

EBOLA PURSUIT

**A
Novel**

By David Carlberg

Chapter One

“Don!” the young woman called from the redwood garden deck, “Someone here to see you.”

Donald Alarcon was on his knees in his postage stamp-size La Jolla, California vegetable garden, inspecting leaf damage to his exotic Batavia lettuce plants. “Damn cutworms. They’re eating us out of house and garden,” he murmured. Cora, his brown Labrador retriever, seemed to understand her master’s grief and rubbed her head sympathetically against Alarcon’s thigh.

“On my way,” he shouted as he raised his six foot four frame, hitched up his cargo shorts and headed for the house. Cora following right behind him, he bound up the steps to the deck. “Who is it?”

“‘FBI’ is printed on his forehead,” Alarcon’s wife, Aurora, responded with a playful smile.

“What now? Can’t they leave us in peace?” Alarcon said with a grimace as he washed his hands in the laundry room sink, dried them on the front of his Pendleton shirt and entered the kitchen. Aurora and Cora followed immediately behind the lanky, thirty-nine year-old scientist.

Sure enough, Alarcon had worked with the FBI long enough to spot a Special Agent from across a football field. He wondered as he spotted the tall gentlemen in the dark suit from across the dining room, Is it their clothes? Their body language? He entered the living room and extended his right hand. “Hi, I’m Don Alarcon. And I see you’ve already met my wife, Aurora.”

“Yes, a pleasure. I’m Special Agent Paul Hollister,” the tall, heavy-set man said while waving his FBI ID under Alarcon’s nose with his left hand and shaking Alarcon’s hand with his right hand. He had a letter-size manila envelope tucked under his left arm.

“Pleased to meet you,” Alarcon responded.

“Sorry to interrupt your weekend like this, but my SAC ...Special Agent in Charge...thought you would want to hear the info I have as soon as possible,” Hollister said.

“What office you from?” Alarcon asked.

“San Diego,” Hollister answered as he slipped his ID case back into his inner coat pocket.

“Know a couple of people over there. Aurora was in the San Diego office for a short time,” Alarcon said.

“Secretary?” Hollister asked, smiling and looking at Mrs. Alarcon.

Aurora frowned, then chuckled. “Special agent,” she said with a smirk.

“Ooops, sorry” Hollister said quietly. “She’s too pretty for an agent.”

“That’s exactly what I thought when I first met her.” Alarcon responded, giving Aurora a firm hug. “I couldn’t take my eyes off her.”

Aurora Kennedy Alarcon, 32, with straight, waist-length blond hair, five foot ten, athletic physique. Was inspired to join the FBI following the death of her brother in a terrorist attack. Following training she was serving at the Washington FBI field office when the 9/11 incidents

occurred and was briefly part of the response team investigating the attacks, then subsequently was assigned to the mailed anthrax episodes. She was transferred to the Dallas field office in 2004 and two years later she acted as Alarcon's supervisor in a counterintelligence operation at the Army's Dugway Proving Ground in Utah.

"How come we never bumped into one another at the San Diego office?" Hollister asked Aurora.

Aurora shrugged her shoulders. "Don't know. Only there a couple of months. I was in white collar."

"That explains it. I'm over in counterintel."

"So, what can I do for you?" Alarcon said, trying to steer the conversation back on track so he could return to his gardening. He gestured an invitation to Hollister to take a seat in an upholstered chair.

"You were working undercover in the Dugway North Korean spy operation?" Hollister asked Alarcon as he eased his substantial frame into the chair.

"Yeah. It ended pretty well." Alarcon responded modestly along with a feeling of pride. "They were trying to pick up classified information about our biowarfare defense capabilities. The last I heard, they're all in federal pens. But my spy days are behind me, for good, I hope."

"Well...maybe not," Hollister responded cryptically, which caused Alarcon to feel a sense of uneasiness.

"You were known as Donald Aaronson at the time...that was your cover name?" Hollister asked.

