

ANA MANWARING

Saints *and* Skeletons

A Memoir



SAINTS AND SKELETONS

Praise for Ana Manwaring's JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventures

Coyote Recipient of the Literary Titan Silver Award for Fiction 2023

US Review of Books

In this fourth book of her JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventure series, Manwaring picks up the story after JadeAnne and Lily escape from a life of sexual servitude and torture. The novel's action is fast-paced as JadeAnne must evade vicious cartel members. Nowhere is safe, and the author does a wonderful job of describing the tension and terror that pervades JadeAnne's life. The protagonist, a headstrong woman who sometimes balks at being kept hidden inside, is at times at odds with her father, Quint, adding to the underlying tension. JadeAnne's beloved dog, Pepper, and Lily's dog, Maya, with her five one-month-old pups, also offer moments of suspense and stress with their dangerous but necessary trips outside. 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 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.

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”

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For privacy reasons, some names, locations, and dates may have been changed.

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Backlash A JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventure #5

For
Fernando

I loved you; I hated you; I forgave you.

and

Parsley

You were a true companion. I miss you.

Acknowledgments

This memoir has been in the making for almost thirty years and many people deserve my gratitude. First, Fernando. *Muchas gracias*, there wouldn't have been anything to write about without you. Then to the host of angels who appeared when I needed help: my cousin Marty and friend Pattie top the list. Both kept track of me and my possessions, giving me lodging, storage, respite, and paying attention when I was out of touch too long. Then to the many people I've met along the way like Hal Miller, who drove me across the border and paid his own airfare back to L.A., Frank, Nora, Enrique, my language teachers and hosts, Dr. Appendini, and all who helped with a loan, a meal, a place to camp. Thanks also to the nameless man who instructed Fernando and me how to stay safe in a bad neighborhood. You all contributed to my adventure of a lifetime, and helped ensure I'd make it home.

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SAINTS and SKELETONS

A Memoir of Living in Mexico



Magic, Mole, and the Mexican
Who Would Break My Heart

ANA MANWARING



INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE, LLC

Prologue



Mole

In a dusty roadside restaurant somewhere in the north of Mexico in 1973, I first tasted *mole*. I remember the land was flat and heat radiated in waves off the pavement of the narrow highway as we drove toward the border. The sparse vegetation choked under dust. My college boyfriend and I were thirsty too. Ahead, rising out of a distant mirage, loomed a faded turquoise cinder block structure with a weathered sign in front: *Lonchería Carta Blanca*. The Cart Blanche Lunch House, a place where anything goes. We rattled the pickup to a stop in front. It looked like “anything” was already gone.

Inside the cool interior were empty metal tables and folding chairs painted in Coca Cola advertisements. Other than a couple of fat red hens roosting near the kitchen door, we were the only patrons.

A small wiry man dressed in the color of dust brought us a menu and a toothless smile. “The chicken *mole* is delicious today,” he said.

Influenced by the chairs, I ordered a Coke; my companion ordered a Superior. The drinks refreshed us after our hot drive up the coast from Guaymas and we were ready to order. Having heard so much about the mystical, ancient dish made with meat and chocolate, I ordered the *mole*.

My plate arrived. On it, a chicken leg drowned in what looked like a dollop of slightly runny chocolate pudding. The chicken’s skin curled up as though gasping for breath; the meat drifted in strings. It tasted thick, sweet, viscous.

“How can anybody eat this stuff?” I pushed the plate away. “It’s disgusting. Too much chocolate.” This from a confirmed chocoholic. Instead, we enjoyed Kirby’s huge plate of *enchiladas verdes*, *frijoles refritos*, *arroz mexicano*, and plenty of hot homemade tortillas while that poor chicken leg vanished back into the kitchen’s maw to the disapproving clucks of the hens.

For over two decades I continued to visit Mexico. I told my chicken mole story that first day at an intensive Spanish course in Oaxaca. As part of the curriculum we had the choice of weaving classes, pottery making, or cooking lessons—all in Spanish. Every day I cooked wonderful dishes like *chili rellenos*, *gorditas*, *tamales* and *enchiladas*.

