

Black Oak

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Also by Raud Kennedy

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Streaking Venus
Sex on the Beach
Stick Out Your Tongue
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Glimpses

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Prologue

On a dirt road in the Arizona desert, two men in their early thirties lean over a roll of blueprints spread out upon the long, black hood of a Mustang Fastback. The corners are weighted down with small sandstones. Sun, sand, autumn colored rock formations envelop them. The scent of honeysuckle hangs in the air. The bleached bones of an animal long dead rise up from the baked earth. Gene DeNee straightens and smiles at his friend, Earl Allen, who designed Gene's future laboratory to be built in the desert where they stand. It's just what he hoped it would be. The lab's layout is efficient, but vaguely sensual in the poise of its austerity. Somehow, it mirrors Gene's feelings toward his lifelong pursuit, the mapping and manipulation of the human genome system, and by working within it he's certain the advances in biotechnology he endeavors to achieve will be that much closer.

In eleven years, DeNee will prove himself right, but not in a way he could ever have imagined.

Present Time, Day One

Crimson spit splatters against the glass wall. The small storeroom reverberates as the knotted fist cracks against the other man's face. Droplets of blood trickle down the wall. The bloodied man wavers on his feet. His attacker follows with a jab to the breastbone and a knee to the groin, dropping the bloodied man to his knees, his hands cupped between his legs and his face contorted in an unheard scream.

With the heel of his boot, he knocks him onto the floor and says, "That's just to show you, professor shitbird, cooperation is a must." He takes a crumpled pack of Chesterfields from his pocket, taps one of the filterless cigarettes out and puts it between his sweaty lips. He snaps open his Zippo and lights it. "Just give me your files and we can be friends. You want to be my friend, don't you, professor?" He exhales a cloud of smoke into the small room, then blows on the tip of the Chesterfield. "One's so alone out here in the desert."

From his fetal position on the floor, the bloodied man says in a raspy voice, "I don't keep files."

"Bullshit," the man spits. "Not in the real world, this isn't some fuckin' college campus with ditsy sorority babes to suckle on." He takes a drag on the cigarette, glaring down at the bloodied man, waiting for a response. When there is none, he swings forward and kicks the man in the shins with his steel toe work boot. "Cooperate, you stupid fuck!" he shouts and kicks him again, "Cooperate!" And again, "The files!" The bloodied man balls up in a futile attempt to hide from the pain. Dark stains begin to bleed through his khaki trousers.

The man steps back and admires his work, inhaling deeply from his Chesterfield. The coal on the tip glows red in his eyes. “Christ, you academics are pathetic. You think the rest of us are dumber than your cloned lab rats.”

In a hoarse whisper, the bloodied man asks, “Who are you?”

“They call me the Hangman.”

“You’re in over your head, Hangman, dealing with forces you can’t even imagine.”

“Is that so,” the Hangman says sarcastically and blows on the tip of the Chesterfield. “Well, shitbird, if you don’t turn over your files, you’ll find out just what I *can* imagine.”

“I don’t have any files.”

“Bullshit, shitbird!” the Hangman shouts as he reaches down and heaves the bloodied man up off the floor and drops him in a steel chair. “Everybody keeps files, even I got a few.”

A painful smile crosses the bloodied man’s lips. “Insurance against your employers?” he asks mockingly.

The Hangman takes a large switchblade from his pocket. “Don’t get clever, shitbird,” he says as he peels open the long, gray blade. He cuts two lengths of rope and ties the man’s hands to the steel armrests of the chair. He slides the open knife behind his belt and says, “So, professor shitbird, what’s it going to be?”

“I haven’t taught in years,” he answers.

The tip of the cigarette glows under the Hangman’s breath. “Okay, shitbird, have it your way,” he says and smiles, then leans forward, whispering, “They say the nerves in the face are especially sensitive.”

“I don’t keep files,” the man pleads.

The Hangman grabs him by his hair, yanking his head back. “Convince me,” he hisses as he presses the burning Chesterfield against the man’s cheek. A feral scream fills the small storeroom. The Hangman flicks the dead cigarette aside, lights another and says, “Not many people get to

smell the scent of their own flesh cooking.” With the long, gray blade once again in his hand, he leans close to the bloodied man’s face and grins, exposing a set of cheap false teeth. His breath rank with the odor of truck stop coffee and beggar’s beer, he says, “And shitbird, mealtime is just around the corner.”

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In the green room of the Ed Sullivan Theater in New York City, Gene DeNee sits on a black leather couch, waiting for his turn to go on the ‘Late Show with David Letterman’. As he watches the show on the room’s monitor, he nervously wipes the sweat from his upper lip.

