



THE MEXICAN GARDENER

Len Lamensdorf

**SeaScape Press™
Westlake Village, California**



CHAPTER 1

José Rivera-Diego hurried down the corridor of the KEMEX Tower, trying to seem casual while moving as quickly as he could. Behind him, in his own superbly furnished corner office with its spectacular views of the city of Monterrey, Mexico, an original multi-dimensional, shaggy brown Miro tapestry hung on one interior wall, and a large brilliantly-colored oil painting of deep-chested ironworkers by Domingo Juarez, the radical painter-activist, hung on another. Seated behind José's vast mahogany desk in his black leather chair, was the dead body of Ermino Diaz, the company's chief chemist, his face grotesquely scarred by acid, blood streaked across his white lab coat, and a piece of printer paper pierced by a dagger stuck into his tongue. On the paper was scrawled: Y TU. In blood.

José had found his reception area empty and his secretary missing when he returned from a meeting with Jeraldo, Diaz's assistant, who had nervously apologized for

his boss's absence, and then made a silly excuse as he more or less staggered out of the company's busy dining room. When José, returning from that encounter, opened the inner door to his private suite he understood everything, immediately backed out of his office and hurried away. Somehow, returning from that inexplicably cancelled luncheon meeting, he had instinctively gone up to his office using the building's interior stairway—part of a new health plan recommended by his personal physician—but in fact it was the first time he had walked up the sixteen floors. There was no-one in the stairwell, which was not surprising because although you could exit onto the stairway landings from each floor, the doors could not be opened from the stairwell side without a special key. José had such a key and used it.

He had been pleased that he was not short of breath when he exited on his own floor, and now it seemed extremely fortunate that he had taken this route. Also, because he had decided to use the steps he had entered the KEMEX Tower by the rear service door instead of the building's ornate entrance facing the street, and therefore he never passed through the security checks. He had long ago figured out that the security systems were clumsy and ineffective and did not cover the rear entrance at all; that knowledge had proved to be vitally important.

However, he was also aware that the security cameras in each corridor (none in the stairwells) would have picked him up, and if they were surveilling him—which they surely were—they would know where he was.

It was not as if he hadn't prepared for this day—even though he had reached the point where the reality of

discovery and punishment had begun to seem distant, almost fanciful. After all, he was Executive Vice President and Director of Science with sterling credentials and an unmatched record of achievement. His combination of scientific knowledge and personal charm had rocketed him up the corporate ladder. Even those who were envious of him had to admit that he was deserving of his progress and that he was not an arrogant or unpleasant person. Of course, there was also his long personal history with the company's CEO, Hector Palacios. José had started very near the top.

José had paced this corridor before, checked the security cameras and noted there was a small, narrow, blind spot at the opposite end of the building adjacent to the other stairwell. Next to it was a suite of offices with connecting inner doors and outer doors to the corridor from each office. He opened the outer door to the first, smiled at the surprised personnel working there and—best of all—found the door to the connecting office open. He walked through, ignoring the employees, and exited the outer door into the thin sliver of a blind spot in the hall. Keeping close to the wall, he exited the corridor into the security stairwell. José raced down the stairs, stripping off his jacket and tie. Only thirteen floors this time, because this stairwell exited on the roof of the four level parking structure adjacent to the KEMEX Tower.

José did not head for his new black Mercedes parked on the ground level, but instead hurried to the ten year old Toyota Corolla he had left on the second level a week earlier. It didn't seem to have been disturbed. He keyed open the trunk, dumped his jacket and tie inside, pulled a dingy, gray sweater over his head, slipped off his

burgundy-toned, Ferragamo shoes, dropped them into the trunk and stepped into a scuffed pair of loafers. He flipped up the padding over the tire-well, ripped the plastic and duct-taped wrapping off a Browning automatic pistol and shoved it and a couple of clips of ammunition into his pockets.

He hesitated for an instant, wondering if he should cell phone the others in the group he called the “KEMEX clique,” (they had rejected “cabal”), but he immediately discarded the idea. Almost assuredly his call would be monitored by company security personnel, and he would quickly be caught.

The Corolla started instantly and he drove down the ramp towards the exit. When he reached the security kiosk, the guard eyed him cautiously, but José smiled and showed him a clear-plastic-covered pass he had forged weeks earlier and drove out. He couldn't help feeling he might never pass this way again. As for Hector Palacios, if he ever saw him again, the circumstances would likely be terrifying. And to think, they had once been friends—of a sort.

Instead of aiming for the well-marked major highway that fronted the KEMEX Tower, he turned into a back street and accelerated away. Three blocks later he parked across the street from a nondescript, blue middle-aged Ford sedan, emptied the trunk of the Corolla into the trunk of the Ford and drove away.

Fifteen minutes later, José drove the Ford into a bleak-looking warehouse area, opened a storage shed with a wireless remote and drove inside, closing the metal door behind him. He stripped off the black hairpiece he had been

wearing without detection for the past two weeks, revealing his own shaved head. Then he opened his shaving kit and, using some of the bottled water in the trunk, swiftly shaved off his mustache and ran the razor over his scalp a final time. He heard noises outside the shed, so he jammed a greasy gray cap on his head and hurriedly changed the Mexican license plates for a set of California plates, stashing the old plates behind the wheel well in the trunk. He was afraid to raise the metal door electrically because of the noise it would make; he disengaged the automatic connection and slowly raised the door using his left hand while his right hand hovered near the pocket holding the Browning.

The only people in sight were a pair of young men unloading some scruffy-looking furniture into a shed about a hundred meters away. Monterrey was notorious for the infighting between drug cartels based in the area, and the young men bore the kind of tattoos that were typical for the battling gangs, but José decided it was best to pretend to ignore them. He got into the Ford, started the engine and pulled out, closing the metal door behind him. The two men looked up briefly as he drove by, but José ignored them. If he had been seen by the wrong people, so be it.

