

NOTHING COMES AFTER



DEATH AND RETRIBUTION IN TEPOZTLAN

A JADEANNE STONE MEXICO ADVENTURE

ANA MANWARING

Praise for Ana Manwaring's
JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventures

The Hydra Effect

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.

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.

NOTHING COMES AFTER Z

Death and Retribution in Tepoztlán



A JadeAnne Stone
Mexico Adventure

ANA MANWARING



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To

Marjorie S. Manwaring
January 20, 1924 ~ July 12, 2021

my first editor

“How will you become a writer if you can’t spell?”

~Mom

Other Books in the JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventures

Set Up (2018)

Set Up Audiobook version (2020)

The Hydra Effect (2019)

The Hydra Effect Audiobook version (2022)

Forthcoming from Ana Manwaring

Coyote (2022)

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Chapter 1



A Whorehouse of Her Own

Wednesday, August 22, 2007

Aguirre's town car jerked to the curb and stopped, knocking me into the door handle and sending X-ACTO knives into my healing gunshot wound. What if the Zeta thugs had followed us from the hospital? We had something they'd paid for—me. And from what I'd heard, that group would stop at nothing to get me back. No, Quint—*Dad*—wouldn't let them get near me, would he? How would I know what my long-lost parent would or would not do? I'd only met him eleven days before, but his concern for me while I was in the hospital seemed genuine. I'd go with that. But *Dad* was still hard to say.

"Can I open my eyes now?" I asked.

"Wait a bit, girl. The surprise isn't quite ready," he said as he slid out, slamming the door behind him.

I slumped down in my seat and pain seared my ribs again. Shouldn't they have kept me in the hospital for a few more days? Or at least given me pain killers? Tylenol wasn't cutting it. The Zeta bullet had furrowed a trough deep enough to plant cabbages. They didn't even sew it up. I'd have a scar for sure. Either an interesting conversation hook or the end of bikinis for me.

Where did Quint go? I didn't need to sit in a hot car with my eyes squeezed shut for some absent father's surprise. I needed my dog and the elegant safety of my room at Senator Aguirre's high-rise apartment building in Colonia Polanco. There I'd be safe. I opened one eye.

Quint popped my door open and took my hand. "You're cheating. Slide out."

I squeezed my eyes closed again and clasped my sweaty palm into his calloused paw. All I'd seen in my brief scan was a ubiquitous bougainvillea-covered wall and the shadow of an iron gate. "Where are we, Quint?"

"You'll see."

"Not with my eyes closed."

I lurched against my father's wiry frame as I tripped over an uneven cobble. He snaked his hand around my back to steady me. "Careful," he said to the squeaky whine of the gate opening. "All right then—on the count of three. One... two... "

I heard birds twittering from the trees. The smells of gardenias and freshly

mown grass overpowered the stench of smoggy Mexico City.

“Three!”

I opened my eyes. Behind my father rose a three-story pink stucco house roofed in red tile. Rustic-looking wooden shutters and lintels flanked the windows and black wrought iron grillwork. Ivy grew up one side, twining into the balconies, and geraniums trailed from window boxes in brilliant reds, oranges and pinks. Shrubs and flowers crowded around the foundation and the high wall surrounding the property and purple jacaranda petals drifted onto the narrow lawn in the slight breeze. I gasped and inhaled the heady scent.

“This isn’t Polanco, is it? Where in the hell are we?”

“Calle Amores in Del Valle. Number 1060. I’ve rented it.”

A chorus of barks and yips rang above a rhythmic percussion of paws. Pepper beelined toward me from the front door, a golden retriever on his heels and six golden puppies tumbling behind.

“Pepper!” I flung my arms open to my dog and winced at the hot stab in my side as he jumped to his hind legs and I caught him into a hug. Pepper’s long tongue slathered my face with doggie kisses while Maya danced around my knees. “You rescued Maya!” I beamed at Quint and let Pepper go, gingerly crouching to hug the dog who saved my life then to tickle her wiggling brood.

“We’re home, JadeAnne. Come on, let me show you around,” he said as he dragged me back to my feet.

I scooped up one of the squirming pups and tucked it under my arm. “Home? I thought we were going back to the senator’s condo. What happened?”

“After you were taken to the hospital, I went back to get the dogs—”

“—the others? In the kennel? What about the ones in the veterinarian hospital?”

