

MORTAL REVENGE



ANA MANWARING
AND FERNANDO LEON TORRENS

MORTAL REVENGE

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The JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventures

Set Up (2018)

The Hydra Effect (2019)

Nothing Comes After Z (2022)

Coyote (2022)

Backlash (2023)

The Dafne Olabarrieta Mexico Mysteries

Kickback (2024)

Other books

Saints and Skeletons

A Memoir of Living in Mexico (2023)

Praise for the Dafne Olabarrieta Mexico Mysteries

Kickback

Literary Titan Gold Award for Fiction 2024

Longlisted for the CIBA Clue Award for Suspense/Thriller 2025

Literary Titan

Kickback is a crime thriller that is a testament to the complexities of human relationships and the strength required to confront life's darkest moments. With its engaging narrative and deep emotional undertones, this is a book that will leave readers eager for the next chapter in Dafne Olabarrieta's journey.

Readers Choice 5-Star Review

Manwaring skillfully blends intense action with emotional stakes, ensuring readers are as invested in Dafne's internal struggles as they are in the plot. I loved the high-stakes story, the intensity of the action, and the character development that accompanied the plot. There was never a dull moment. I finished this book in one sitting and enjoyed it immensely. I highly recommend it.

Praise for the JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventures

Backlash

Literary Titan Gold Award for Fiction 2023

Shortlisted for the CIBA Clue Award for Suspense/Thriller 2023

Midwest Book Review, Diane Donovan

Ana Manwaring does an outstanding job of crafting a story ... steeped in Mexican culture and mayhem, with the lingering effects of Vietnam relationships. The result is a vivid portrait of traitors and a dangerous man whose wrath and cleverness threaten everyone Quint has believed in and loved.

Coyote

Literary Titan Silver Award for Fiction 202

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

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 ensures 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.

Michelle Chouinard, USA Today bestseller of A Serial Killer Guide to San Francisco 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, multi-award-winning author of The A&E Investigations Series

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.

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.

In Memory of Victor “Toto” León Torrens, Diego León

*Torrens, and Blanca Torrens Anguiano lost to
corruption.*

*May they rest in peace knowing their stories have
been told.*

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I also owe my First Readers a huge debt of gratitude. *Mortal Revenge* is more deeply steeped in Mexican culture than my previous books. More than read the story, my readers had to decipher an unfamiliar culture and come up with suggestions to smooth over the bumps. Thanks to my “BritCrit” women: Aletheia Morden, Kerry Granshaw, and Susan Savage; “my siblings” in *Sisters in Crime*: Bruce William Johnson, Mac Daly, and T.E. MacArthur; and my “publisher-in-training” Jeanette Tomson. Your analyses and comments helped shape this story immensely.

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Don't let me forget my amazing cover designer, Tatiana Vila of Vila Design who put up with probably too many changes. The cover rocks! That half-blind Justice is brilliant! And to my publisher, Lisa Orban of Indies United Publishing House. You've been waiting for this one, and finally—here it is! I know you'll work your magic, and the book will be totally fabulous.

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To all my Spanish teachers, especially Susana Ackerman who corrected my “Mexicano” to proper Spanish. Without these many kind mentors, I’d never have been able to write this book.

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Ana Manwaring
Fernando León Torrens



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Prologue

December 2019

Surprise! Alex's mother invited him to come for the Christmas holidays. Most years, he was ignored. This year he wanted some comfort and cheer, yet he couldn't shake the dread. Confront his family again? What did Irene want? *But she's my mother. I have to go.*

Since his girlfriend had betrayed him, he needed his family. What should he do? Like his conniving ex, his mother wanted something. *What?*

"It's stomach cancer," Lucas, his brother, claimed when he arrived.

Then why leave Irene to die alone in pain in her house with a caregiver instead of a hospital? Or better yet, at Lucas's house with family? Worse, Alex was forbidden to stay at Irene's house for the weeks of his visit, forced to take a costly short-term rental next door to his brother and drive back and forth to care for his mother.

What the hell was Aimee, the hired caretaker, doing? Not much he could see, beyond flirting with Lucas when he came, which was often. The two sat up in the spare bedroom drinking and doing who knows what while Irene suffered in the next room. Alex could hear the middle-aged servant giggling like a teenager.

By the third day, he had a clear idea of Irene's condition. His mother was being starved, left in her own

filth, and over-sedated. To top it off, if she truly had stomach cancer, her medications were wrong. He should know—top pharmaceutical salesman nine years running.

He took on his mother's personal care—bathing and dressing her, cooking her meals, feeding her, and cleaning the house while Aimee watched t.v.

One morning over coffee on the patio in a patch of warm sun, Alex quizzed the caretaker.

"I'm from Veracruz, a jarocho pure through," she said, giggling, as though this was the greatest joke. "I live in the next block. Irene and I have known each other for years."

"You married? Kids?"

"My husband took off after I caught him with my sister. Good riddance. I've had to work to support our daughter. He doesn't send anything." The woman minced a coy smile over her cup.