Alarcon and Aurora simultaneously dropped into a large green sofa. Cora curled up against Alarcon's feet. "Yup, Alarcon is the name I was given under witness protection because of a prior case I was involved in. That was a long time ago. Something to do with testifying against a major drug czar up in L. A."

Hollister nodded. "I remember hearing about that. Your testimony was key to his conviction."

"Seemed so," Alarcon said quietly. "To complete the record, I was born Donald Allinger. Keeping all these names straight has been one giant pain in the tail. One of the downsides of playing spook."

Hollister smiled and nodded in sympathy. "Great looking dog," he said, tilting his head toward the large brown animal at Alarcon's feet. "Lab?"

"Yes. Name's Cora. Belonged to one of the actors in the Dugway case. The spoils of war, I guess," he said as he rubbed Cora's flank.

Alarcon's demanding role in the Dugway operation, which culminated with his kidnapping and torture by North Korean thugs, ultimately aided the FBI in breaking up the spy ring. The substantial reward money provided Alarcon and his new bride with a down payment on a small, comfortable house in a modest residential area just east of the University of California's La Jolla campus after he was offered a research position at the university. Specializing in robotics as applied

to microbiological and chemical detection systems made him a highly desirable addition to the university's research team.

"You've certainly led a remarkable life the last several years," Hollister said. He fell silent for several moments, apparently not relishing the primary purpose of his visit. He nervously rubbed his hand over his heavy, black, wavy hair, then began slowly, "Uh...in the Dugway case you made contact with a high ranking North Korean official, a Doctor Oh?"

"Yeah, what's this leading to?" Alarcon asked cautiously.

Hollister shifted the brown envelope from his left hand to his right. "Bureau headquarters passed some intel to us from the South Korean National Intelligence Service." The FBI agent again hesitated for a moment, took a deep breath and continued, "Doctor Oh was executed by the North Korean government sometime last year or early this year. It wasn't announced officially until recently by the government's Central News Agency. The reason for her execution was 'action injurious to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.' That's all we know at this point except she must have been held for at least a year since she was arrested right after you had contact with her in Dubai, according to information we got from the CIA."

Alarcon felt a chill race down his spine. Although Doctor Oh headed North Korea's biological warfare research and development operations that were clearly intended to find ways to sicken and kill people with biological agents, Alarcon had developed a certain degree of sympathy and even a little fondness for the misguided woman with whom in the line of duty he had been intimate as a covert agent. The information he gleaned from the woman averted a major bioterrorist attack on a California city that would have been catastrophic.

"Any information about what prompted her arrest at that time?" Alarcon asked the FBI agent.

Hollister shook his head. "You must know, North Korea is one of the deepest black holes on the planet when it comes to acquiring intel."

It occurred to Alarcon that it might have been his contact with Doctor Oh that led to her arrest and execution. He began to sense a slight feeling of nausea...like a tight band around his head.

"Well, that's...interesting," Alarcon managed to murmur. It took several moments for his head to clear sufficiently to say, "I learned about her capture right after I got back from Dubai. When I was grabbed by North Korean goons in Salt Lake, the head goon took great glee in informing me that Doctor Oh had been forcibly returned to North Korea. Was pretty clear that her future was not going to be pleasant. Mine didn't look so hot at the time, either. That was when that North Korean mutant tried to rearrange my internal organs with the barrel of his pistol."

"I hadn't heard about the Dugway case until I was asked to deliver the news to you about Doctor Oh," agent Hollister said. "I read your report before coming here. Had to shoot your way out of a sticky situation. Amazing,"

Alarcon nodded but said nothing.

Aurora moved closer to Alarcon, held his arm and gazed at his face, trying to measure his emotions. She could see muscles in his clenched jaw strain and his eyes narrow as his memory

replayed the gun battle between him and two armed thugs in that warehouse in the outskirts of Salt Lake City. He had been double-crossed by the intermediary for the North Korean spy cell leader and consequently was kidnapped and about to be shot. What saved him was a pistol in an ankle holster that the thugs failed to discover.