On the first day, Doña Carmen, our instructor, marched us to the central market. It was a *mole* experience. There were vats of *mole*, tubs of *mole*, mountains of *mole*. *Mole verde*, *mole rojo*, the famed Oaxacan *mole negro* and *mole* of every color in between. Each stall crowded into the huge market building brimmed with *mole*. *Mole*, spicy and chocolaty, pervaded the air with its fragrance. It blended with the meat smells of the butchers' corridor, mingled with the sweet ripe smells of fruit and the pungent herbaceous odors of vegetables in the greengrocers' section. The scent of hot bread and tortillas baking melded with the *mole*, becoming an almost palatable smell. Our every breath was wrapped in *mole*. It settled over the household goods and wafted through the clothing aisles, spilling out the many doorways, down the narrow sidewalks, and into the dusty exhaust-choked streets of the city. ¡*Que rico!* was the only way to describe it. I thought back to *Lonchería Carta Blanca* and the indignant hens clucking over my untouched lunch.

"Perhaps," I commented to the group, "I could be persuaded to try *mole* again."

In class I pestered Doña Carmen for a promise to demonstrate *mole*.

"Oh, *mole*. It takes too long to make," she replied as she spread out the ingredients for *picante salsas*, sweet *atole* but no *mole*.

On our last day of class, Doña Carmen greeted us in the kitchen at four o'clock as we straggled in from our sumptuous lunches on the plaza. By this time the class had dwindled to the hardcore. The long wooden table was laden with tomatoes, plantains, sesame seeds, raisins, four kinds of dried chilies, almonds and oil. On the counter stacked thin patties of crumbly soft Oaxacan chocolate wrapped in pink paper. Doña Carmen announced we were going to make *mole negro*—the quick way.

She allowed us to select only the finest of the fruits and vegetables. Classmate Tom and I had to hand-pick the plumpest of the half kilo of sesame seeds. Only the reddest tomatoes were good enough; the plantains could not be bruised; the raisins needed to be juicy. Jacquie ground the almonds to a paste in the *molcajete*. Linda roasted the *chipotle* chilies on the *comal*.

Two hours later the ingredients were ground to paste and simmered in broth to a velvety smooth sauce. When the sauce was thick but not too thick, we added just enough of the chocolate to deepen the flavor to a rich complexity. The little kitchen smelled divine. In moments the sauce adorned the tender braised chicken resting in a brown-painted clay serving dish with the fluffed rice. I set the table and we began the feast.

Someone passed the *mescal*, and toasting ourselves, and our crown of creation, we dug in. We ate, and ate; and we ate some more. We invited the weavers, the potters, and the guitar students. We invited the director and the teachers, and we all ate. When the feast was gone, and I was cleaning up, I found myself licking the *mole* pot. So this was *mole*—truly food for the Gods.

Chapter 1



Robbed

September 30, 1991

Five days after my forty-first birthday, and sixty-eight days in-country, I screeched into the receiver of a pay phone near the police station in downtown Oaxaca long distance to Marin County. “Sam, they stole *all* my clothes. Five suitcases! I’ve got my pajamas and the jeans I had on last night.” My dog Parsley whined and leaned into my thigh as though to comfort me.

“I’m sorry, Ann, but I hope your birthday was happy,” my ex-boyfriend said.

Yeah, happy birthday. At least the *ladrones*, thieves, hadn’t found the secret compartment Sam had built in-between the front seats, which held the computer, my Nikon camera and lenses, and a pullout Clarion tape deck. *That* was a consolation.

“Have you reported it to the authorities?” Sam’s calm voice grated on me.

“Yes. They aren’t going to do anything. Six bathing suits Sam! And the sandals I had made in Denver.” I felt violated, like a heavy weight pressing on me. Or was it guilt for calling my ex? I started to cry.

“You still have the valuable stuff—money, your computer. What do you want me to do?”