Alex wasn't interested. He felt manipulated—*pitching for a raise?* Aimee should be fired, not rewarded for her poor caretaking. Did Irene really have cancer? She wasn't taking her medicine per instructions. He counted the number of pills in the containers and the dates the medications had been purchased. He'd call the prescribing doctor, a Dr. Lionel Fierro, on the 27th when he returned to work after Navidad. That is, *if I still have a job.*

"Aimee, I'm concerned for my mother's care. Have you any background in administering medications?"

She stiffened, pulled away from the table, frowning, eyes defiant. "I do exactly what Lucas instructs me to do."

Nervous. Covering her tracks. Was Lucas involved? That she referred to him as Lucas, not Señor, troubled him too. That and the drinking in the spare room.

"I'd like to see that, Aimee, and I'd like to watch you do things to learn how to take care of my mother on Navidad when you'll be with your daughter. I don't want you to worry I would make a mistake." He smiled as sincerely as he could muster.

Aimee's voice belied her words. "Of course, Señor." She checked her watch and continued like she'd won the upper hand. "Irene is due for her next injection soon and I always give her the cancer medicine before she naps."

She was lying. Oh, not about the order in which she administered the medicines, but her willingness to "teach" him was fake. Did the woman think placating him with a moment of compliance would make it okay she was not doing her job? *Why does Lucas keep her on?*

When the cups were empty, Aimee cleared the coffee service to the kitchen and proceeded to make a soft-boiled egg and toast for Irene. When she was finished, she called Alex in from hanging out the laundry to dry on the line. They mounted the narrow stairs and entered Irene's room.

The shuttered room still smelled of unwashed bedding and body, old food, incontinence, and illness. The low wood-frame bed took up most of the floor with a chair placed by it facing a TV mounted on the wall, playing a telenovela at low volume. On the other side of the bed, a cabinet with several drawers held an array of medicine bottles, small paper cups, and syringes on a plastic tray, but the room was too dark to actually read the labels on the drugs. Alex pulled open the heavy curtains. Irene groaned, jerking her thin arm across her face.

"Mother, does the light hurt your eyes?"

She whispered something. Aimee slammed the breakfast tray on the bureau and snapped, "Your eyes will adjust. I've brought your eggs and toast." She bent to haul the old woman to a semi-sitting position.

Irene cried out in pain. Alex nudged Aimee aside. Gently he propped his mother upright with the bed pillows. "Are you comfortable now?"

Her lips barely curved upwards as she uttered, "Thank you, Alex."

"Aimee, why don't you prepare the medicines while I help Mother eat?"

The woman edged around the bed to the bureau to

count the pills into the paper cup.

Alex took up the bowl of eggy toast and encouraged Irene to taste it. She swallowed several bites and waved her hands, croaking, “No more.”

Not eating was a sure sign a patient was ready to go. He’d seen too many patients dying. But watching Aimee prepare Irene’s medication, he wondered if it might be drug poisoning, not cancer, killing her.

Aimee set aside the cup to prepare the sedative. When she finished filling the syringe Alex was certain the woman was about to administer triple the dose a frail old lady required to rest comfortably.

“Thanks, Aimee. You can leave the rest to me. I’ll help Mother take her pills, clean her up, and settle her back into bed before the sedative. You’d like that, wouldn’t you, Mother?” Irene nodded. “Find those instructions for me,” he added.

Aimee’s face took on a narrow-eyed, tight-lipped expression, but she shrugged and left the room.

Once Irene was clean and settled into the pillows, he emptied the syringe into the toilet and dropped the needle into the medical waste container. Then he read the labels on the drugs, verified through the internet what each was for, and adjusted the paper cup for only those she should take with her meal. Four pills, not nine.

Aimee, of course, had not appeared with Lucas’s list. It was just as well. He helped Irene find a comfortable position and bent to kiss her cheek. She smiled.

When Lucas showed up, Alex asked for the list of medications and doses. His brother stonewalled him, disappearing upstairs to drink with Aimee. He heard her shrill voice arguing with Lucas. And crept up the stairs to listen to the row.

“Get him out of here, Lucas. He’s in my way. I can’t take care of your mother. He’s questioning everything I do. I can’t stand him.”

Lucas shouted, “Shut up Aimee. You’ll wake up Mother.

My brother will be go—” His voice lowered.

Alex retreated to the bottom of the stairs.

What was going on? Lucas was well aware of Alex’s training and jobs with pharmaceutical companies. Why should it bother him that Alex wanted to understand his mother’s diagnosis and treatment? The creeping feeling Irene had been mis-diagnosed and was receiving improper care overtook his thoughts to the point of obsession. It wasn’t so far-fetched that she had stomach cancer. His youngest brother had died of it a couple of years earlier. His father had died of it too. Both had worked at the nuclear plant; cancers were common in the area.

But Alex and Lucas lived in Mexico City for much of their lives; Lucas moving to Veracruz as an adult where he worked at the nuclear plant as well. But not for much time. Was his family victim to radiation? Would Lucas eventually be diagnosed with stomach cancer?

The powers that be claimed the plant was secure, radiation free—clean. But this was Mexico—Veracruz, with a notoriously corrupt government. He didn’t believe the claims. The only family member who never worked there, Alex, was the control group. The future would tell.

When Alex arrived one morning, there was no doubt about what was going on. The moaning he heard was not his mother’s. He kicked open the guestroom door and caught them—*fucking like street dogs*—liquor bottles strewn across the floor.

