

SET UP

SECRETS AND LIES IN ZIHUATANEJO



A JADEANNE STONE MEXICO ADVENTURE
ANA MANWARING

Praise for Ana Manwaring's Series JadeAnneStone Mexico Adventures

Kirkus Reviews

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

JC Miller, author of the bestseller, Vacation

A routine investigation takes a mysterious, chilling turn when JadeAnne is abducted at gunpoint then deposited in an opulent, albeit creepy manor. Moment-by-moment, her story unfolds in real time as she experiences the sights, sounds and myriad flavors of Mexico, the underworld of political corruption and high-stakes criminal activity roiling beneath the surface. When nothing is as it appears, and no one can be trusted, Jade's adrenaline surges—her mettle is tested. Told with humor and humility, grit and beauty, this page turner delivers.

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.

CT Markee, author of the Otherworld Tales, Irish/Abaddon Series

“...a fast moving tale of crime and danger in Mexico.... The plotline is devious and surprising. There are plenty of twists and turns in the story to keep you engaged. This is a complicated well-crafted story...I absolutely love the descriptions. It's a good read that I highly recommend.”

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A JadeAnne Stone
Mexico Adventure

ANA MANWARING



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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I'm grateful to my parents who were readers and kept our home full of books. Even before I could read them, stories were my relaxation, my entertainment and my escape. I always knew I'd write novels in my future.

It was a future far, far away before I finished this novel, and it required much help along the way. My thanks go to my many teachers, particularly Brian Bolt and Guy Beiderman. Special thanks to my critique groups in all their configurations: First Drafters, Novelistas, Wordweavers and JAM. I'm ever thankful for my writer soulmates: Jeanne (JC) Miller and Mark Pavlichek of JAM for spot-on critique and pushing me to write well. A special shout-out to Kerry Granshaw who's been with me since my journey began and we founded Wordweavers. I couldn't do without Jan M. Flynn, my student turned colleague turned teacher for amazing critiques, or Kathy Rueve who convinced me to write in the first person. And heartfelt thanks to Malena Eljumaily for taking me under her wing and introducing me into Sisters in Crime Norcal.

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And to my greatest champion, supporter and tech director, David. I can't express the depth of love and gratitude I hold for you. You've encouraged me in more ways than I can name."

DEDICATION

For Dr. John Hamilton Manwaring, M.D.
9/10/1919-4/11/1995

Dad, You encouraged me to travel and to read thrillers.
Look what happened.

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CHAPTER ONE



Jacked

July 27, 2007

A pair of headlights rushed my old VW camper, assailing me with their high beams. I moved over as far as the shoulderless causeway allowed. The vehicle pulled into the oncoming lane, honking furiously, but didn't pass.

"What the—? Pass, you idiot!"

Ahead, light strobed through the trees, and a bus barreled around the oncoming curve. It headed straight for the honking moron, and its brights reflected, blinding me through my side mirror. I tensed, gripped the wheel, and laid on the gas. The overloaded VW accelerated inch by inch while I rocked forward and back like a kid willing motion. "Go. Go. Go!" I yelled.

Just in time, the daredevil dropped back into the southbound lane of Ruta 200, and the bus roared past, spewing diesel fumes across the Mexican landscape on its route to "Cd. Obregon."

Stupid kids, I thought. But I kept my grip on the wheel and my foot to the gas pedal. Taking a missing persons case had seemed like such a good idea at the time—a working holiday, and a chance to take a good look at my life. Now I felt anxious as I drove south on the narrow, winding Pacific Coast Highway down through Michoacán on my way to Zihuatanejo.

Beep Beep Beeep. The vehicle roared into the other lane again. Did the driver see something wrong with my camper? Lights out? Hatch open? Cargo falling off the roof? Through the mirror, I saw a white pickup. Colored lights set in the grille blinked back and forth—the kind that *camioneros* use to adorn their trucks. The honking became more insistent. BeepBeepBeep Beep.

Pepper woke up from his nap on the back seat and growled at the side window, his hair standing on end. Confused, I toggled the lights off and on. They were working just fine. What did this asshole want?

BEEPBEEPBEEP—The cab pulled parallel with me, and two porky men waved frantically. I slowed down—there must be an emergency—until it registered they had baseball caps pulled low over their faces, and the driver even had a bandana tied like a western *bandido*. BEEEEEP BEEEEEP. I stiffened with fear. Why didn't I keep Pepper up front with me? Could they see him? The driver revved his motor and shot forward just enough to reveal a third masked man sitting in the back, pointing a mean-looking semi-automatic rifle at me. His brown belly poked out of his dirty, open shirt, and my headlights sparked off the thick gold chains he wore. Pepper went ballistic, clawing at the window with his forepaws and barking. I felt lightheaded.

