“I dunno. Which is worse? Explaining what happened to the police when we’re pulled over in town, or risking a run-in with Nader? The thing is, Nader knows where we’re going and where we’ll end up. He’d be insane to attack us here. Too much traffic. Too many witnesses. He’ll wait until we get to El Paso or hit us on the interstate. There’s a lot of empty country before the border. But I-25 is the fastest route.”

Horacio nodded and pulled over then veered onto the southbound entrance ramp.

Quint pushed down his seatback, closed his eyes. “Wake me up when you want to switch drivers.”

“Where are we?” Quint yawned, rubbed his eyes, and sat up. “It looks like a desert out there.”

“We’re almost in Santa Fe. Just past the halfway mark. You’ve been sleeping for five hours.”

“Didn’t get much sleep last night. Want to trade now?”

“No, I’m fine. I’ll take us into Santa Fe. We can get out. Stretch. I’ll swap then. I could eat.”

Quint fished around behind his seat to grab the bag of snacks. “Cheetos and beer?”

“I was thinking about some of that famous *carne adovada* with Hatch chilis.”

“How do you know about New Mexico food?”

“My wife and her sisters took a trip to Santa Fe. She’s still raving about a restaurant called Cafe Pasqual’s in the old town. Here’s the map.” He handed Quint a new road map with city maps of Santa Fe and Albuquerque. Quint flipped to Santa Fe.

“Where’d you get this?”

“Stopped at a visitor center when we crossed into New Mexico, *jefe*.”

“Damn. I must have been tired. Sounds good, *amigo*. Let’s find those Hatch chiles.”

The SUV garnered a ration of stares and glares. Quint wanted to pin his credentials to his shirt or shout, *We’re the good guys here*, but kept his head in the map, trying to ignore the tourists. Horacio looked nonplussed. Maybe he didn’t realize they were being taken for narcos. But inside the quaint adobe restaurant, the food was worthy of remembering; the other diners at the long communal table were congenial. A Russian woman, her American daughter, two gay men from California, one a muckety-muck in high tech, a couple from Toronto celebrating their thirty-fifth anniversary, and a young German running a humanitarian aid organization for immigrants displaced by wars and poverty, who was traveling with his vivacious Italian girlfriend. Quint relaxed, enjoying the lively talk, the exchange of ideas, observations, and, of course, the food. Horacio proved to be a warm, entertaining, social addition to the group. For a moment, Quint’s sadness lifted.

After a bison burger and two servings of toasted piñon ice cream with fleur de sel caramel sauce, Quint was ready for another nap. “*Amigo*, I’ve got to walk off some of this food.”

“All for it, *jefe*. I need to pick up some trinkets for *mi marida y hija*.”

“Let’s go. We walked by plenty of shops on the plaza.”

Thirty minutes later, Quint had a stunning silver necklace of green turquoise and Mexican jade for Jade’s birthday. Horacio bought a silver ring inlaid with turquoise and coral for his girl, and a handmade silver and turquoise bracelet set with several tiny sapphires, her birthstone, for his wife. Everything had been made locally.

When Quint and Horacio returned, two local officers were inspecting the SUV, their patrol car double-parked, hemming in the vehicle.

“Can I help you, officers?” Quint asked, his tone mild.

The younger officer’s hand hovered over his gun. The older man asked, “This your vehicle?”

Quint replied, “No, sir. Borrowed.” He patted his pockets.

The younger cop rested his hand on the butt of his revolver. “License,” he said.

The older cop nodded. Quint pulled out his wallet, handing over his driver’s license, carry permit, and a second ID. Quint noted the man’s nametag: Quintero.

“You’re attached to the State Department? You carrying?” the cop



asked, handing the IDs over to his partner.

“Not on me. Glove box. I’m on loan to the Mexican government, actually.”

The cop eyed Quint skeptically. “This is *New Mexico*. What happened to the vehicle?”

“Registration’s in the glove box. H, give the man the keys.” Quint replied, ignoring the question. The younger patrol’s hand tightened around the gun. Quint swung his chin toward Horacio. “My assigned minder. Horacio, *dale al oficial las llaves.*”

Horacio fished the keys out of his pocket, tossing them to the younger cop who let go of the sidearm to catch them. *Good thinking, H.* A tourist family with three school-aged kids flowed around them, the kids gawking open-mouthed.

“Your man don’t speak English?”

“Nah, but my *español* is improving.”

“Ask him for his papers,” Quintara demanded, waving Quint toward the side of the SUV. “Hand them to Herdez.”

“*Horacio, muestrale al hombre tus papeles.*” Again, he gestured with his chin.

“*Claro, jefe,*” Horacio replied as he handed over his passport to the junior patrol.

Herdez nodded to his partner and unlocked the door, reaching into the glove box. He retreated to the patrol car with the registration and Quint’s gun, checking the license plate on the way.

“What happened to the vehicle?” Quintara demanded a second time.