Lucas reared up and roared obscenities as he hustled into his clothes and fled; Aimee screamed. Alex bent, scooped her clothing from the heap on the floor. “Get dressed and get out of here. You’re fired!” He tossed the clothes into her bare chest. “Cover yourself!”

The woman wailed, “You’re not my jefe. I don’t need to do anything you say. Lucas says—”

“I don’t care what Lucas says. *I* say, get out of this house and don’t come back.”

Aimee, bawling, asked, “How will I take care of my girl?” while pulling on her clothes. Her hands shook.

“I don’t care. Be glad I’m not going to the police.”

The caretaker shoved past Alex. At the bottom of the stairs she shouted, “You’ll never get away with this, you stupid man. Lucas won’t let you. I’ll have what’s promised!”

What was promised? Money? *It was always about money, wasn’t it?* He prepared Irene’s breakfast and carried it up to her room. She was sitting up in bed; some color had returned to her sallow cheeks.

“Good morning, Mother. Hungry?”

“What was all that shouting, Alex?”

“I’m so sorry, did they wake you up?”

“Who?”

“Lucas and Aimee.”

“Lucas! Lucas is here?” Her cheeks pinked.

“No Mother, Lucas and I argued over the care Aimee gives you. I don’t think she is doing a good job. I fired her. Lucas left.”

Irene’s voice dropped to barely a whisper. Alex had to lean down, his ear near her mouth, to hear. “Lucas promised to give Aimee my house.”

Could it be true? He had taken her off most of the drugs and all the sedative. Her mind was clearer. He pondered the evidence as he cleaned the house, starting in the spare room, clearing away twenty-three brandy bottles and a bag of sex toys he found under the bed. He changed the sheets. He was probably going to spend the night.

It was getting dark when he heard a commotion at the gate. Lucas and Aimee came in. She threw herself onto the couch, and Lucas marched to the table where Alex studied receipts for Irene’s medical visits and prescriptions for cancer medicines.

“You have no authority to fire my employee, brother. You may leave now. We won’t need you tonight. Adios.”

Alex grabbed his keys, slammed out of the house, clanging the gate behind him. His only solace was he'd disposed of all the unnecessary drugs and the sedative.

On Christmas Day, Irene was feeling better and appeared happy to see him. She wanted to go downstairs. His mother was not dying, she was stronger, happier and alert as she settled into her chair. Heartened, he opened a streaming station of Christmas music for her.

For lunch, she devoured a Christmas atole to go with the tamales and buñellos he picked up en route from his rental.

"Alex, can you ever forgive me?"

Alex's stomach danced with butterflies at her words. She never spoke intimately with him. "For what, Mother?"

"Get me a stool, would you?" she asked.

He pulled up the footstool and lifted her legs onto it. He could feel the stiffness and began to rub each leg.

Irene sighed in pleasure. "Thank you, my son. That feels lovely."

"I forgive you, but what for?" he asked again.

Irene's mouth pursed into a tight line. Eventually she said, "I need one hundred fifty thousand pesos. Your brother needs it." She looked around the modest, poorly constructed government-built home Lucas had given her, waiting.

Alex knew the house came through some double-dealing Lucas was involved in. He had been lucky with his deals, and he earned a good salary. "Why?" he asked. But he knew. It was always about the money with Lucas and his spendthrift wife Ana.

"He needs money to pay his credit cards. You owe it to your family to help, Alex."

Before Alex answered, Lucas and Ana breezed through the gate with arms full of wrapped gifts. He ignored them, asking, "Mother, I'm confused. Why should I forgive you?" He sure as hell wasn't confused about the plea for money.

As always, Irene lit up when Lucas entered the house.

Lucas glowered at Alex. Ana shoved a box his way while Lucas announced, “With Mother doing so well now, Ana and I have decided we don’t need you here anymore. Go on back to Mexico, Alex. Merry Christmas.”

Chapter 1



The Award

Friday, March 27, 2020

Alex Deltoro chained up his motorcycle, pulled off his helmet, and shrugged his toned frame out of his leather jacket. He smoothed his unruly silver-streaked auburn curls into place, adjusted his blue striped tie, then trotted up the steps to push through the heavy doors into the foyer of La Mansion. A hostess greeted him, checked his helmet and jacket, brushing his arm as she directed him to the private room Laboratorios Salud Integrales booked for the annual product roll-out and awards dinner. He smiled. He may be fifty-three, but somebody thought he still had it.

This year was special. The COVID pandemic raged across the world and their new antiviral was working miracles with patients in the trials. Alex grinned with pride. In part, it was his project making the extensive trials possible. He was certain he was going to be acknowledged—and not fired for his indiscretion with the traitorous Avelina.

He paused in the doorway, embarrassed by the unusual rush of self-pride and accomplishment. How could he feel on top of the world when the last he heard from his mother was a whispered, “She’s trying to kill me.”

Guilt for leaving on Christmas day washed over him—again—and worry cast its shadow. It had been days; he couldn't reach anyone in the family.

Director Ivan Castellanos Palacios waved him to an empty stool, shouting “Alex, over here.”

Alex squeezed through the gathering crowd of lab techs at the end of the bar, greeted several by name, and eased onto the stool Ivan held for him.