I sniffed and wiped the back of my hand across my eyes. He was right. I still could plug in and write, the reason I gave for my trip to Mexico—launching a new career. Not the barely recognized truth: I was escaping my mediocre life. And Sam was part of that life, but what was I going to do? Was I so weak I couldn’t go buy myself some new clothes and get on with it?

“I have a trunk of clothes in my storage. Get me the red sleeveless t-shirt, the peach flounced dress, my deck shoes...” I ticked off the list of clothes I wanted and started to cry again. Why would anyone break in to my bus and steal my clothes? All the stuff sold together wouldn’t be as valuable as the 350 HP Honda generator, but the *pendejos* left that.

His voice softened. “I’ll fill a suitcase for you, Ann, just pick me up next Saturday at the airport. Four o’clock.”

The guilt settled into my neck and shoulders. I was only going to hurt him again. “I’ve lost weight, Sam. I’m size eight now, I guess. Tell Mom to get me some clothes. See you in Mexico City.”

I hung up and slumped into the stone side of a building, stiff with tension, tears streaming off my chin. Pedestrians gave me a wide berth and funny looks, but none as funny as I gave myself. But left with only the jeans and t-shirt I was wearing at the time, I didn’t know who else to call.

From his tone, I knew Sam had construed my call as an invitation. There was no justification for my selfishness. I didn’t want him in Mexico with me. I claimed I wanted to stand on my own. To stop relying on Mr. Wrong to fill me up.

What had I done?

Sam cleared customs at the Mexico City airport on October 5th, lugging the promised suitcase along with his own bulging duffle. In those few days, I had fallen into the easy groove of Spanish classes, cooking lessons, lively cultural exchanges at *Instituto Cutural Oaxaca*, a Spanish language school, and I’d settled comfortably at my hosts’, the Maldonaldos, home with Parsley, my twelve-year-old German Shepherd mix. The Maldonaldos loved Parsley and she settled right in.

The drive from Mexico City back to Oaxaca took about twelve hours in the old VW bus, and we planned to drive all night; I didn’t want to miss any lessons. Sam, Parsley, and I had traveled by car plenty over our eight years together: through the Pacific Northwest, several trips down the Baja Peninsula, once pulling a twenty-three foot sailboat on a trailer, up the Australian eastern seaboard, Brisbane to Cairns, and a month in Mexico and Belize. We had it down: the rhythm of the road. Drive and ride, drive and sleep, pit-stop, walk the dog, eat, change drivers.

“I’ll drive first—you sleep,” I offered. “I can get us out of the city and onto Highway 190 through Cuautla by dark. Then you drive.” It was six p.m. I’d left Oaxaca at five that morning. I yawned.

West of Cuautla the sun disappeared behind the distant dead volcanoes, their dark peaks worn to two-dimensional flatness against the yellowy haze of sky fading to ash with the twilight. Earlier in the day, I’d crossed this prehistoric valley with its moonscape of cones jutting from a vast expanse of empty grassland and experienced the strangest sense of *déjà vu*.

I planted corn kernels in this rocky, fertile soil. My brown stick-like legs jutted from the thread-bare hem of my rough jute-colored tunic, my dusty feet bound to leather soles by strips of tanned hide. My pointed stick plunged into the ground; I saw my calloused hand dip into the cloth bag, drop the seed into the hole. I saw the others, dark-skinned against their light tunics, ragged black hair flowing

forward across bent shoulders—dig, reach, drop, dig, reach, drop—against the backdrop of smoking cones.

This was why I'd come to Mexico—to decode my night-time dreams. I wanted to dig my ancient roots, uncover an obscure heritage within my blood. And I was going to write about it. I'd been in Mexico for over two months and, so far, this valley held the strongest pull, the sharpest vision. I thrilled to my discovery.

"Ann, I can't live without you." Sam's voice crashed between our Caddy seats, urgent, jarring.

I flinched, startled back from my past-life musings. "What?"

"I need you— give me the excuse to finalize the divorce," he mumbled, his hang-dog body language barking "loser."

"Get over it, Sam. Don't bring me into it—if you don't love your wife and don't want to be married to her—get a divorce."