“Slow down, Jade. One thing at a time. The vet took over and all the dogs are fine. I grabbed Maya and the pups, and went back to Aguirre’s. The puppies pushed him over the top. You know how he is about dogs; he barely tolerates Pepper. The senator has thrown us out,” he said as a grin broke across his face. “Lucky for us, his family owns this place and it was empty.”

“You mean Lidia. I don’t trust that woman. Aguirre’s mother has something to do with this mess.”

“That’s what we’re going to find out, ain’t it?” Quint said.

“Oh, so you agree.”

“I didn’t say that, but even the senator knows she owns a working brothel.”

“Senator Aguirre’s mother is connected to the Zetas cartel somehow, I’m sure of it.” As I voiced my suspicion, it sounded ludicrous. She was a society matron. A *Grand Dame* with adult grandchildren.

We entered to the brightly tiled lobby with stairs and an elevator leading to the living area above the street. It reminded me of Anibal’s house in Condesa. The polished door to the left must lead into the garage where, I supposed, my combi was housed. “Where’s my bus?”

He pointed. “She’s got her own barn. Let’s go up.” He scooped the rest of the

puppies into his arms and toed the door open with a *you first* nod of his head.

I headed up behind Pepper and Maya, who looked pretty chummy, wincing with each step as my unused muscles pulled over my ribs under the bullet burn.

“I’m out of shape,” I said to the dogs.

At the top of the stairs, the dogs nosed the door open to reveal a smiling Señora Pérez, Anibal Aguirre’s housekeeper. My heart stopped. Fear and rage exploded in my gut; I spun to flee, and smacked into my father. He steadied me.

“*Buenos días, señorita. Bienvenidos. ¿Esta bien?*” she asked.

“Thanks, Mrs. Pérez. I’m better,” I said over her prattle as she ushered me into the kitchen.

“What’s she doing here?” I hissed at Quint.

“She’s worked miracles with Lily,” he replied.

“Yeah, she was kind to me too, but—”

“But nothing. She came with the house. After the fire, and Anibal’s presumed death, she needed a job.”

My head swiveled toward Quint. “Presumed? I thought you’d...”

Señora Pérez glanced at me for a beat as she busied herself at the stove preparing tiny *quesedillas* on a *comal*. “I think she speaks English,” I mouthed, watching her intently. Coincidence? Or was she Señora Lidia’s spy? I hadn’t been able to prove it at the house in Condesa. I’d stay on my guard here.

“All right then. Let me show you to your room.”

“My things?”

“All upstairs. The vest too. You should have been wearing that.”

“Don’t nag me, Quint. I was having lunch in the Colonia with a gentleman. It was a date. How was I supposed to know the bastard planned to kidnap me and sell me into the sex trade?” My laugh sounded shrill and my muscles tensed; I wasn’t over this. Would I ever be? And why *did* they want me? My Vietnamese build and complexion? Aren’t I too old for the trade?

He snorted and his lips flattened into disgust, but he kept quiet.

The stairwell up to the second floor was narrower than that from the ground floor to the kitchen, and it exuded an odor of panting dog and dust. We were quite a parade of feet kicking it up out of the carpet. I sneezed. “Does Señora Pérez vacuum?”

“She just got here today. Give her a break,” he replied and set the puppies onto the floor. I put down the two I carried, and they clustered around Maya, peeping and jostling for a teat.

Quint gestured to the end of the hallway. “That’s your suite. I’m on the other side. That door is Lily’s.” He pointed to a door on the left.

“Lily is here?” A wash of guilt engulfed me. “Isn’t she under the Embassy’s protection?”

“Long story JadeAnne. She’s here under the senator’s protection.”

“A lot of protection that is,” I muttered as I surveyed the rose-colored room. “Very, uh, girlie. Whose bedroom was this?”

“A furnished rental, Jade. I thought you liked *Louis XV*.” He laughed. “It’s

pretty awful, ain't it."

"Maybe Lily would like it. She's only fifteen. Princess rooms might still appeal to her. Where is she, anyway?"

"Nah, she's got her own pink room and bath, and she hides away there most of the time." He frowned before grinning. "You get a sitting room too— Look." He pushed through a silk-draped doorway and opened the door into a den of red velvet accented with gilt trim. Everywhere. Antique oil lamps dotted the black lacquered writing desk and spindly occasional tables.

I aimed my finger down my throat and made gagging noises. "My own bordello."

"That's about the size of it. This was the madam's suite."

"You're kidding me, right?"

"The girls' cribs are smaller, but some have bathrooms. Lily gets one *en suite*." He imitated a bad French accent.