“Glad you could make it. Have a drink?” Ivan said.

Mustering some enthusiasm, Alex said, “I wouldn't have missed this for anything, jefe. We've done it. What are you all drinking?” he asked, eyeing the row of seated executives chatting among themselves. The head of the virology department looked up and nodded toward Alex. He tipped up his chin and smiled. The bar was littered with shot glasses and a dark bottle inscribed in blue: Casa Dragones Añejo. A fine sipping tequila.

Ivan grabbed the bottle and called for another round. The bartender scurried over, swept aside the dirty shot glasses, and set a fresh one in front of each man, then brimmed them with the golden liquid.

The director turned, raised his glass, and shouted over the din, “To Laboratorios Salud Integrales and our new antiviral! We're gonna beat that COVID dragon!”

“To LSI and Viru-out!” chorused the crowd. Ivan and some shot back their drinks. Others raised their glasses in the air, cheering.

The tequila went down around him like water, but Alex ordered a whisky neat with a mineral water chaser. Shots weren't his thing. He could see some of the employees already showing signs of inebriation. He planned to stay sober to give the obligatory dreaded speech. He swiveled on his stool then leaned back against the bar to watch the excited crowd. The bar was packed with LSI employees, most in their party best, especially the women. Ivan had given the entire company the afternoon off to get ready.

Alex felt blessed to have been hired by LSI. Even after

a decade, he was excited to go to work every day. Castellanos was an excellent director—caring, humane, inspiring. He maintained an encouraging atmosphere of innovation, excellence, and family within his company. People who wanted to work hard and rise up the ranks were offered every opportunity to do so, and each contributor received deserved praise. Better yet, the pay was excellent and the raises regular.

Alex was no novice. He'd worked his way up through several pharmaceutical manufacturers, starting as a junior salesman to reach his current position as Director of Sales and Promotion. Public health was his passion; he cared about people—like his mother alone in the Port of Veracruz. Why hadn't she called him back? Why hadn't he brought her here to Mexico in December? His stomach tanked along with his good spirits. The entire family had shut him out. He took a gulp of the whisky and let the burn relax his tense muscles. *Not tonight güey*, he told himself. *It's my night.*

"Well hello, Alex. So nice to see you again," a voice crooned into his ear.

He spun to the right, recognition sending his nerves through the ceiling. Avelina Fogle. He frowned. What the hell was that bitch doing at LSI's annual product roll-out and awards dinner? She'd been fired for stealing company secrets.

"Avelina. I'm surprised you'd show your face here."

She fluttered her fake eyelashes over her smirk. "So nice to see you too, Alex." She turned to a burly man wearing a bespoke navy suit with a school tie. "I believe you know my *novio*, Jesus Bonillo?"

Bonillo held out his hand to shake.

Chingao. The evening had barely started, and it was already going to shit. "Yeah, we are acquainted. Chucho, 'sup?" He did not offer his hand and the man dropped his, turning away.

Avelina crowded in closer, laughing. In his ear, she

said, “You can’t stand I dumped your wimpy ass for a real man, can you?”

“Excuse me, Avelina, they’re calling us to the dining room. Take care,” he intoned in a patronizing voice as he pushed past her into the crowd. *Jesus Cristo*. How had he ever been attracted to that woman? A self-serving painted doll with a heart of stone and criminal greed. Bonillo would find out what Avelina Fogel was about when she made off with his clients and company secrets. He had to hand it to Ivan—Alex should have been fired for his lapse in judgement. He was the king of picking the wrong women; Avelina was kicked out of LSI—and his house—before the holidays. He changed his passwords then notified his contacts she was no longer representing the company or him. She should have been prosecuted, but Ivan was right, the press would have been disastrous for the company.

The Director’s personal assistant greeted Alex at the door to the private dining room and pointed out his seat at the head table between the Director of Development and the head of Marketing. He sat down, ordered another whisky as the waiter passed by with a tray of tempting mini huitlacoche quesadillas, and watched the LSI staff stream into the room. The table was positioned in front of a narrow riser with a lectern and two microphones. A small table loaded with plaques and envelopes sat next to it. Behind the lectern on the wall, hung a banner touting LSI and the new antiviral drug, Viru-Out. A clutch of capsule-shaped helium filled balloons floated overhead in a rainbow of colors. Alex’s drink arrived and he settled in to endure the evening.

“Good to see you, Alex. I’d hoped to talk to you,” Abramov from Marketing greeted him. “I hear you’re having a huge success with your trials, and sales are skyrocketing through your network. I want to create a campaign featuring you and your foundation’s work.

Interested?”

“I’m flattered, Levi. We do our best. Because of Margarita,” he elbowed the Development director, “Virus-Out is helping hundreds of low-income COVID patients beat this damned virus. And provide the necessary trials. We should include her—”

“Good evening gentlemen. Include me in what?” Margarita interrupted.

“Hola, Directora, I was just suggesting to Alex we run a campaign on the foundation and your efforts to get LSI products into the hands of the needy. It would make an excellent marketing tool. Especially now that Virus-Out is proving safe and effective.”

Alex asked, “What’s your idea? A video? I’d be happy to talk to you. Margarita?” He turned to her, eyebrows raised—and choked on the skewered shrimp he was nibbling. There she was again, taking a chair at the next table. Avelina, staring at him with an air of triumph. She winked, then threw a mincing smile his way.