I'd dumped Sam two years before when he ran off to Belize to chase drug smugglers on what I thought was a DEA contract. I didn't want him following me around Mexico, spoiling my big adventure. But I was the one who called for help, and there we were, driving toward Oaxaca and the *Instituto*.

Why did I think I needed him? I had agreed that I would show him around — *as a friend*—if he brought me some new clothes and a printer for my portable Toshiba computer. Now he was rooming with me. This was more than I'd bargained for. I'd moved on. Why hadn't he?

After our session at the *Instituto* ended in late October, Sam and I headed out of Oaxaca City onto the narrow country road winding toward the Pacific. We cruised my 1969 VW pop-top camper as though chugging an old Chris Craft along the sloughs of some sleepy delta. The ride felt thick and smooth—I had installed air shocks in place of the regular stiff factory stock.

Villages with tongue-twisting names peeked from under profusions of blooming vines. Churches, soccer fields, and markets overflowing with fresh vegetables and fruits, plots of marigolds pungent-ripe with golden flowers, and dark skinned families carrying pottery and crafts along the road, drifted by our open windows. The countryside smelled of fresh tortillas, burning chilies, chickens, goats, and the ubiquitous corn. As we ascended the foothills, the terraces of maize stretched into the clouds that hung around the high peaks above us like wooly ruffs.

Sam drove. I popped some old Moody Blues into the tape deck and cranked it up, making it impossible to talk, and leaving me plenty of time to savor the shifting view of Mexico as I settled into the divots of my wide, red-leather seat, which some previous owner had pulled out of a Cadillac and installed into the cab. The seat matched that owner's rear, but over time, it reformed to fit me.

I felt Sam rankle. I didn't care. I was still pissed-off that he'd followed me from California to Oaxaca—even though he had done me a huge favor. It was bad enough that he'd signed up for the same session at my language school, and then he finagled lodging with my hosts. We argued about it. Worse, we'd shared a room for three weeks and I'd settled right into the old relationship. I hated that it was so familiar, so easy, but mostly I was disgusted with myself for stringing Sam along to soothe my own apprehensions about travelling alone. I'd managed to take care of myself from Mazatlán to Oaxaca over the last two months. What was the matter with me now?

Sam claimed from the start I was nuts—out of my mind—to make this trip. Crazy? Probably. Who else but a lunatic would close a viable business, pack up a geriatric dog, and drive to Mexico in a VW camper at age forty? To write a novel—or that's what I told myself I was doing—but I'd had plenty of time to consider the truth on my long drives. Call it a mid-life crisis, or just plain running away from everything I thought was wrong with my life: my lousy choices in men, my dysfunctional family, my lack of distinction. I'd been stuck in a dead relationship and bored with keeping books and preparing taxes. My family dynamics weren't going to change, so why not get out while the getting was good? My therapist advocated I take a break and have a good look at my life and my choices—as far from my normal life as possible. She was right. I needed to figure it out, and let go of my anger with my family, with Sam, and with myself.

I returned my attention to the cab and the ribbon of tar, at times barely a car width, which wound higher into the Oaxacan mountains. Astringent scents of mountain pine and wood smoke swirled through our open windows, the afternoon air crisp and fresh. In places, the mist hung heavy in the trees as adobe huts gave way to wooden cottages scattered farther and farther from their neighbors. The spectacular scenery unfolded around each bend. Freshwater streams spilled over tumbled stones and fell down steep cliffs, disappearing into fern-lined canyons. In sunny pockets, brilliant red, yellow, and orange flowers crowded against the dark forest. The people we saw wore woolen clothes and hats, stout boots, and thick woven shawls to protect against the chilling dampness of the shadows. We shivered in shorts and sandals from the biting breeze flooding into the cabin of the bus, and the awesome beauty of the cloud forest as we reached the summit of the range.

A compact wood-hewn restaurant with white smoke billowing from the chimneystack sat atop the pass.

"I'm cold," I said. "Let's stop for some lunch and change into something warmer. Parsley needs a walk, too. Are you hungry?"

