

# ***The Iceman's Curse***

by

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## Chapter 1

Monday, January 8, 2018

St. Paul, Minnesota

9:00 a.m.

Grant Farnsworth entered the old PathoBiology building of Minnesota's College of Veterinary Medicine and took the stairs two at a time to the second floor. He headed down the main hallway, removing his winter gloves and unzipping his heavy parka. He power walked past the first door on the right. It opened on an area where a secretary's desk had once stood, guarding the entrance to three offices. Years ago, computers had made secretaries unnecessary for mere professors, so the room became an open area with no practical use.

A quick glance across the empty space was a mistake. Grant made eye contact with sixty-three-year-old Ron Schmidt, his faculty adviser, who was standing in the doorway of his office.

A hiker and winter camper, Ron was in good shape for his age. He could look impressive dressed in a suit and tie to meet visiting dignitaries, but today he wore the working uniform worn by professors of basic sciences in the Veterinary College: khaki pants and a rumpled dress shirt open at the collar. He smiled and waved the sheaf of papers in his hand, gesturing to his office.

Grant recognized the smile. *Fuck, another idea for a project*, he thought. He tried to get by with a wave and move on, but there was a fat chance that would work. "Grant," Ron called to him. "Come here. I have something we need to discuss."

Ron took a seat behind his desk, leaned back in his chair, and interlaced his fingers behind his head. His grin was even broader. “How would you like to take a crack at sequencing ancient DNA?”

Grant swore under his breath and pasted a phony smile on his face. An overworked and underpaid postdoctoral student, he was already working seven days a week. His wife Sarah was eight months pregnant and complained that she felt like a single parent. Last night, two-year-old Jimmy had treated him like a stranger. There might be a way out of this, though.

“Sounds interesting, but wouldn’t it be faster to send it to a commercial lab?”

“Nah. Ancient DNA is fussy to work with and requires special procedures. A commercial lab would charge too much.”

Sure. That would make sense for Ron. Why should he pay an outside company when Grant was working for peanuts and table scraps?

“Besides,” Ron continued, “it’ll give you a chance to work on something new, expand your résumé. This project will produce a covey of important papers. *Science*, *Nature*, or *Cell* are bound to accept a few of them. It’ll jump-start your career.”

Grant’s shoulders slumped. Ron was right. Papers published in any of those journals would be a terrific boost to his career—if that’s what happened. He’d been through this before, though. Ron would get excited about an oddball project, dive into it without adequate background information, and Grant was stuck with extra work and little to show for it.

Grant steeled himself. “What’s the DNA from?”

“Another Iceman. It’s a twelve-hundred-year-old corpse a skier found in the Alps. Professor Louis Antoine at the Federal Technical Institute in Zürich owes me a favor and promised to provide tissue samples from the corpse.”

Grant bit his tongue to avoid saying what he thought. What Ron described didn't mesh with any of their other research projects. Grant would have to develop lab techniques from scratch. Worse, what they learned about the human DNA from the Middle Ages was unlikely to help them in their other work.

Ron sat up and spread his hands in an expansive gesture. "Do this, and we'll get invitations to speak at international conferences." When Grant didn't respond, he added, "It'll give you a chance to travel and network."

Grant remembered the last "international conference" Ron had sent him to. It was international, all right. Speakers from Europe, Asia, and South America presented papers—in Ames, Iowa. That was unlikely to happen this time, though, since they'd found the Iceman in the Alps. Even the less prestigious meetings—where Ron would let Grant present their papers—would be in Switzerland, Italy, or Austria.

He might wangle another postdoc or assistant professorship in Europe if the research went well. He hadn't used his German in years, but it could come back quickly, maybe. And anyway, English was the language of science. Sarah might think of it as an extended vacation. Maybe his luck had changed. "I'll get started on a literature search. When will the samples arrive?"

"Louis is one of the speakers at next week's conference on RNA viruses. He's promised to bring us samples from the corpse."

"We have to get approval from the Department of Transportation for that, don't we? Will there be time to get it?"

"I've already applied for the approval."

“Does Professor Antoine have the special shipping containers required by the CDC and the DOT?”

“I hope so, but these samples are small.” Ron glanced at his doorway. Grant looked too. No one was there, but Ron lowered his voice anyway. “If he doesn’t have the right shipping container, I wouldn’t be surprised if he stuffs the samples in his luggage to bring them in. Two samples will be the size of a travel tube of toothpaste. They’ll be easy to hide, and European airport boarding exams aren’t as fussy as ours. Besides, there can’t be anything infectious in the samples after all this time. Most bacteria and any viruses would have died hundreds of years ago.”

Grant froze. If the professor was caught smuggling potentially infectious contraband on an airliner, the Department of Transportation, the Center for Disease Control, and the FBI would take turns hanging everyone involved by their balls. “Doesn’t he have to ship by FedEx or UPS?”

“Yeah, that’s what the regs say, but don’t worry. How Professor Antoine ships them is his responsibility, not ours. If he gets caught bringing them in illegally, that’s his problem.”

Grant had little faith that any of those assumptions were correct, but Ron was the boss. “Let me know when the samples arrive, and I’ll store them in liquid nitrogen.” He shuddered. Ron had never worked with a tough virus like canine parvovirus, and the Iceman samples weren’t just frozen. If this corpse was like the last Iceman, he’d been mummified while frozen. That was basically freeze-dried. Pathogens survived much longer that way.