Suddenly the pickup sped off around a bend, its taillights vanishing as quickly as its headlights had appeared.

My heart thudded fast in my chest. I scanned the forest for a break in the trees, somewhere to hide. What on earth am I doing in Mexico? I asked myself for about the billionth time since I'd crossed the border three days before. But now more than feeling lonely, I felt scared and pissed off. It was all Dex's fault.

Twilight faded into night too fast, and the forest turned to a black void. I wondered if I should stop and fish my gun out of its hidey-hole. I'd probably be safer if I kept moving. "Keep driving—don't stop. Just keep driving." A mantra against fear. Anyway, what good would the little pistol do against that rifle?

Truthfully, my feelings had morphed into edginess and irritation hours before. I hadn't had cell service or seen a road sign since Tecomán, and the few villages I passed were poor, sparsely-populated assemblages of huts and corrals, surrounded by plots hacked out of the forest and planted with scraggly still-green corn. Thin burros and even thinner children stared with large, sad eyes as I passed, posed like the ghastly velvet paintings in the tourist traps. Didn't anyone feed these kids? Cultivated fields stretched along the narrow littoral between mountains and coast. If the corn wasn't ripe, there were bananas, coconuts and mangoes, but all this bounty didn't help me relax—or put meat on those skinny little

bones.

Pepper stopped barking but whined from the back, perhaps voicing my own question: Where did they go? The forest looked ghostly under the beams of my headlights, and I floored it when the road dipped down toward sea level. The camper shimmied, reminding me of my mechanic's warning, "If you're crazy enough drive in Mexico, drive slowly. The border will be dangerous, but don't stop for anything until you get to Mazatlán, especially not in the state of Sinaloa—not even for gas. And stick to the coastal route through Michoacán. It's safer." Well, call me crazy. But what did Ebbie know about fleeing armed Mexicans?

Keep driving, don't stop. Just keep driving. I turned off the heart-wrenching mariachi music playing on the radio. My mind raced. It's not my day to die, I told myself. Nothing is going to happen to me. Just keep driving.

Out of nowhere, the pickup reappeared and stopped in the middle of the highway, blocking both lanes. The fat guy in the truck bed sighted his weapon on me, and I exercised my only option. Gasping, heart hammering, I clamped my hands to the wheel to steady myself and braked to a stop. I took in a ragged, fear-filled breath. One, two, three, four. Hold, two, three, four. Exhale.

I thought about my gun again as the two thugs from the cab lumbered out of the truck. The masked driver positioned himself to my right and pointed his handgun in my direction. My legs ossified and clacked against each other with the tremors attacking my body. The other man came up to my window, and I smelled cheap tequila, tobacco, and rancid sweat—possibly my own. All I could think of was bad Mexican movies and guessed they didn't plan on showing me any "stinking badges."

"¿A dónde vas, Señora?" The man leered, a cigarette dangling from his pig-shaped face. He took a good look down my tank top and then glanced into the bus as he illuminated it with his flashlight. "*Quién está atrás?*"

"Good evening, Señor. I'm sorry, but I don't speak Spanish," I lied. "Is there a problem?" I strained to keep my voice steady.

"Where is your husband?" he demanded in accented English as his hand darted in the open window and ripped down the curtain. I cringed. Yes, the sixty-four thousand dollar question—where is

Dexter Trouette? At least I still had Pepper to protect me, or would they shoot him? Me? I said nothing. Pepper growled.

“So, you are alone. El Patrón he is waiting for you. You must come.” He turned to the other man who had moved directly in front of the bus and gestured toward the passenger door, “*Ábrela!*”

The thug promptly smashed the passenger-side window with the pearl handled butt of a small pistol. He reached in hesitantly, pushing cubes of broken safety glass out of his way. “*¿Muerde el perro—does he bite?*” He jerked his thumb at my growling dog. I let out a choked sound he took as “no.” He opened the unlocked door then swept the map, guidebook, and a pile of CDs onto the floor and hoisted himself onto the red leather Cadillac seat Dex had installed in the bus. His stench overpowered the cabin. My stomach heaved.

“*Maneje. Drive,*” he said, although the bandana made it hard to understand him. The sound of the camper door slamming was like the hollow clang of a prison door locking.