"I could use some coffee. This road beats hell—what have you gotten me into?" Sam said.

Inside the snug restaurant a bright fire burned in a large fireplace along one wall with local crafts and paintings hanging above it. Hand-loomed yellow cloths brightened the cluster of square wooden tables filling the room. Opposite the fire a little bar and the door into the kitchen took much of the wall-space. Most

amazing was the north-facing picture window overlooking rugged peaks ranging farther than my eye could see.

The restaurant wasn't listed in any of my guidebooks, but, like the miraculous vision of a saint—it materialized when we most needed it. We'd changed into sweats, socks, and shoes inside the camper then hunkered down in front of the restaurant's fireplace to sip our steaming mugs of sweet *café de olla* while we waited in silence for the *dueña* to serve her sweet and spicy *mole de guajillo*.

Back on the road, a black blanket of clouds extended below us to the horizon covering the lower range and foothills as we began our westerly descent from the peaks. We slipped under the clouds into a torrential downpour that turned the twisting mountain road into a churning mud-laced rapid. The cloud-forest had thinned and lush tropical jungle crowded over the narrow road. Storm-tossed leaves and branches rained down like confetti over a wild parade. We crawled along in first gear.

"God, do you think this road is safe?" I asked Sam. "What if it washes out while we're on it? What if one of these trees falls on us?" The road was dark and slippery. Thunder rocked the bus. Brown churning rivers cascaded down the hillsides briefly illuminated by the white glare of lightning. I smelled the ozone and wrinkled my nose.

"We should pull over and wait it out," I said.

Sam shifted into second gear, dismissing my suggestion. "Let's just get down this damn mountain. I can't see a damn thing. Wipe off the window."

I bristled but pinched my lips tight against the angry tempest close to bursting from me. Not the time to argue.

Soon the torrent slackened and trickled to mist then cleared around us, the air perfumed with exotic flowers and damp loam. The road, still curvy, wasn't so steep, and it was no longer a muddy flash flood. The deep black sky lightened. I saw people walking with their burros and baskets from banana groves at the end of the day's work. Girls clutched stacks of tortillas in embroidered cloths, grandmothers bent under tumplines of firewood, and mothers carried steaming blue enamel pots on their heads while herding their children to dinner. We had arrived in Pochutla. It was the first town since Miahuatlán back on the east slope, and it flanked the intersection of *Ruta 200* and *Ruta 175* from Oaxaca.

"Turn right at the intersection," I directed.

"To where for God's sake? Let's stop and have a beer," Sam said as he maneuvered the bus into a parking space.

Once we'd made ourselves comfortable at a small wooden table in the window of a restaurant on the main street, Sam demanded the map, asking "Where the heck are we?"

"Here." I stabbed Pochutla with my index finger. "We go north on the Pacific Coast Highway," I continued, tracing our route. "Look. To Puerto Escondido;

there's a trailer park."

My pals from the Instituto planned to visit this "anything goes" haven for young gringo surfers—a snarky crowd and certainly not Sam's type, but I wanted to hook-up with my friends, especially cute, dancing William after Sam's jealous outburst the day before.

"Puerto Escondido? The surfer-dude hang-out?" Sam banged his beer bottle onto the scarred tabletop. "We're going to Huatulco—to Club Med."

"Sorry, Sam, everyone else is going to Puerto Escondido." *Everyone* meant a couple of the other students from our language school. "Anyway, you agreed to meet William tomorrow night for the World Series. There's a bar with satellite TV."

"That must have been the tequila talking. God, I hate baseball. You want to see your new boyfriend from the *Instituto*," Sam baited me. "You and William looked pretty chummy dancing at the party last night."

My stomach clenched in irritation. What part of "just friends" was so hard for him? William and I danced a few times at the end-of-session party. So what? But I resented myself for being so transparent. It was true. William, a classmate, was handsome, witty—new. And old Sam was here. End of story.

I bit back a rejoinder. What purpose would it serve? Instead, I pulled a 1000 peso coin out of my pocket.