“We’re guessing they were gangbangers. Shot it up while we ate breakfast in a dive in Denver. Maybe thought we were someone else.”

“Make a police report?”

“No. I can’t talk about the mission. You’ll have to call to verify. Partner’s got the number.” Quint tossed his chin this time toward the kid in the patrol car.

The older cop motioned to Horacio to stand next to Quint. “Is he carrying?”

“No sir,” Quint snapped back. “Not authorized in the U.S.” He prayed they wouldn’t search the SUV. The cache of weapons would boggle the bored tourist cops’ minds. And probably land them in jail.

“So what’re ya doing in Santa Fe?” the man asked, obviously making small talk until the plate was run.

Quint chuckled. What did anyone do in Santa Fe? “Lunch at Cafe Pasqual’s. Shopping for the girls.” He held up his gift bag from Malouf’s. Quintero raised his eyebrows, gave a quick nod.

Herdez returned and leaned toward his partner. In a low but audible

voice he said, “All clear, Quintero. Vehicle checks out. It’s a Fed permit to carry. Matches the ID. Only problem I can see is the SUV could be connected to the shootout in Hernandez—black, shot up. Whadda we do?”

Car tires squealed around the corner; its motor revved as it peeled away from the plaza. A second car in hot pursuit.

“Let’s go!” Quintero sprinted to the patrol car. Herdez thrust the papers and gun into Quint’s hand and ran.

Quint settled behind the wheel and shifted into gear. “Someone is watching over us, H. Let’s blow this town. Five more hours, if the gods continue to clear our path.”

“Police are the same everywhere. It’s why I quit. What did they want—money?”

“Not so common in the U.S. You didn’t hear the young guy. He made the SUV for the one in Hernandez. Someone saw what went down. Or Nader made a report.”

“He would have known the *placa*, license plate.”

Quint shrugged. He turned left toward I-25. Traffic was light pre-rush hour. “I dunno, H. Nader was never the most observant character. If he’d reported the plates, we’d be in the back of that squad car, cuffed.” *But now they have the license plate.*

The men sank into silence as Quint maneuvered them onto I-25 and set the cruise control to 75 mph, the posted limit. He punched on the radio, dialed in a jazz station to some peppy driving music. Lots of clarinet. The station identifier cut in. “103.7 The Oasis. We’ll take care of your thirsty ears. Your best stop along Route 66.”

Horacio dropped his seatback and stretched out as far as he could. “Wake me up when we get there, *jefe*.”

Fifty minutes later, the SUV snarled into Albuquerque afternoon traffic. Quint kept an eye on the signs for the throughway to Las Cruces, the termination of I-25 at the Texas border. He’d pull off. Contact Gonzo to expect him. Maybe have a coffee. They could eat in El Paso at the airport before flying. If all went well, they’d be home in Mexico City before morning.

Outside the windshield, the urban landscape morphed into a dun-colored drone of emptiness bordered by dark crags and monotone peaks. Along the highway, he could see evidence of irrigation, but this late into the year, most of the cultivation would be done. What did they grow in New Mexico, anyway, besides chilies and corn? Goats probably. After all, he was essentially in Mexico. Listen to the ads: Valencia sopapillas.

Even the city names: Santa Fe, Las Lunas, Belen, Las Cruces. No question who immigrated here first. Were there missions like in California?

Further south, the scenery began to resemble a moonscape. Dry. Bare. Rocky—driving him into the blue funk again, but now the mists morphed to dusty haze. He could always fly to California. Beg her to come home. *But Sausalito is her home.* Quint had a hankering to pull over, dial JadeAnne's number, ask about the dog. Dylan. Their trip. But he had another two hours and forty-seven minutes of this mind-numbing scenery to go before Las Cruces. He hoped to arrive before dark. Easier to see attackers during daylight. *Would Nader be so stupid?*

Convinced Nader hunted him, he pondered why. *Why would Nader hate me?* What nagged at Quint was, he'd done time for Nader's operation. He'd never given him up. Quint never revealed the kingpin—and Nader walked scot-free while, for five years, he languished in Lompoc. Lost his commission. Dishonorable discharge. Everything expunged if he signed on with NSA. Everything he hated—dirty dealing—spying on citizens—assassinations—you name it. Only, you didn't name it. Top secret. Few with clearance. Not even Nixon was privy to what those fuckers were up to in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Or, maybe the politicians just didn't want to know. Still didn't, for that matter. Not that Quint was NSA anymore. He'd completed his indentured servitude. Got out. *But did I really get out?*

The radio program changed, with a new DJ coming on shift. An evening program. Mellow. Easy. So unlike Quint's life. He'd paid his dues. Why was Nader after him now? "Hold on! Because I know the truth. I know everything!" he bellowed.

Horacio stirred, snuffled, and shifted his weight toward the door, but didn't wake up. "Sorry, man," Quint whispered and punched the door lock. Didn't want to lose his partner, but he did want to lose Nader. They'd never really been friends. Nader played him back then just as he was doing in Mexico City before showing his true colors and attacking them outside Hernandez three days ago.