"Doesn't this shout out something revealing about our landlady? Maybe Madam Consuelo did the decorating."

"The senator said he evicted the tenant when he found out what was going on."

"I assume he fumigated?"

I closed Maya and her pups into the "bordello," shutting the door behind me and laying down on the bed. Pepper jumped up, and I wondered if whoever belonged to the frilly dotted Swiss coverlet would mind a shedding dog sprawled across it. I'd have to do something about the decor, but then, would I be here long enough to bother? Maybe now was a good time to go home. Before I got shot again. That idea creeped me out and totally pissed me off. I sat up, disturbing Pepper. He furrowed his brow.

"It's okay boy. I'm not leaving, just thinking."

He woofed softly and nuzzled into my hands. I stroked his head. He sighed and grinned.

I kissed one of his silky ears. "I'm happy to see you too. I missed you."

Pepper wagged.

"But what are we going to do? Can we turn our backs on Lily? It's my fault her little sister is dead. If I'd just let them go in the helicopter with the rest of the kids..."

I thought back to the day Anibal Aguirre, the senator's half-brother, and I discovered twenty-three filthy children, ranging from six to fifteen, cowering in an airless prison carved from the rock of Mount Ajusco in a southern district of *La Capital*. We sprang them from their jail, and Anibal called his contact for a helicopter. I slammed my fist into a pillow. "How was I so stupid?" I'd believed Anibal was a DEA agent fighting against the drug cartels. At my insistence, he boarded all but the two American girls, Lily and Evie, and the rest lifted off to safety as the traffickers launched an attack on the house. We escaped, but *that* time when I was shot, I'd needed stitches. I ran my hand over my shoulder.

Almost time to pull them out. He'd convinced me to stay in Mexico to help him avenge the death of his cousin Lura. Why hadn't I gone home after I found her? That was what I was paid for: find the banker's missing wife in Ixtapa. Take a vacation. Go home. But I stayed.

"I could have lived without *this* vacation, Pepper." He wagged but let out a soft whine. "Oh, you too?" I asked.

Tears welled and streamed down my cheeks. Lura hadn't deserved any of what happened.

A bolt of energy shot through me, and I sprang up from the bed. I hadn't deserved any of this either. "He tricked me, Peppi." Yes, Anibal had meant to sell me into the sex trade from the start, right along with the girls. He was to blame. Anibal might as well have been the man who raped me—he caused it. My skin crawled with the filth I couldn't wash off. My stomach clenched and I felt the burn of bile rising up my throat. I flopped back onto the bed, curled around Pepper and gasped for air. "He was going to give you to Fernando, Pepper. If he weren't dead, I'd kill him myself."

Anibal was dead, wasn't he? All I'd seen was him trussed like a turkey and tossed into the back of the Zeta's van. "Pepper. What if he isn't dead? What if he comes back?"

Pepper pricked up his ears and turned toward the door. My stomach turned over before I heard the soft knocking and Quint's voice.

"JadeAnne, who are you talking to? You ready to get some lunch and make some plans?"

Pepper answered him by bounding off the bed to the door in two leaps. He woofed and Quint took that as *come in*.

"Aren't you ready?" he asked, scrutinizing my face. "Go wash your face."

What? I wasn't five. This guy was falling into a parental roll too easily.

After we corralled the puppies into a corner of the kitchen, we leashed the other two and headed out on foot where I took in my new neighborhood. Our house, unlike most of our neighbors' was free standing on a double lot. Mature trees shaded our wall and the street, and I now noticed two gates set into the iron fencing, one for people, and the other that would admit a vehicle. That one had an electric sensor. The street itself was narrow, lined with mostly three-story buildings; the compact cars and VW bugs parked in front faced south. A one-way street.

The dogs strained on their leashes, excited to be out for some fun. "Have the dogs been walked today?" I asked. I'd forgotten my dog-poop bag.

"Of course. I've kept dogs before."

"Yeah? When?"

"Growing up, we had dogs."

I looked up at my father and realized I knew nothing about him. He carried himself like a soldier, but exuded a squirrely vibe that I mistrusted. Probably exacerbated by the graying red stubble on his chin. He must have been a redhead,

or auburn at least. We had that in common. And those startling green eyes—I was staring into my own. “Where’d you grow up?” I asked, cutting off that disconcerting sense of connection I felt looking in his eyes.

“I was born in San Francisco in 1950 and lived in North Beach until I was sixteen and I left home for college. I never went back.”