"I'll tell you what—I'll flip you: Quetzalcoatl says we go north, and the eagle with the snake points to Huatulco. You flip it."

I shot the coin across the table. Moisture from the storm hung heavy in the hot coastal air and I was anxious to get going; anxious to let the rush through my open window cool me and drown out Sam's tiresome accusations. I'd heard enough of his entreaties and his wallowing jealousy. What had I been thinking when I agreed to spend the next ten days traveling with him? Stupid, stupid, stupid.

He flipped the peso into the air. It bounced back to the table clanking dully.

Quetzalcoatl—I won—we'd go north to Puerto Escondido. Sam fumed.

I pushed a salsa tropical mix into the cassette deck as I considered the coin toss. Maybe Sam was right that this wasn't such a good idea. But he had already nosed the camper out of Pochutla's *centro comercial* and turned north onto the highway.

Puerto Escondido for only a peso, but costly in the end.

Mole Veracruz Style

Adapted from Diana Kennedy's "Mole de Xico" in *My Mexico—A Culinary Odyssey with More than 300 Recipes*, Clarkson Potter Publishers, New York, 1998

Over the twenty-nine years since I returned to California from Mexico, I've continued to search out superior *moles*. My husband and I frequent Mexican restaurants where I sample their *mole* atop enchiladas, in tamales, with meats or fish, and if they offer it, over my favorite—scrambled eggs. If I like the *mole*, and the restaurant is owner-operated, I ask what region they and the *mole* are from. Too often I can taste the *mole* is from a commercial paste, but sometimes it's the real deal—homemade from authentic *mole* ingredients. We're lucky, our local *Mi Pueblo* serves homemade red mole from the Mexico City region. I've never enjoyed Veracruz style mole in the U.S. except when I've given up a day to the kitchen, and made my version of *Mole de Xico*.

The original recipe was featured in an out-of-print, limited edition, collection of recipes sponsored by a former governor of the State of Veracruz, *La Cocina Veracruzana*.

This recipe will serve twelve. Leftover *mole* will keep for a month in the refrigerator; longer in the freezer.

Ingredients:

- 12 oz. *mulato* chilies dry
- 9 oz. *pasilla* chilies dry
- pork lard (best) or flavor neutral cooking oil
- 1 small-medium pungent white onion sliced
- 9 small cloves of garlic or 5 large peeled
- about 4 quarts of rich chicken broth
- ½ c. almonds (I use blanched and skinned almonds)
- 2/3 c. skinned peanuts (for a richer-flavored sauce, exchange 1/3 c. each pine nuts and hazelnuts)
- ¼ c. pecans (you can use almonds and pecans if you don't want peanuts)
- 4 T. sesame seeds
- 1/3 c. raisins
- 2/3 small plantain sliced
- 10 pitted prunes
- 3 small slices of stale French bread
- 2 dry corn tortillas, tiny street taco sized
- 2 medium sized tomatoes broiled, see directions
- 6 peppercorns toasted and crushed
- 6 cloves toasted and crushed

2/3 inch cinnamon stick crushed
1/3 c. *piloncilo* grated or soft brown sugar
1 ¼ oz. Mexican drinking chocolate such as Tazo
12 generous servings of chicken (or turkey) pieces
salt to taste

Equipment:

a saucepan large enough to hold the chilies
a frying pan
a blender
a deep heavy Dutch oven (I use Le Cruset)
a large deep skillet to cook the chicken

Steps:

01. Remove the seeds and veins from the chilies, place in the saucepan and just cover them with water, simmer for five minutes. Set aside to soak for up to ten minutes and drain completely.
02. Place the tomatoes on an ungreased pan or comal over medium heat, turning often to evenly brown and blister. Or broil two inches under the oven's broiler on a foil-lined baking sheet until browned, blistered and soft inside.
03. Heat 2 1/2 tablespoons of lard or oil in the frying pan. Add the onion and garlic and fry without browning until the onion is translucent. Drain the oil. Add mixture with 2/3 cup of broth to the blender. Blend until smooth. Add a cup or so of broth and blend a few of the chilies to a grainy puree in two or more batches, adding enough broth to keep the blades turning.
04. Add 1/3 c. lard or oil to the heavy Dutch oven. Add the pureed chilies and fry very gently, scraping the bottom of the pan often to prevent scorching. Fry for about ten minutes. Set aside.
05. Put some lard in the skillet and fry each of the remaining ingredients through the corn tortillas separately and draining each in a strainer to remove the fat. Between ingredients add only enough fat to cover the bottom of the pan. Crush the fried nuts, bread and the tortillas after draining to blend more easily.
06. Add about 2 c. of broth to the blender and blend the fried ingredients in small batches, adding broth as needed. Pour the fried ingredients into the chile puree.
07. Blend the tomato and spices together. Add to the mixture the pot with the sugar and chocolate. Cook over low heat for about ten minutes. Add about a quart of broth and continue cooking for about a half hour. Stir often to keep the mole from sticking to the bottom of your pot. The *mole* should be thick and the flavors well blended. Pools of oil will form on the surface.
08. Heat 1/3 c. of lard in the frying pan to brown the pieces of meat. Drain the

excess fat and add the meat to the pot. Cook over low heat for about 40 minutes until the chicken is fully cooked. Dilute with more broth as needed and adjust the salt before serving.

Mole is delicious served over fluffy long grain white rice or with plenty of warm tortillas of your choice to sop up extra sauce.

¡Buen Provecho!

About Ana Manwaring



Ana Manwaring is the award winning author of the JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventures and 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 <https://buildingabetterstory.com/>. She 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 (e-book and audiobook, too!)

If you enjoyed Saints and Skeletons, please consider going to your favorite online bookseller and leaving a review. Reviews help authors continue to write their books for your enjoyment.

To find out about new books and upcoming events, please take a moment to sign up for my mailing list at www.anamanwaring.com.

A JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventure Book 5

Backlash

Venom and Vengeance from 'Nam

Chapter 1

The Past is Always With You

September 30, 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 child, lost to him before her birth, JadeAnne was flying away. He hadn't expected to feel like this.

Obscured behind the snaking line of travelers inching through the TSA checkpoint, he watched his daughter slip back into her shoes, scoop up her small carry-on and take her man's hand. They headed into the wide hall toward the train to Concourse C. Quint watched as they disappeared into the crowds, eyes stinging from pinpricks of hot moisture. Would she come back? He shuddered, gulping to stifle his sorrow, and swiped away the visible signs of emotion from his face. *Get a grip, soldier.*

Irritated at acting like a broken-hearted teenager, he exhaled and strode 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, or risk a ticket and police interest. It would be gamble enough driving back to El Paso in the shot-up SUV, one of the cartel attackers 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. And 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 and soiled napkin into a receptacle then pushed through the revolving door onto the wide sidewalk, crammed with travelers and luggage

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, the side riddled with bullet holes, gesturing.

“Queent. ¡*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. The sooner they got out of Denver the better. And the sooner they dumped the SUV back with his contact on the border, the sooner they could get back to Colonia Roma and the op.

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. They’re off. Let’s get out of here. Dump this SUV. You okay to drive?” he asked, straightening up, nodding toward the bulky dressing under his partner’s shirt.

“Only hurts when I laugh, *jefe*,” He grinned, slamming his door shut 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 into 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. headed toward I-70 West.

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 breeching 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 ran a tight ship, regardless of his outward appearance as a gangbanger. And 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. The Mexican cartel bastards operating the human trafficking ring. A joint taskforce—as it were.

Quint stiffened. “*Oye* H. If they followed us here, do you think they followed us to the Medina’s?” After everything...what if Nader had snatched the rescued

teen and sold her back to the cartel?

“We weren’t followed, Quint. Nader knew the plan. They were 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—”

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 next exit in a quarter mile—Tower Road—” he pointed north— “Sign says there’s a Walmart Superstore. Pick up supplies. Hide in the parking lot until we’re sure no one is following us. We have ten hours to the border if it goes right.” He paused, peered through the side mirror again. “You sure you’re good to drive?”