How long had the man been looking for him? *Congratulations, asshole. Took thirty-three years to find me*—now that Quint had something to lose. Nader knew Jade was flying back to California. No coincidence he was shooting at him, or had he been waiting to kill JadeAnne? Maybe he planned to hop a flight to San Francisco. Quint banged the steering wheel. The vehicle shimmied and swerved into the right-hand lane, cutting off a farm truck piled with hay bales. He stepped on the gas and moved back into the fast lane. Horacio snored.

A dark blue SUV shot up behind them, tailgating. Quint adjusted his

mirrors to see into the vehicle. No luck. Too dark as the sky streaked pink, orange, and purple between the peaks as the western mountains shadowed to black. He sped up, the SUV dropped back but kept pace with him. Quint needed a telephone. But there wasn't any cell service in this God forsaken desert. Anyway, who would he call? He was still a half hour from the Texas border. He reached over his sleeping partner and retrieved his gun from the glove box. If the vehicle came any closer, he'd wake H.

Horacio woke up chipper at the Shell station just off I-10 East outside Las Cruces.

"Good morning, *amigo*. We're being followed. Get your weapon."

"¿*Qué hora es, Queent? ¿Dónde estamos?*"

Horacio put his seatback up and swiveled to see the blue SUV pulling into the station behind them. It drove around the pumps and stopped in front of the convenience store. Three kids piled out. Quint blew out a clenched breath and circled to a pump.

"The border. Las Cruces. I figured it out, H. Nader. I have to call Jade. Need a pit stop? It's another fifty minutes to El Paso."

"¿Pit estop?"

"*Baño*." He opened his door and dropped to the ground.

Horacio called across the seats, "I'll be back. Want anything? How much on the gas?"

"Forty. Thanks. I'll park over there." He pointed to the front of the convenience store, then extracted his cell phone from his jacket pocket. Three bars. He dialed.

"It's Quint. Heads up, I'm in Las Cruces. One hour. You ain't gonna be happy, Gonz." He disconnected. The pump was ready and he filled the tank. At least Gonzo would get the SUV back with a full tank.

Quint hung up the nozzle and capped the tank. Horacio hadn't returned, so he moved the vehicle to a parking space then wandered into the store. H appeared with the bathroom key. *Might as well hit the john*. "Grab something if you're hungry. We'll eat dinner at the airport in a couple hours."

In the bathroom, Quint dialed JadeAnne. No answer. They had to have arrived. Maybe out grocery shopping. Or...he let the thought hang unfinished. He couldn't go there. She and Dylan would be doing something. Visiting her friends or her parents. Her parents. He should have raised her. He should have rescued *Thuy*, Jade's gentle mother. He didn't even know she was pregnant. Because of Nader and his "mission" he was pulled out of Saigon, sent to Laos to move heroin into Vietnam.

White-hot hate boiled through him, scalding his veins. Charley promised to protect Thuy, had tried to find her as the NVA swept toward Saigon, but it was too late. She was dead.

Quint slammed his fist into the metal bathroom door, splitting open his knuckles. The pain soothed him. It was real. He was a free agent. He could do something about the tragedy of his life. Not like 1975—addicted, incarcerated, and disconsolate. Quint had been helpless. He signed over the papers for Charley Stone to adopt his baby. He hadn't even read the documents to find out the child's gender. But now he'd found her. His flesh and blood. He'd be damned if anyone was going to take her away from him.

Pounding on the door. "*Queent?* You okay in there?"

Quint washed his bloodied hand, looked for towels, then wiped his palms across his jeans, and opened the door. "The big question, H. Why'd Nader turn up right when I found JadeAnne?"

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## About Ana Manwaring



Ana Manwaring is the award winning author of the JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventures, a memoir of living in Mexico, Gold Book Award Saints and Skeletons, three volumes of poetry as well as many essays, short stories and flash memoirs.

Ana teaches creative writing and autobiographical writing in California's wine country. She is the founder of JAM Manuscript Consulting where she coaches writers, assists in developing projects and copyedits. When Ana isn't helping other writers, she posts book reviews and tips on writing craft and the business of writing at [www.anamanwaring.com/blogs/Building a Better Story](http://www.anamanwaring.com/blogs/Building a Better Story), and produces the North Bay Poetics, a monthly poetry event.

She's branded cattle in Hollister, lived on houseboats, consulted brujos, visited every California mission, worked for a PI, swum with dolphins, and out-run gun totin' maniacs on lonely Mexican highways—the inspiration for The JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventures. Read about her transformative experiences living in Mexico at [www.saintsandskeletons.com](http://www.saintsandskeletons.com).

With a B.A. in English and Education and an M.A. in Linguistics, Ana is finally able to answer her mother's question, "What are you planning to do with that expensive education?" Be a paperback writer.

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