I considered that for a moment as we crossed a street. Would I never go back to my childhood home? My parents weren’t anything to crow about, but still, I’d grown up there.

“How could you never go home? Don’t you miss your family? Hey, what’s my grandmother’s name?”

“Take it easy, I can’t answer everything at once. I only went to Berkeley. UC Berkeley. Mum came to see me every month. The rest of them? I hated my drunk-ass father, and my three older brothers were just like him. Mean. Greedy. Violent. I was the youngest and learned to defend myself early. My studies were my escape. Mum’s dogs were hers. I graduated with degrees in Math and Business Administration in 1970. Got my draft letter the day I graduated.” Quint’s smile warmed me as he continued, “If I hadn’t been drafted, you’d never have been born—whoa Maya, that’s a red light!” he said, and reined in the leash, the moment lost.

Pepper sat at the curb patiently as the traffic crawled by. We’d left our quiet neighborhood and emerged into a sunny commercial district. A breeze carried the smell of raw vegetables and I looked around for a market. The light changed and we crossed the street and continued toward the vegetables. “But you said my grandmother lives in Florida. Where? What’s her name?”

“Audrey Quint. My father was Morris. He died three years ago, a mean son-of-a-bitch to the end. Mum made me go see him in the hospital before he passed. She hoped we’d reconcile. I hadn’t seen him in thirty-eight years. I never understood why she stayed with him.”

“So, no sisters?” I asked.

“Yeah, the oldest, but she’d already married and was having babies by the time I came along. Her escape. She was born in Australia—Sydney.” He stopped talking and his fist clenched around the leash, jerking Maya.

“Careful, dude,” I said, laying my hand on his tense arm.

He blew out a breath and smiled. “Sorry. Thinking about that bastard pisses me off. Dad was a longshoreman. They say he killed a bloke in a tavern brawl and had to pack up the family in a hurry. It was just Mum and my sister then. She died of cancer while I was in ’Nam. I don’t know my cousins.”

The smells of fruits and vegetables grew stronger and the traffic congested with both vehicles and pedestrians as we came abreast of the municipal market. “Have you been back to Sydney?”

“On assignment. I don’t have people there. Mum’s people came from Perth and they’re all gone. Dad’s? They were drunks and thieves.” He sounded bitter.

The aroma of cooking meat set my stomach growling. The dogs tugged against their leashes and Quint picked up his pace. My side hurt, but the doctor

had insisted I get exercise.

“Here we are.” Quint held the door for me. He already knew the area.

I had no idea where we were. I looked at the sign, Don Capitán, as we stepped into a typical Mexican joint with brightly painted wooden tables and chairs. A counter toward the back separated the diners from the grills and *al pastor* rotisseries. My mouth watered. So did the dogs’.

“I can’t believe they let dogs in here.”

“This is Del Valle. Dogs go everywhere—like the Condesa. But unlike Condesa, Del Valle is home mainly to families. It’s where the young and hip go to raise their kids after they find their mates in the bars and restaurants of Condesa, Roma, or even Polanco. You’ll find an organic market here too.”

He smiled at me, his look a little too hopeful. Did he think I was going to cook and keep house for him? Oh, no. Señora Pérez would do that. Then again, maybe I should take on the cooking. The señora probably would poison us for killing Anibal. Hadn’t he said she was his aunt? Godson?

I must have made a face because Quint’s brows furrowed over the top of his menu. “What?” I asked.

He shrugged and went back to the menu.

“Don’t you worry about having Señora Pérez in the house? What if she’s loyal to Anibal?”

“I thought you were thinking about the organic market.” My dad laughed. “Not going to take over the cooking so we can get rid of her?”

Was this guy a mind reader? Could he divine how many fingers I mentally held up?

The waiter appeared to take our orders. I asked for shrimp *al diablo* and a Victoria. Quint went for *pulpo en tinta*, octopus cooked in its ink, and a Coke. Yech.

When the waiter scurried off to get our drinks, I asked, “So, Quint, if this is a family district, how did someone operate a whorehouse on Avenida Amores?”

About Ana Manwaring



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 out-run gun totin' maniacs on lonely Mexican highways—the inspiration for The JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventures. Read about her transformative experiences living in Mexico at www.saintsandskeletons.com.

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.

Learn more at www.anamanwaring.com. Please join her mailing list to keep up with news, events, giveaways and future releases.

If you had as much fun reading *Nothing Comes After Z* as I did writing it, please consider going to your favorite online bookseller and leaving a review. Reviews help authors continue to write their books for your enjoyment.

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