Alex coughed. Turned away. “Sorry, shrimp down the wrong pipe.”

Margarita patted his back. “Okay?”

“Okay,” he lied.

Surreptitiously he watched Avelina and Chucho Bonilla chatting up the guests as the table filled. What the hell were they doing at the LSI product launch?

“Camarones al diablo. Shall I schedule a couple of meetings to interview you?” the marketing director asked, an expectant smile below his trim mustache.

We should go do it right now. Anything to get away from that bitch. He turned Margarita and said, “Shall we do it?”

“Of course. Say, isn’t that your ex with the owner of Aplicaciones Farmaceuticos? Bonillo? Wasn’t she fired four months ago? What are they doing here?”

Abramov cut in. “I don’t remember her. But he’s competition and ruthless. I don’t much like his methods.

How do you know him Margarita?”

“Long story, long ago. Let’s say my opinion is similar to yours. You know him, Alex?”

“No, not really. Avelina introduced us at a party once. He pestered me for info on our products and access to Ivan and the board. Looks like he got what he wanted.”

“You’re better off without her, Alex. She had a sneaky side and acted as though she were entitled to more than anyone else when she worked under me. I would have fired if you hadn’t gotten her,” Margarita said.

“I don’t miss her, but I’m missing some videos that walked out around the time she did. It wasn’t enough to call the authorities, but—”

The waiter interrupted the conversation. “Excuse me, folks. The buffet is ready when you are.” He recited the menu, then asked, “May I bring you anything to drink?”

After jotting down the drink orders, the waiter moved on to re-count the menu to the newcomers. The room had filled to capacity. It looked to Alex as if the entire company had turned out, even the janitorial team.

“Let’s get some food while it’s hot off the grill,” Margarita said.

Eventually, a pretty waitress came around with trays of delicious looking dessert assortments. Alex resisted the urge to try both the flan de coco and cajeta crepas.

Alex and Levi were in an intense conversation on the merits of social media marketing versus traditional print advertising when Ivan strode to the lectern and shouted, “Bienvenido to our tenth annual awards dinner!”

The crowd, except Avelina and Bonilla, cheered, hooted and shouted encouragement. Ivan patted down the air with his hands. Someone yelled, “Let him talk!” Someone else tapped a water glass with a fork.

Finally, Ivan commanded, “Quiet down! Quiet down, we have a special guest, and we don’t want to give him the impression we are a herd of hyenas.” The group laughed

and settled.

“Before I introduce this year’s award winners, let me pat our collective back on the incredible job Laboratorios Salud Integrales has done with our new antiviral, Viru-Out.” He quoted some statistics collected through the trials on efficacy combatting COVID and the steady rise in sales as the pandemic swelled. “If our analysts’ projections are anywhere near their expectations for sales, every employee of LSI will receive a fat holiday bonus come December. And we can thank the teams that made this happen.”

Ivan gave a short history of the development lab’s discovery of compounds that in tests killed viruses, and Margarita’s expert leadership in bringing the new drug to human trials. “Alex, escort Margarita up here,” he shouted.

Alex jumped to his feet and offered his arm. Ivan welcomed her with a hug and a hearty *gracias*. He thanked her staff then handed over one of the plaques and a fat envelope “for Margarita and the team”.

Alex stood back waiting to hand her down from the stage.

“Of course we couldn’t have done it without the development team, but even a miracle drug can’t sell itself. I thought this guy was a nut case when he approached me to start a foundation to serve the needs of our nation. I wasn’t buying his Boy Scout attitude. LSI didn’t need a do-gooder, we needed trials and positive proof Viru-Out would work. A lot of money poured into developing it. For the patent, we needed proof it worked—and didn’t kill anyone in the process.” The audience laughed. “Listen, I said, you do your magic with sales and keep us afloat. We’re not giving anything away, not until we’re the Pfizer of Mexico. But this dumb-ass kept hammering away at me. Then Margarita came at me. And before you know it, the crazy scheme was making sense. I want you all to honor our very own crazy man, Alex

Deltoro. A bull in the ring. For the tenth year, Alex's team receives the award for the year's top sales. But that's not all. I finally listened to his cockamamy idea, and folks, Mr. Alex Deltoro's do-good heart has created a system to get medicine free of charge to the most in-need in exchange for participating in our trials, and he has boosted sales of our drugs to the very doctors who care for these people in the government run IMSS and ISSST hospitals, not to mention the free clinics across our city and beyond. With COVID, we have thousands of patients in trials and we're winning the battle against the virus, *and* our competition! Come over here, Alex," he said.

Margarita hugged him. Alex stepped to the lectern. Ivan took his wrist and raised his arm in a gesture of winning. "You deserve this man. Thank you from LSI." He handed Alex one of the plaques and two envelopes. "One for Sales Team of the Year and the rest for Highest Contributor to the Company. Alex, a plaque doesn't say it clearly enough. We are impressed with your dedication, drive, loyalty, innovation and know-how. I, and the Board, want you to step into the Director of Operations position when Zugasti retires in May. Congratulations, Deltoro!"