José knew he couldn't relax. It was hundreds of miles to the U.S. border, and he might be intercepted at any time. But he did congratulate himself for having sent his wife and two children to visit relatives in Buenos Aires two weeks earlier—for a two month stay. His wife, Luisa, had been puzzled by his insistence they stay away so long, and she had questioned him somewhat suspiciously.

He had laughed aloud. “I don’t have a mistress,” he said. “I’m too old for that sort of thing.”

They both laughed. He was thirty-eight years old.

José was certain that as soon as KEMEX security realized he had fled, they would assume he would head for the Monterrey International Airport, where he hangared his own recently acquired twin-engine Cessna, or to the nearest border crossings into the United States, such as Nuevo Laredo or Reynosa. He had no such intention. Instead, he drove due west towards Gomez Palacio, avoiding the toll road where he might be stopped at a kiosk, then angled southwest following similar roads through Torreon and Durango; next he turned sharply north into Highway 45. He had stashed two large cans of petrol in the trunk weeks earlier, but he pulled into a decrepit petrol station in the small town of Mirador. The ancient owner was dozing on a chair tilted against the wall of his home in the shade of a ragged, dusty-leaved Sycamore tree. José knew the station had two old-fashioned pumps, and he waved the owner away and pumped petrol himself. When he paid for the petrol, he removed his cap and wiped his sweaty face, making certain the old man saw his bald head. Apparently, the man was almost blind and wouldn’t have been able to identify José with any degree of particularity anyway.

He decided it was time to alert the others; he tapped the emergency number into his iPhone and text-messaged a single word: “alien.” When Sanji and the others received the message they would know that José was on his way to crossing the border into the U.S. José couldn’t tell if his message got through or had been intercepted, but it hardly

mattered. He would have had to contact the others sooner or later.

There were still several hours of daylight left on this July day and he was still a long way from the border. There was nothing to do but keep driving—not too fast, yet as fast as possible. Highway 45 had only two lanes and the traffic wasn't extremely heavy; he was usually able to pass slower-moving vehicles. As he neared Hildalgo del Parail, José became aware of a throbbing sound over the traffic and wind: a helicopter. There was no way he could avoid being seen by anyone in the chopper, so he decided to do the opposite. He pulled off the road, got out of the car, climbed down in the drainage ditch, pulled off his cap, shoved it in his back pocket, opened his zipper and began to pee. The chopper's shadow seemed to hover over him—he hoped his bald head and his nonchalance would dissuade them. The aircraft hung very low, its engines were very loud, and the wind and dust it stirred up almost caused José to lose his balance. One second after another, each as long as a minute. Then, abruptly the chopper moved swiftly away. He shrugged—he had needed to pee anyway. But now his clothes and his face were grimy with dust and dirt. So were his private parts.

He drove west again, avoiding Chihuahua, taking a very bad road that paralleled the Sierra Madre Occidental. The Ford was in good condition for its age and mileage, but the road was pot-holed and uneven. The sun had passed west beyond the mountains, and the sky was growing darker every minute. He decided he would pull off the road at a convenient place and nap, then proceed through the night until he reached the border. Later, he would decide whether

to cross at Agua Prieta or drive over at some unguarded place along the road.

José found a place where the road edged a steep valley. On the opposite side, it curved around some boulders and then flattened out. He decided to drive off and park behind the rocky outcroppings. He got out, stretched, and walked in a little circle, wriggling his hands and moving his shoulders to restore some of the blocked circulation. He checked his iPhone, but there hadn't been any response. He didn't expect any.

Suddenly the unit began to vibrate—an incoming text message: “There is no reason for concern. Please meet me at the club, and I'm sure we can work this out together. Best, Hector.”

José hadn't realized until that moment that Hector knew his wireless address, which meant he could readily locate him. After all his careful planning, he had done something incredibly stupid. First he stamped on the phone, then he picked up the remains, ran across the road and hurled the phone as far as he could into the valley

As for the message, it was a typical Hector Palacios ploy. Ignore the horror of the situation and chat amiably with your old friend. Hector had displayed this form of disingenuous amiability since they were a couple of pre-teens at the Mission middle-school in Casa Loma, a suburb of Monterrey. Hector's family was wealthy and could easily afford the parochial school tuition. They simply wanted their children to have a rigorous Catholic education. José's family rode a couple of rungs lower, but they believed the Mission schools provided the best education in

the area, and they were willing to make sacrifices to pay for it.

José shrugged, walked back to his car, climbed into the front passenger side of the sedan, angled the seat as far back as possible and stretched out as far as he could. He was well over six feet tall and powerfully built, and the angled seat was far from comfortable because he couldn't straighten his legs completely. Still, he thought it was better to sleep in the front than in the back since he could more easily climb into the driver's seat if necessary.

It wasn't difficult to close his eyes for he was quite tired, but it wasn't easy to sleep. He moved and pushed, shoved the seat this way and that, ending up lying sideways with his back and butt against the seat, knees bent, and arms cradling his head. That was the least uncomfortable position and the one it was most difficult to move out of. He had to leave the window open or he would have been unable to breathe in the heavy, muggy air. A few minutes later he was asleep. He dreamed about Hector and himself. They were both twelve years old and running through the woods behind the Old Mission. Hector was telling José which direction to run. He had a malicious smile on his face, his teeth bared in a frightening array. When he gestured, Hector looked like a devil. José veered off the trail in the direction Hector had pointed out to him. Suddenly, he was yanked off his feet and hanged upside down from the branch of an oak tree. José was flailing his arms trying to get out of the trap, while Hector was bent almost double, roaring with laughter.