“Nerves?” an assistant producer asks, poking her head into the green room.

Gene forces a smile and says, “All the telltale signs, sweaty upper lip, damp palms.”

“I get ‘em too, and I’m not even on the show. Here, have one of these,” the assistant says, offering him a lime green handkerchief with the ‘Late Show’ emblem on it.

“Thanks,” Gene says, taking it and rubbing it between his palms.

“Don’t worry, Dave will do all the work. Just follow his lead and you’ll be fine,” she says, watching the monitor. At the commercial break, she says, “Time to follow me, you go on after this break.”

Seated behind his desk under the glaring lights out on stage, Dave puffs on a cigar as Mort, the show’s producer, signals they’re about to go back on the air. Dave lays his cigar in a large glass ashtray and smiles into the camera. “Welcome back, folks. My next guest is a major mover and shaker in the field of biotechnology. He’s recently made some rather stunning breakthroughs. So without further ado, here to tell you about the science of the future and maybe even the future itself, please welcome, Gene DeNee.”

Offstage, the assistant says to Gene, “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” Gene says and walks out onstage to the audience’s applause. Dave steps in front of his desk and shakes Gene’s hand, then motions him to take the chair next to the desk. As the crowd grows quiet, the two men sit. Gene looks out at the audience, but because of the glare of the stage lights, he can’t see anything without shading his eyes with his hand. All the better, he thinks, smelling the cigar smoke, it’s just Dave and I having a chat in his living room.

“Thanks for coming on the show,” Dave says, rocking back in his chair. “I know you’re a busy man.”

Gene smiles. “Not at all, this is a sort of vacation for me. I’ve been cooped up in my laboratory for so long I can’t remember,” he says. “I needed to get out, you know, work on my tan, read a newspaper, see who’s president.”

With a sly smirk on his face, Dave asks, “Now Gene, this lab of yours, by chance does it look anything like Frankenstein’s?”

“Actually Dave, it probably is the modern day equivalent.”

“So what? Are you waiting for the big thunderstorm?”

“I’m not quite ready for that,” Gene says, looking down at his hands.

“You say ‘not quite’, does that mean you’ll be creating a monster sometime soon?” Dave asks, then deadpans toward the audience. “Hopefully Igor will get the right brain this time.”

“I don’t know about that,” Gene says.

“Yeah I know, those Igors are damned unreliable, I know all about them,” Dave says, eyeing his crew members. “But you do have an Igor don’t you?”

“Of course, Dave, all of us mad scientists have Igor sidekicks,” Gene says and takes a sip from his coffee cup.

“That’s good, I find that reassuring. Does he make good coffee?” Dave asks.

“Coffee? No, but a passable martini.”

“Jet fuel, eh?” Dave says and chuckles. “I suppose that’s when you make your major breakthroughs. Down a pitcher of Igor’s finest and play with the calculator.”

Gene smiles. “It’s more than likely. In fact, I brought something with me to demonstrate the power of Igor’s martinis.”

“Oh goody.” Dave looks at the audience. “Show and tell, kids.”

Gene takes a small black pen case from his inside suit pocket and places it on the corner of Dave’s desk. “Igor whipped this up for me just as I was on my way out the door.”

“If it’s a martini to go,” Dave says, “I want some.”

“Not quite,” Gene says, opening the small case. Inside are two syringes filled with a dark blue fluid.

Dave leans forward, getting a closer look. “Eeeek!” he says. “Mort, get a close up on this.” When the two syringes appear on the overhead monitors, a squeamish hush passes over the audience. As Gene removes his suit jacket and begins to roll up his sleeve, Dave asks, “Gene, what are you up to here?”

Completely serious, Gene answers, “Well Dave, I’m going to make my nose grow.”

“Like as in Pinocchio?” Dave asks, feigning disbelief and wondering why none of his staff prepped him about this gag.

“Yes, Dave,” Gene says in his mock HAL 9000 voice from the movie 2001, “just like Pinocchio.”

Growing uncomfortable, Dave pats his hands on his desk and says, “We have to take a short break, folks, but when we come back, Gene is going to make his nose grow. A television first, ladies and gentlemen, so don’t go away, we’ll be right back.”

* * *

In the starlit Arizona night, the Hangman drags the limp body of the bloodied man across the gravel to the rear of his rental car. The body's feet dance on the small stones, the desert turkey vultures are asleep. He lays the body down and fumbles in his pocket for the keys to open the trunk. He checks the right pocket, then the left one, but all he finds are more cigarettes. He pats down his jacket pockets as he sticks his head in the car and checks in the ignition. Finding nothing, he goes back inside the lab, thinking they might've spilled from his pocket.

