Excerpt from Chapter 5: The Secret of the Yellow Death by Suzanne Jurmain

1. Mid–Late July 1900

2. On one hot summer day, the team got word that American soldiers were dying of an illness at the Pinar del Rio army post, located about one hundred miles from Camp Columbia in Cuba. But was the sickness yellow fever? No one seemed to know, and army officials ordered Dr. Agramonte to investigate.

3. It was a good choice. Agramonte, a charming and sophisticated man, was also a very smart, well-qualified physician. He'd examined plenty of living yellow fever patients. He'd autopsied the bodies of those who'd died of the disease. He knew all the symptoms of the illness, and he headed to Pinar del Rio right away.

4. One of the sick soldiers had died just hours before Agramonte reached the camp. The body was waiting, and Agramonte promptly did an autopsy.

5. As he worked, the doctor looked for the usual signs of yellow fever: the yellow eyes, the yellowish liver, the yellow skin, all of which were caused by serious damage to the liver. Since liver injury can prevent the blood from clotting and because yellow fever can also make the body's veins and arteries "leak," Agramonte thoroughly checked the corpse for signs of bleeding. Was there liquid blood in parts of the digestive tract? Partially digested blood that looked like coffee grounds inside the stomach? One by one, the doctor noted down his findings, and by the time he put his scalpel down, Agramonte knew one thing for certain. The soldier on the table had died of yellow fever.

Dr. Aristides Agramonte, the only member of the Reed team born in Cuba, was the son of a Cuban general who died fighting against the Spanish for Cuban independence

6. After leaving the autopsy room, the doctor walked through the camp's hospital ward, moving carefully from bed to bed. To his horror, there were more patients showing telltale signs of yellow fever. There was no mistaking the yellow skin and eyes, the bleeding gums, the high temperatures, and the slow pulse rates. Somehow the doctors at Pinar del Rio had failed to recognize a yellow fever outbreak.

7. Agramonte immediately telegraphed the news to headquarters. Reed jumped on a train the following morning. By July 21 he had

joined his colleague at the camp, and the two men began to search for the cause of the disease.

8. The statistics were clear. Thirty-five soldiers at the army post had come down with yellow fever. Eleven had been killed by the vicious illness. How had all those young Americans become infected?

9. One man, a prisoner who'd been locked up in the guardhouse, had died of the disease. But he hadn't been near any yellow fever patients before or during his imprisonment. He hadn't ever touched clothes or sheets that had been used by other yellow fever victims. How could he possibly have gotten sick?

10. And what about the eight other men who shared his cell? They had breathed the same air the sick man had breathed. They had touched his clothes, brushed against his blankets, and handled his dishes. But those eight men had stayed completely well.

11. So what had caused the dead prisoner's attack of yellow fever?

12. Reed and Agramonte examined the possibilities.

13. It wasn't Bacillus icteroides. That much was clear. After weeks of work, the team had found no evidence that Sanarelli's bacteria had anything to do with yellow fever. That eliminated one theory.

14. Contact with infected clothing and bedding didn't seem to have spread the disease to the dead prisoner's cellmates. That discredited the idea that yellow fever was somehow spread by touch.

15. So where had the disease come from? And how had it managed to strike only one soldier in a locked guardhouse?

16. That was a mystery, but wrapped inside that mystery was a clue.

Patients in a Havana yellow fever hospital in 1899. The ward Dr. Agramonte walked through at Pinar del Rio probably looked a lot like this