The employees went wild. Avelina glared daggers at him. *What was that about?*

Ivan handed him the mic; Alex pulled Margarita next to him to acknowledge her participation in the foundation's, and the antiviral's, success. "I'm grateful to LSI, a company that values innovation and hard work. Ten years ago, I came in as part of the sales team hoping to do well enough to help my family. I never thought I'd receive such an honor. Thank you!"

"So, you'll take the job?" Ivan asked, winking.

"You're the boss, I can't say no," Alex quipped back to chuckles across the room.

The men shook hands; the audience applauded as Alex returned to his seat.

Ivan called up the other department heads and

introduced each to the room. The heads reported on their 2020 projects and 2019 outcomes, awarding envelopes to each department team member of the year.

As the last award recipient returned to her table, Ivan called Jesus Bonillo to the podium. Alex's chilis en nogadas turned to cement in his stomach. *What the hell?* He shot a side-glance at Avelina. The gloating look on his ex-protege cum lover's face burned him up. Suddenly, he understood how people could be pushed to murder.

He turned back to the stage as Ivan introduced Bonillo, “. . . Director of Aplicaciones Farmaceuticos, formerly our biggest competitor in the antivirus market, now our co-collaborator. LSI has just signed a contract with AF to co-develop a version of Viru-Out for children. We'll market the two together and beat this deadly virus!”

Bonillo grinned and the men shook hands. Alex couldn't listen to his speech. He knew where the formulations came from. Stolen from LSI by Avelina. He ordered a third whisky.

Champagne corks popped, waiters circulated with brimming flutes, attendees milled and chatted. The music changed to some popular dance tunes and the party kicked into gear. Alex gazed at the exit longing for his soft bed and the cuddly kitten who had adopted him, both waiting at home. And someone to answer his call to Veracruz.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Family

Alex “Gato” Deltoro—Brother, Director of Sales at LSI

Lucas "Loco" Deltoro Ramos—Brother

Hugo Deltoro Ramos—Brother

Irene Ramos Deltoro—Mother

Enrique Deltoro Bandenboosh—Father

Ana Luisa Deltoro Mata—Wife of Lucas

Morticia Deltoro Mata—Daughter of Lucas

Dr. Victor Antonio Mata—Brother of Ana

Laboratorios Salud Integral (LSI)

Ivan Castellanos Palacios—Director General

Margarita Ledesma—Director of Development

Levi Abramov—Director of Marketing

Samuel Zugasti—Director of Operations

Avelina Fogel—Former employee and Alex’s ex, now with Bonilla

Doctors

Doctora (Dra.) Milagros Bondad—Section Chief, IMSS #58

Dr. Lionel Fierro Martinez—Deltoro family doctor, IMSS #57

Dra. Aurora Rodriguez—Ordered the ultrasound

Dr. Juan Carlos Figueroa—Gastroenterologist, IMSS Tarimoya

Dr. Robredo—Surgeon, Star Medica

Dr. Fabián Alcalá—Anesthesiologist, Star Medica

Yajaira—Nurse, Star Medica

Señora Santiaga de Vega—Account manager, Star Medica

Dr. Jose Gordillo—Veracruz M.E.

Attorneys

Licenciado (Lic) Fidel Godoy—Attorney who disappeared

Yolanda Zarate—Fiscal del Estado #1 (State D.A.)

Carmela Soto—Fiscal del Estado #2

Paola Zamudio—Fiscal del Estado #3

Fiscal Humberto Picharra—Veracruz State D. A.

Blanca Estela Cuauhtémoc—FGR #1, canceled Alex’s victim status

Alfonso Cardona—FGR #2

Margarita Fernández—FGR #3
Melisa—Assistant to Margarita Fernández
Fiscal Frederid Osnaya Domínguez—Head of the FGR for Veracruz
Licenciado Rafael Altamirano—Alex’s victim defense attorney
Licenciada Samia—Alex’s attorney in CDMX
Asesor Angelica Borzo—CEAV #2
Asesor Armado Padilla—CEAV #3
Lencho—CEAV security guard Licenciado Fernando Locona—
Head of the CEAV Veracruz

Police

Chief Commander Rolando Hernández Macho—PFM Veracruz
Daniel Gutierrez—Officer at the scene of the accident
Manuel Barrera—Officer at the scene of the accident
Pérez—Alex’s security dayshift
Gonzáles—Alex’s security evening shift
Hernández—Alex’s security nightshift

Supporting Characters

Gabriel López—Morticia’s boyfriend
Aimee—Irene’s caretaker
Poncho López—friend of the family
Rosa Dorantes—Alex’s next-door neighbor
Eduardo Braulio Falfan—Driver of the white Tsuru
Julián Castillo—Alex’s friend from CDMX who takes care of him
Carolina Jepes—Rosa’s granddaughter
Rafi—Alex’s ten-year-old neighborhood watcher
Javier—Owner of the corner gym
Señora Amélie Roux—Owner of the fish restaurant
Señora Patricia Zentella—Alex’s Mexico City realtor
Enrique Silva—Driver of the blue Jetta
El Puño—Altamirano’s fixer

Acronyms

Federal General de la República (FGR)
Comisión Ejecutiva de Atención de Víctimas (CEAV)
Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (IMSS)
Policía Federal Ministerial (PFM)