A weak moan comes from the body, a hand twitches, but then the Hangman returns with a fresh Chesterfield burning in his mouth and the keys jangling from his hand. He pops open the trunk, heaves the body in head first, folds in the legs and slams the lid shut. As he turns to get in the driver's side, he notices the blood trail leading from the door of the lab to the car. He crouches on his haunches, taking a long pull from his cigarette, then on all fours he gets as low as he can without getting blood on himself and gazes down the trail. The little stones painted red remind him of the big rocks where teens pledge their undying love. He begins to chuckle, then mumbles, "The Hangman, killer of love." He straightens and slides behind the wheel, starts the engine and puts it in drive. "Franz plus the Hangman equals shitbird stew," he says and guns the car down the dirt road back toward Tucson.

* * *

"My gosh, would you look at that, his nose is really growing," Dave says with genuine amazement. "Mort, get a close up on Gene's nose, this is unbelievable." The monitor fills with a giant nose. "Gene, how is this possible? I thought Pinocchio was just a children's story."

"Well, Dave," Gene says. "With a little help from Igor,

I've injected myself with a DNA concoction that's loaded with messages for my nose."

"Whoa! It's getting pretty big," Dave says, then turns to the camera. "Ladies and gentlemen, do not, I repeat, do not attempt this at home."

With a rather bulbous looking nose on his face, Gene says, "It's a matter of tricking the DNA into thinking it's infantile, then it thinks it's a baby and starts growing. The growth rate is an entirely different equation."

"Of course," Dave says, "I knew that. Paul, how 'bout you, you know that?"

The band leader leans into his microphone. "Junior High science."

"Yea, right," Dave says sarcastically. Then to Gene, he asks slowly as if talking to a small child, "Gene, have you slept with Madonna."

"No, Dave, I haven't."

"You're lying, it's still growing," Dave says and chuckles. "This is truly amazing. You know what this means, don't you? Howard Stern is going to want you on his cable show."

Gene fidgets with his hands in his lap. "I'm too modest to do what I think he'd want."

"Yea, I bet," Dave says, smirking at the camera. "You know, I didn't notice this before, but you sort of look like Carl Malden."

"It's time then," Gene says and takes the pen case from Dave's desk and removes the second syringe. He holds it up to the light and gently presses the plunger. Droplets dance in the air. "Believe it or not, I hate needles, they give me the willies," he says, pressing the tip against the main vein on his arm.

"Yikes!" Dave squirms in his seat as the needle slides under the skin. "What's this one going to do?"

"I'm returning my nose to its former size," he says, removing the needle from his arm and returning it to the

black pen case.

Dave leans forward, scrutinizing Gene's nose. "Wow, there it goes, shrinking away. You've really stumbled onto something. So this is biotechnology, I didn't realize it was so advanced."

"Come on, Dave, don't you read the National Inquirer? Fifteen Elvis Clone Babies Found In Florida Marsh'? 'Hitler Alive Again From Hair Follicle'?"

"You know, Gene, you might put the tabloids out of business by turning all of their sensationalism into reality."

"How's that, Dave?"

"Well, with all those crazy things they write about being true, what kind of outlandish bull will be left to make up?"

Gene smiles wryly. "Just the same old diet of sordid celebrity love tryst, I guess."

"I think I'd prefer the Elvis clone babies. Speaking of which, with all the Elvis sightings, could it be we got a few Elvis clones running around?"

"Well, in theory it's possible. There's the Scottish sheep, Dolly, but cloning humans..." Gene says, knitting his brow. "There are some ethical and moral dilemmas we need to address before any such act is committed."

"What you're saying then is that it isn't clones out there but the King himself, alive and doing that lip and hip thing," Dave says with a grin.

"Apparently so, Dave, it's definitely not a clone."

"But hypothetically, say in a few years, this whole audience here in the Ed Sullivan Theater could consist entirely of Elvises?"

"If you so wished, Dave. Obviously, some DNA would be in greater demand than others. In fact it could get completely out of hand."

"You mean like designing your kids?"

"That's just for starters, where would it stop? Maybe you want a blue lawn and pink trees in your yard. In a few years, we won't recognize our surroundings."

“But that happens to every generation,” Dave says.
“That’s why we’re called ‘old farts’.”

“Maybe so, but not on a biomolecular level. We’re playing God, and he, she, or it has an uncanny way of getting back at those who do.”

“Gene, have you just turned the key in Pandora’s Box?”

“I’m sorry, but I think I have.”