Choking back a mouthful of bile and a bellyful of fear, I slowly shifted into first gear and let out the clutch. The camper lurched forward then smoothed out when I shifted into second. Rivulets of perspiration coursed down my face and body. Pepper growled softly in warning. Well, I’d proved I was crazy enough to drive alone through drug cartel territory, but was I stupid enough to try and—and what? I knew I couldn’t outrun the pickup even if I could get away, not too likely since the man pointed the small pistol at me with his meaty paw. If Pepper could make a direct hit on his wrist, he would have to drop the gun, but I wasn’t sure the dog would be able to leap over the oak cabinet Dex had built. I signaled Pepper with a low whistle to wait on guard. He stopped growling, but I could see him in the mirror baring his teeth. The man yanked off the bandana and swiped at his neck as he jerked his head between me and the dog. I prayed. Wind whooshed through the open windows.

Home. The image came sharp and stinging behind my eyes: my houseboat, the Sarasvati, moored in the tree-shrouded cove at Varda Landing on Sausalito’s waterfront, cool and silent in the fog.

The pickup turned into an almost invisible break in the forest, and I reluctantly followed at the insistent prodding of the man’s gun. I felt like a sheep going to slaughter—hopeless, dead.

We arrived at an electric gate, which opened to allow the two vehicles through and closed rapidly in a shower of sparks. The forest pressed in on the lane and closed up behind us as we drove through. Unlike the highway, this private road was smooth, hard-packed sand without ruts or potholes, better than my parking lot at home. No light shone. It was impossible to see anything beyond the small bubble we traveled in.

Eventually the trees began to thin and drop away. The evening became brighter. A skunky odor I hadn't smelled since college poured through the windows and I sneezed. The sneezes roused me from the torpor of fear I'd slid into and I began to notice my surroundings. If Dex couldn't magically rescue me, I'd better pay attention.

We drove along a farm track beside cultivated fields of pot. The black shadow of the forest ringed what I estimated to be two or three acres of budding marijuana. The redolent smell of the crop covered the stench of sweat and I took a deep belly breath, letting it out slowly and completely to the count of eight. My taut muscles loosened slightly, but I couldn't shake the thought that I'd never see Dex again. Why hadn't I believed my mechanic? He'd warned me. Michoacán was a prime marijuana growing state and filled with dangerous roadblocks, weapons, and hot tempers. "If the Federales don't kill you while trying to rob you, the *narcotraficantes* will—just because they can." I blinked back the hot tears spilling onto my cheeks. El Stinko sneered.

The lane curved up around the edge of the field and back into the forest where it joined a wider road paved in red brick neatly laid in a herringbone pattern and cemented in place. Everything looked hyper-clear to me. I noticed details such as the tin roofs on the well-lit compound in a small valley below the road. I noticed men with rifles outside three large buildings that looked like warehouses. Beyond the buildings, I could make out a barn and what I thought might be a stable for horses or tack rooms. I smelled a chicken coop as we skirted the compound and circled through gardens illuminated by the rising moon. Silhouettes of coconut and banana trees lay beyond the kitchen gardens, and the steep mountains to the east looked like black shadows against a star-studded sky.

We arrived at another gate set into a high stone wall topped

with broken glass. The gate, black metal wrought into a serpent motif shined with gold accents. I didn't see who opened it, but the pickup continued inside and my captor waved me on. We pulled up in front of an apricot-colored Mediterranean-style house with more iron grillwork on the lower windows. I couldn't get a good look at the place because the pickup eased to the curb, and El Stinko motioned with his gun to pull in behind it.

Fatso, with the semi-automatic, remained in the truck bed, but the driver got out, strode to the smashed passenger window, and said something too low to hear. My captor jumped out of the bus and scuttled around to my door, waving his little girlie gun at me.

The driver bent into the window and ordered, "*Bájate,*"

El Stinko yanked my door open and half-dragged me from the bus. He marched me around the vehicle to the sliding door, gripping my arm roughly, but lowered his pistol.

"Open it," he barked in Spanish.

I didn't really have a plan, but I saw opportunity cracking open. We'd make a run for it. I whistled two notes and pulled down the handle, ducking to the side while the door slid open on its track. Pepper flew at the man's throat, knocking him over. The gun fired, the man screamed, and we all hit the ground. Pepper lunged at his throat a second time. El Stinko let go of me to fend off my dog. I rolled under the bus and watched in horror. The man's neck was coated with blood. His breath gurgled through the punctures. When he tried to get up, he collapsed onto his ugly face. Three more shots rang out. The driveway filled with shouting and running feet, clattering across brick and stone. I braced myself, expecting to see my beloved Pepper in a bloody heap.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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, 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 outrun 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.

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 this book as I had writing it,

please consider leaving a review wherever you purchased your copy.

To find out about new books and upcoming events, please take a moment to sign up for my newsletter, Writing on the Wall: <http://www.anamanwaring.com>.