

Feast of the Gods

By: Colleen Fuglaar

Prions are unique among contagions. They can be both inherited and transmitted. Because they're simple proteins that carry no DNA, they're invulnerable to usual sterilization methods such as bleach or steam autoclaving. Most frightening of all, ingested, they survive the journey through the gut wall, migrating up the spinal column to the brain. They are exponentially smaller than viruses and are almost impossible to filter with normal methods. We can't smell them, taste them, or see them under electron microscopes. The most famous of the known examples of a prion disease is Mad Cow Disease which has a 100% fatality rate. However, an increasing body of medical evidence indicates common neurological ailments such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's may also be caused by similar, minuscule amyloid deposits.

The antagonist in *Feast of the Gods* is a prion expert, CEO and major shareholder of the new biotech firm Zargonics, based in Dallas. Those well-read, well-off individuals in Europe and the U.S. who fear Alzheimer's are the first targets for his new wonder drug, Vionex, recommended as both cure and preventative for dementia. As the efficacy of his amazing new drug spreads, no one realizes this half Egyptian, half Greek, Oxford educated microbiologist has created two versions of his wonder drug. One is a cure; the other is a contagion. And prions are so little understood and hard to trace that even the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (CDC), would have a very difficult time identifying them.

Only two people will have the information, the access, and the reckless arrogance to uncover this bioterrorist plot. Dr. Terry Baxter, (29), is a dedicated, equally brilliant epidemiologist. Through sheer moxie and a refusal to follow the rules, she's recently been promoted as the CDC's newest Epidemiology Intelligence Service Officer.

Her former lover, Galen Archer, (32), is a discredited FBI undercover agent near burnout because of his fear of attachment and because of his own refusal to follow rules. This stubborn pair parted acrimoniously, but they'll be brought back together by Zargonics as they work the case from opposite angles. She follows medical clues trying to pinpoint the source, or reservoir, of the outbreaks in the U. S. and Egypt. Galen follows a trail of bodies and crime linking the terrorists and the secretive biotech firm Zargonics, beginning with the disappearance of a geologist from a prominent Egyptology dig.

First, Terry and Galen are bitter adversaries. Finally, when their careers and their very lives hang in the balance, they become lovers again. Their emotional journey switches in cinematic fashion between Dallas, Atlanta, and Egypt while they track the obscure trail of clues.

Both angles of investigation climax in a mystical, ancient place: Tell el-Amarna, Egypt, where the Heretic Pharaoh Akhenaten ruled as the world's first monotheist. The antagonist believes Akhenaten almost destroyed ancient Egypt through his decadence, his scandalous elevation of the status of women, and his perversions. It's only appropriate, he vows, that a heretic will strike at the heretics. He plants his engineered disease, now highly air transmissible because he's spliced it at the genome level onto the common cold, in Akhenaten's tomb. It's being excavated by a prominent U.S. team of archaeologists.

The dig members, mostly from affluent backgrounds, Terry's sister Mandy among them, will be the index cases of the new plague. And bring it back to the U.S....where the only known treatment for prion infection is Vionex. But unlike its earlier promise, it now seems to make the plague worse. Only in great peril of their lives and those they love will Terry and Galen's tenuous alliance solve the plague just as it reaches pandemic proportions.