GLOSSARY

Spanish—English

- Abuela—grandmother
Artesanía—crafts
asi es Mexico—“this is Mexico” used in resignation
Atole—a rice drink served with tamales
Autopisto or pisto—toll road
Aver—let’s see; I say!; show me
Ay—Oh; a nonsense exclamation
Barrachos—drunks
Bueno?—how a telephone is answered
Buenos días—good morning
Buenos tardes—good afternoon
Cabron/a—bastard; asshole; ass
Caguamas—very large beers
Cajeta—goat milk caramel
Callejon—alley
Calmate—calm down
Cariño—dear
Cervecería—brewery
Chelas—beers
Chiles en nogadas—stuffed chilies in walnut sauce.
Chingo—lots; many; much; way cool; really good
Concha—a pastry
Crepas—crepes
Cuernos—a filled pastry
Cuetes—firecrackers
Doctor/a—doctor
Dueña/o—owner
El centro—city center
Flan de coco—coconut custard
Guau—wow
Güero—fair skinned; blond
Güey—dude; fool
Halcon—lookout
Hermano/ hermanito—brother; little brother
Hijole—OMG!
Hijo/a—son/ daughter
Ja ja—ha ha

Jaiba—crab
Torta de jamón—ham sandwich
Jarochos—people from Veracruz
Jefa de pabellón—floor manager
Joven—young
Juez—judge
Licenciado/a—title of a lawyer
Los gangleos—lymph nodes
Madre de dios—Mother of God
Mariscos—seafood
Morena/o—refers to dark skin
Mota—marijuana
Ni modo—no matter; never mind
No mames—I don't believe it; look
No te preocupes—don't worry
Novena—the nine masses held after a funeral
Ojalá—God willing, from Arabic
Pan dulces—pastries
Panque—a sweetcorn cake
Pendejo—asshole
Pesera—a type of small municipal bus
Pinche—fucking, used as an adjective
Placa—license plate; shield; badge
Plata o plomo—silver or lead, referring to Narco threats
Pobrecito—poor you
Polleros—the people who lead immigrants across borders
Poncela—give it to him
Ponche—traditional Christmas punch, often spiked
Por favor—please
Privada—a gated community; dead-end street
Pues—then, well, oh. A place holder
Puta—hooker
Putero—hooker bar
Que amable—how nice
Rico—delicious; rich
Salchicha—sausage
Salud—health
Seguro—I'm sure; safe
Semana Santa—Easter week
Sin magna—lead free

Sopapillas—a fried snack

Taxistas—taxi drivers

Te amo—I love you

Topes—speed bumps

Torta de jamón y queso—ham and cheese sandwich

Tu mamá—your mother

Ustedes—you people

Author's Note

North American culture approaches life very differently than Mexican culture. For this reason, I think it's important to jot some notes for the English reader to better understand *Mortal Revenge*. Some of the story may seem exaggerated or unbelievable, but I assure you, the depiction of the Mexican health and legal systems are ripped right from reality. In fact, this book is based on a true story.

Mexicans place great importance on the family, to such an extent that even people who can't stand their parents or siblings, are unconditionally loyal, honoring the obligation to stand with family with total fidelity. Family comes first. It's ingrained within us as children, and we in turn pass this to our children. *Así es México*.

Corruption and impunity are so common, they have become a way of life. People expect it. The mismanagement of the government leaves no other option. For example, police as a rule, make so little they use their badges as authorization to legally shakedown citizens to pay the rent of their patrol cars, or pay the *mordita* (little bite) due their supervisors—on up the chain of command. The same type of behavior occurs in all government offices such as prosecutors' offices, courts, federal police, etc. Authorities are bought. The winner of the legal case is the person who bribes the authorities to obtain victory even if they are the criminals.

Another common example is the obtaining of social benefits. To get a housing loan, Mexicans must pay what is commonly called a *mochada*, which is nothing more than bribing bureaucrats to prioritize our requests, regardless of who has priority. An important point is that the corruption influences the lack of important social

services such as education and health.

Before the MORENA government, theft by public officials stole money from programs, but there were still services. Now, the centralization, or federalization, of programs has made it easier to defraud the public. Our health system has deteriorated so much, our hospitals don't have enough funding for essentials such as bandages and medicines. There is no money for building and equipment maintenance, meaning that there is no equipment such as respirators or ultrasounds. This current government, instead of improving essential health services, has cut it by 50%, eliminating the Seguro Popular (Popular Insurance System), serving people not entitled to Social Security (IMSS) or ISSSTE (state or government workers' insurance) because they were informal workers—essentially the impoverished.

The government steals without limitations, but the Mexican mentality is, “what can I do?” In part this attitude is pure Mexican, and the other part is lack of education. Mexico is currently 30% in poverty while 10% of the population holds 80% of the wealth. Instead of improving national education, it is now dedicated to the dumbing down of the population, to the eventual ruin of my beautiful Mexico. Hola Cuba.

To add to our collective identity, we have an epidemic of obesity. Our ancestral diet consists of tomatoes, corn and beans, not inherently fattening. Then why is the vast majority of the population obese? The objective is to satisfy hunger. Foods fried in lard and wrapped in tortillas taste good and are cheap. People have not been educated about nutrition. I'm not criticizing them; the vast majority of the population has no idea what I'm talking about. There is no dearth of fresh fruits and vegetables in the markets, but the food traditions have been handed down through the centuries, and “asi es

Mexico.”