Alarcon inhaled deeply and turned his attention back to the FBI agent. He tilted his head and glanced toward the envelope Hollister had in his right hand.

Hollister noticed Alarcon's subtle gesture. "Got a little something you might be interested in." He opened the manila envelope and pulled out a heat-sealed, transparent plastic pouch containing a crinkled brown envelope. "Apparently before she died, Doctor Oh had this smuggled out of her country. It's... addressed to you," Hollister said slowly as he leaned over and handed the pouch to Alarcon.

Alarcon tentatively grasped the pouch with a trembling hand. "Oh, my God. Any idea what's in it?" he asked, staring at the pouch, his voice strained.

"No, but I imagine CIA does," Hollister said, smiling. "Pretty sure they took a hard look at it before passing it on. Wouldn't be surprised they had something to do with getting it out of North Korea."

"How did *you* get it?" Alarcon asked as he held it up to bright sunlight angling through a window, trying to discover the envelope's contents.

"We've been told it came from the Swedish embassy in Washington to the CIA Langley to bureau headquarters to the Dallas field office to us. That's all I know. How the Swedes got hold of it is a total mystery since I don't believe Sweden has diplomatic relations with North Korea. Obviously it's been trickling through channels for some time, since she's apparently been dead for several months."

"Don," Aurora said quietly. "Please don't open it here. There might be anthrax in it ...or worse."

"Think she'd do that?" Alarcon asked, looking at Aurora, his brow wrinkled.

"She must have learned soon enough that you were working for the FBI. I'm amazed she didn't have a contract out for you," Aurora said.

"Maybe she did, but yeah, that might be safer," Alarcon said, turned to Agent Hollister. "If you think the CIA has already looked at it, they must think it's safe if they sent it on to me. No bugs or a bomb or anything like that. But considering its source, to be on the cautious side, I'll open it tomorrow in a biosafety hood. It's not that I don't trust the CIA, you understand," Alarcon said with a wry smile.

FBI Agent Hollister responded to Alarcon's remark with a wink.

Alarcon ran his fingers along the edge of the envelope through the plastic pouch. "Feels just like an ordinary letter but on narrow note paper. There's some Korean characters in the corner. Have to get that translated."

"I have it here," Hollister said. He removed a small notebook from his jacket pocket and began reading from it. "The printing says, 'Office of the Deputy Supreme Director, Pyongyang-ri, Yodok, Democratic People's Republic of Korea.'"

“Which means?” Alarcon asked with raised eyebrows.

“Pyongchang-ri is one of North Korea’s several political prison camps. Probably the worst.”

“Jesus,” Alarcon said quietly, his eyes narrowed, focusing on the pouch. “I wonder what’s in it.”

“Mind if I look over your shoulder when you open it?” Hollister asked.

“No, of course. Sometime tomorrow morning, in my lab. When can you make it?” Alarcon asked.

“How about ten? Got a meeting at eight. Probably can’t get away before nine thirty.”

“I’m at the U. C. San Diego Institute of Engineering in Medicine, Robotics Lab in the Science and Engineering Research Facility. Just ask the man at the gate where the SERF building is.”

Agent Hollister, after writing down Alarcon’s directions in his notebook, nodded. “See you at ten. Nice meeting you both,” he said, rose from his chair and exited the house. Alarcon rose to see him to the door.

Aurora fell against the sofa’s back and exhaled loudly. “Holy crapola. What is that all about?” she said as Alarcon returned to the sofa, still fidgeting with the plastic pouch.

Alarcon shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. “I can’t seem to knock that damn Dugway affair off my back. It keeps bouncing back like a tennis ball. Find out tomorrow what this all means.” He tossed the pouch onto a low coffee table and strode out the room, shouting, “Come on, Cora! Let’s hunt for more worms.” Cora skittered behind Alarcon over the dark wood floor.