Horacio grunted. Quint nodded. “Okay then.”

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

“We’ll probably find a station nearby. We should eat before we hit I-25 South.”

“Any decent Mexican food?”

Besides the usual gastrointestinal distress cluster of Burger King, MacDonald’s, and Taco Bell squatting on Walmart’s coat tails, Horacio sniffed out two Mexican restaurants on a cross street in the neighborhood. He pulled into the parking lot behind the second restaurant, a ramshackle-looking affair tucked into the edge of an equally downtrodden housing district, and wedged the SUV between two jacked-up pickup trucks. 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 of hot tortillas and roasting chilis. Quint almost felt at home. *Damn. I’m getting too comfortable in Mexico.* There was no telling where his op would take him. So why was he obsessing over Jade’s return?

Three orders of *huevos rancheros* later, a thermos full of black coffee, and a packet of a dozen each chorizo tacos and mushroom quesadillas to-go, the men eased out into the weedy parking lot. Quint felt better. Maybe his emotional weakness was 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 and finishing his work for Senator Aguirre, he needed to find a local breakfast dive with good food and a cheerful staff.

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

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

They pulled up to pump 6 at the EXXON Mobil on Tower Rd. "Grabbing a six-pack, H," Quint said. "I'll pay inside. Keep your eyes open."

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

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

"Good thing I got a six-pack of Dos Equis." Quint grinned. "But let's get out of Denver first. By the way, I called Medina and 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 AR15 and made like he was blasting them. Quint heard the laughter over the booming bass. The light turned green; the kids roared ahead, fingers cocked.

Horacio finger blasted back. "We're drawing attention. *¿Qué piensas?* The *entrada* to I-70 is coming up."

"I dunno. Which is worse? Explaining what happened to the police when we're pulled over in town, or risking an attack by 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. There's a lot of empty country before the border. But we have to get on the interstate."

Horacio nodded and pulled over then veered onto I-70 West.

Quint pushed down his seatback and 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 passed 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 so we can get out. Stretch. I'll swap then. I could eat."

Quint fished around behind his seat and grabbed 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 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, 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. Horacio wanted another dessert. Where that man put all the food, Quint couldn’t say, but he’d managed to wheedle the cook into making his adovado, not on the luncheon menu, and put away a plate of *mole* enchiladas as well. “Amigo, let’s take a stroll and do some sightseeing? Whaddya say? 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. I saw plenty of shops on the plaza.”

An hour 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 his 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 and tossed 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 and 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. Quintara raised his eyebrows and gave a quick nod.

Herdez returned and leaned toward his partner. In a low but audible voice he said, “All clear, Quintara. Vehicle checks out. It’s a Fed permit to carry and

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 and it’s motor revved as it peeled away from the plaza. A second car in hot pursuit.

“Let’s go!” Quintara 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 had the *placa*.”

Quint shrugged and 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 it 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 there and contact Gonzo to expect him. Maybe have a coffee. They could eat in El Paso at the airport. If all went well, they’d be 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 and 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 and never given him away. 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. Or now, 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.

How long had the man been looking for him? *Congratulations, asshole. Took twenty-seven 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. Horacio snored. The sky streaked pink, orange, and purple between the peaks as the western mountains shadowed to black. Quint needed a telephone. But there wasn't any cell service in this God forsaken desert.

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

"Good morning, amigo."

"¿Qué hora es, Queen? ¿Dónde estamos?"

"Las Cruces. I figured it out. Nader is going after Jade. I have to call her. Need a pit stop? It's another fifty minutes to El Paso."

"¿Pit estop?"

Quint pulled up to the pump. "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 and 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 hung up. The pump was ready and he filled the tank. At least Gonzo would get the SUV back with a full tank.

The pump clicked off. Quint hung up the nozzle and capped the tank. Horacio hadn’t returned, so he moved the vehicle to the parking space then wandered into the convenience store. He appeared with the bathroom key. *Might as well hit the john.* “Grab something to go with the tacos. 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, his gentle woman. 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. And 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, and 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?”