Ron leaned forward, put his elbows on his desk, and merrily continued. “Professor Antoine is filling out the import applications. He’s calling the tissues ‘diagnostic samples.’ That

gets them past the most onerous regulations, and everything will be completely legal, if he can get the required shipping containers in time.”

Grant put a hand to his forehead. His mind raced. Ron was a hardcore biochemist with little experience in pathogenic microbiology. The Iceman corpse was freeze-dried. Anything living in the samples would only have been reduced by four or five logarithms. That would drop the viral count by tens of thousands to several hundreds of thousands. If they were supremely unlucky, the tissue could have up to four logs—ten thousand viable infectious pathogens *per gram* remaining. That was three hundred thousand per ounce.

“Look on the bright side,” Ron said expansively. “We won’t have to get permission from Iceman’s next of kin. We can run any study we want.”

Grant’s stomach churned as his hope for a European academic position dissolved. He thought he was going to be sick. There still might be a way out of this mess. “Do we have grant money for this? Some of the reagent will cost a couple hundred bucks per microliter.”

“This is a chance to collaborate with a famous Swiss lab and a well-known German lab. The Germans are using stable isotope analysis on the corpse’s teeth to determine where the Iceman grew up. I’ll get a grant if I have to type it standing on my head. I’m sure we can get funding for sequencing the bacteria in the guy’s gut. There’s a lot of interest in how the modern diet has altered our intestinal flora. Seed money is available through the department. We’ll use that to produce preliminary data to spruce up the grant application, but we’ve got to get on it before others beat us to it.”

Grant couldn’t think of anything else to dissuade Ron. He excused himself and headed down the hallway to his tiny office.

As he dug his office key out of his pocket, he considered what Ron meant by “we.” They both knew darn well it would be Grant who’d be stuck with the work. Identifying the bacteria in the gut by sequencing their DNA and comparing them to bacteria in modern intestines was interesting, though. It was a new field, with implications for the normal development of the gut in humans and even for susceptibility to disease. The whole idea of probiotics was built on it.

Grant tossed his book bag on his desk and hung his coat behind the door. Damn Ron! He’d come up with a great idea for a project, but Grant could end up divorced and in jail. He was caught in the slow, dark waltz of possibilities and consequences, of hope and fear.

Grant wondered if he’d been insane to leave his Wisconsin veterinary practice after five years of working with dairy cattle. He’d had a blast learning everything he could while earning his PhD in virology, and his postdoc in molecular biology in Ron’s lab was intellectually stimulating. Although academia had been a prolonged intellectual banquet for him, it paid little.

With another baby due in a month, he and Sarah were in a precarious financial position. Next year, *if* he managed to convince a selection committee he was doing world-class research, he might get a job as an assistant professor.

Big whoop. Sixteen years of college, and he’d make less money than a bus driver. He hadn’t gone into science for the money, but his family had to eat. His salary would be exponentially larger had he gone into marketing, accounting, or law. That was hard to forget. And talking heads on television wondered why Americans didn’t go into the sciences.

As the reality of work in science pressed in, his goals had become more modest. Right now, he’d settle for being able to take Sarah out for a decent dinner and spend a Saturday morning playing with their son.

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Grant's Apartment

6:15 p.m.

Grant had barely pulled off his boots and hung up his coat at home that night when Jimmy yelled, "Daddy," rushed to him, and threw his arms around Grant's legs. He gently broke Jimmy's death grip on his knees, picked him up, and tossed him into the air.

"How's my boy?" Grant caught Jimmy and carried him to the sink where Sarah was chopping onions and celery. "Toddler" wasn't accurate anymore, the way Jimmy raced around. "Have you helped Mommy today like I asked you to?"

Jimmy nodded somberly and wrapped his arms around Grant's neck. To get loose, Grant pursed his lips, pressed them against Jimmy's neck, and blew. Jimmy squealed happily. Grant set Jimmy down, gently put his arms around Sarah's swollen waist, and kissed her on the cheek. "And what does Mommy say?"

Sarah turned, set the knife on the cutting board, put her arms around Grant's neck, and kissed him. "Jimmy has been good today. He wanted to help me chop the onions for the tomato beef tonight, but I told him I preferred little boys who have all of their fingers."

"Good call." Grant tightened his arms around her waist and brought her close against him.

She kissed him again. "And Daddy washed up thoroughly before he left the lab this afternoon?"

He kissed her harder and longer. "Of course. Daddy always comes home clean." He relaxed his hold on her waist. "I've got some bad news, though."

Sarah turned back to the cutting board and sliced a tomato, but it was more squashing than slicing. “Ron has more work for you, and you accepted it?”

“There wasn’t much I could do. I’ll have to wait—”

She slammed the knife into another tomato with the same results, swore, and threw both the tomato and the knife in the sink. Red-faced, she put her hands on the edge of the sink and leaned away from Grant. “Tell me, when do Jimmy and I get to ask for some of your time? Huh? When do we get to count?” Hands on her hips, she turned to face Grant.

Grant wrapped his arms around her. He discarded all thoughts of sharing his concerns about the work Ron had lined up for him. This wasn’t the time; maybe there’d never be a right time for that. “It’s been hard on me, too. I’ll tell Ron I can’t continue working like this. From now on, Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons must be for you and Jimmy. No exceptions.”

He felt her body stiffen. “You’ve said that before.”

“And I meant it, but something crucial always came up. I’ll tell him I can’t work on this project unless he agrees to those limits.” He hugged her more tightly but gently, careful of her swollen belly.

She pushed him away. “That’d better be a promise.”

“It is.”

“Okay, then,” she said and hugged him tightly.