While not specifically political, I wanted to tell my story to show the world what happens when people don't fight for their rights. Unlike in *Mortal Revenge*, as of this writing, my lawsuits have not settled. I am angry and tired, but I'm still fighting. My attorneys have been bought off, my evidence disappeared, and my story is no different from any other victim's story. We all know it, and yet Mexicans still do not wake up. This may be the biggest difference between our English-speaking cousins and us. You fight. Mexicans say, “Asi es Mexico.”

Fernando León Torrens

Your Next Read

Kickback

A Dafne Olabarrieta Mexico Mystery
Book 1

Excerpt From Chapter Two

The light on her landline blinked again. She punched the code, and the message started. Static or some sort of crackling. As she reached to drop the receiver into its cradle a familiar voice sounded.

“Help. Please, Daf, please help me.”

She put the receiver to her ear and started the message over. Static. Maybe sobbing? The sound so low she could barely hear the voice.

“They’ve kidnapped my girl. Aisling. They’ve taken her. My baby!”

She was listening to bloody Alba Falconi. Dafne hadn’t heard that voice in years. Not since Alba admitted she’d been in a relationship with Oliver. *Her* Oliver. *Her* fiancé. And they were getting married.

Dafne’s gut clenched and her head pounded. Hang up the phone. That’s all she needed to do, then she could forget again. It had been a small consolation that Oliver acted his usual cheating self and did something stupid to Alba. Dafne had heard through the grapevine she was back in Mexico several years later. How long ago had that been? Dios! Ten years or more.

The message was still running. “Help. Please, Daf, please help me.” Then clear sobbing and a choked-out

telephone number.

Should she call? A kidnapped child! But Alba had betrayed their friendship; let her call the police. No. That was petty. She checked the time stamp: 8:20 this morning. A lot could have changed since then. The room dimmed as Dafne's heart sank under a wave of black self-loathing. She couldn't punish a child for her mother's disloyalty. She'd sidelined as a hostage negotiator since university. At least she could find out what happened. She played back the message again. This time scrawling the number on her pad.

"Alba? It's me, Dafne."

"You got my message. I-I wasn't sure you would be working there. I thought you weren't going to call." Breathless she added, "Dafne, I need you to get Aisling back!"

She pronounced her daughter's name ASH-leen. "Oliver's daughter? When was she kidnapped? Could he have taken—"

"Disculpame, por favor, Dafne. Please! Find my child," Alba said through her rising sobs. "It's not Oliver. He has no interest in Aisling."

The terror and pleading in Alba's voice frightened Dafne. This was real, but she wasn't ready to forgive. "You betrayed our friendship, Alba. Call the police."

"They told me not to involve the police or I'd never see my daughter again."

"Who are they? What did they ask you to do?"

"I don't know who they are. I only have a number. Dafne, help me! She's only a little girl..."

Something was off. "Alba, what do they want you to do?"

Her sobbing intensified. She gulped. "They'll sell her to the cartel."

"Give me the number."

Her sobs subsided. Alba hiccupped and spoke in a near whisper. "1722-597-0930."

“I’ll find out who it belongs to and call you back. But I need you to tell me what’s really going on, Alba. There’s a special FGR unit, the Policía Especial Anti-secuestros. They know how to help you.”

“No!” she wailed. “Please, meet me somewhere.” Dafne’s voice softened.

“I’m at work, Alba. I can’t get free before four-thirty—”

“Pues, meet me at Coffee and Deli on Gobernador Rafael Rebollar in San Miguel Chapultepec at five.”

Readers Choice 5-Star Review

“Manwaring skillfully blends intense action with emotional stakes, ensuring readers are as invested in Dafne’s internal struggles as they are in the plot. I loved the high-stakes story, the intensity of the action, and the character development that accompanied the plot. There was never a dull moment. I finished this book in one sitting and enjoyed it immensely. I highly recommend it.”

About Ana Manwaring



Ana Manwaring is the award-winning author of the JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventures, three volumes of poetry as well as many essays, short stories and flash memoirs. Her recent release, *Kickback*, received a Gold Book Award and has been short-listed for the 2025 Chanticleer International Clue Award.

Ana teaches creative writing in California's wine country. Founder of JAM Manuscript Consulting, she coaches writers, assists in developing projects, and copyedits. She also produces the North Bay Poetics, a free monthly poetry event. <https://northbaypoetics.net>

She's visited Mexico's garbage dumps, explored a mortuary, sampled tequila in a 150-year-old cantina, lived on houseboats, consulted brujos, camped in Mayan ruins, 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 in her award-winning memoir, *Saints and Skeletons*.

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.

If you had as much fun reading *Mortal Revenge* as I did researching and writing it, please consider going to your favorite online bookseller and leaving a review. Reviews help other readers find our books and help us continue to write for your enjoyment. As the adage goes, a book is not finished until a reader reads it. Thank you.

To find out about new books and upcoming events, please take a moment to sign up for my mailing list at www.anamanwaring.com. To connect with me on social media, find all my information at www.linktr.ee/anamanwaring