

Song of the Black Dog

by Kit Reed

"The black dog is not like any other," the forensics officer says. It is a little incantation.

In the journalists' skybox high above the civic auditorium, Bill Siefert strains to see the distant stage, the speaker, and, at her back, the beast he is here to deconstruct. That's the way he thinks of it. Siefert hates anything he doesn't understand. If it doesn't make sense, disassemble it. He's always been uncomfortable with the idea of supernatural powers, but this is not his stated reason for sneaking into the press box. He thinks he's here to crack the black dog program and show the people its inner workings. If the wonder dog is just a dog, then the police department are money-grubbing charlatans and the expose will move him from unemployed to famous.

He'll be all over CNN. Networks will come calling. *Silence the black dog*, he thinks, and wonders where that came from. Stop mizzling and get the story. He needs a job. He needs the attention. He needs the power. He needs to be more than who he is, and before any of this and all of this Bill Siefert needs to figure out why this morning, on a perfectly ordinary day, he woke up screaming.

Get the story, he tells himself and does not know what about this makes him so uneasy. Cell phone for instant screen shots. Notebook, digicorder, nice smile. Seat in the booth. Fake press pass to get him backstage. Piece of cake.

With the black dog, nothing spins out the way you expect.

"The black dog can cut through the welter of visual and olfactory stimuli in a disaster situation and find those most in need of rescue," the forensics officer says matter-of-factly, as though this is a given. She is sleek in the black uniform. Persuasive. It is disturbing. "He is only the first," she says and then she says portentously, "His descendants will save thousands."

Cut to the chase. Startled, Bill shakes himself. *Did I speak? Who?*

The speaker glitters in a cone of light, but the wonder dog—if there is one—is nowhere present. Peering into the shadows behind her, Bill looks for the darker shadow signifying a living creature, reflected light pinpointed in the eyes. The darkness gives back only darkness. Nothing to see, he tells himself, and wonders why this comes as a relief. No dog. Another wasted day like so many days in what is shaping up to be a a wasted life.

With the black dog, the future is open to question.

In the next second he shivers, transfixed. He can't even guess what just happened, but all the furniture in his head has shifted.

It sees me.

Given that the stage is far, far below, this is unlikely, but the sense that he is being watched is so acute

that all of Bill Siefert's bones begin to itch. No, he tells himself. No way. He swallows hard. but his throat closes. It's just a dog.

Far below, she continues, "Of course the prototype is a genetic fluke, but one that can be exploited for the good of all."

Yeah, he thinks bitterly. Yeah, right.

There are a thousand people in the auditorium, city officials and guests, all in some variation on black tie, velvet, opera-length pearls. The gentry have come out for this press conference—the unveiling of the superdog. A thought flies across Bill's mind: *If there is a dog*. Shifting on his haunches, sweating for no apparent reason, he thinks: *What if I kidnap the thing?* Down, boy. Focus. First in his class in Communications Studies, but a tad bit A.D.D. No wonder he can't keep a job.

The woman who discovered and trained the black dog continues thoughtfully. "We're not certain exactly which combination of pheromones alerts the black dog, but we do recognize his singular power. He can rush into a burning building or dig his way into earthquake debris and go like an arrow to the victim most in need."

Fine, Bill thinks, your basic Saint Bernard. It helps to picture him bounding over the snow with that keg of rum and the pink tongue flapping. Pant pant pant. Hello, I am here to save you. He tries to laugh, but his belly is jittering and when he tries to swallow, the spit won't go down. There is something terribly the matter here, and nobody sees it but him.

"The black dog is unique," she says. "He has no interest in the quick or the dead."

Unaccountably, Siefert feels twin points of light, like paired lasers, fixed on him. The eyes—why can he not see the eyes? It leaves him jittery and unsettled.

What the forensics officer says next will flatten him.

"His peculiar skill is like no other." Severe in black, with her own offbeat elegance, the tall, bony woman creates a silence so profound that even the mayor gets nervous.

Then she says into the hush: "He can identify the dying."

The journalists mutter among themselves. From the orchestra seats far below comes a muffled cry.

"He has the uncanny ability to smell impending death." In case they still don't get it, she finishes: "The black dog knows who's next to die."

Everything inside Siefert's head skids to a stop. He wants to silence the other journalists, stop them breathing if he has to, so he can hear what comes next. He has to know! He leans forward with his mouth open and his tongue out like a dog hanging out a car window, gulping the words like rushing air. If he could, he would find a way to stop his heart to create the silence he needs to grasp her meaning. Stop the pounding of his blood so he can hear.

"Understand," she says, "he can predict the exact moment."

The audience gasps.

The speaker smooths her varnished hair with a proud, confident smile. She is in the homestretch now. Explain. Make the pitch. Walk away with an extra million in public funding. "This makes him particularly useful in triage situations, like earthquake and building collapses, when the living and the dead are trapped under tons of rubble, and for us there is no telling which is which. Of course we have instruments to detect body mass as well as warmth and motion and the sound of breathing, but we have no time to waste excavating cadavers and no way of knowing who to rescue first. Only the black dog knows which of the victims is poised at the door to death, and only he can guide us in to pull that victim back from the brink."

Reporters on either side exchange skeptical looks, but Bill is beyond questions. He does not so much ignore his colleagues as rise above them like a soul cut loose and floating outside himself, observing from the top left-hand corner of the press booth. Did he see the dog's eyes back then or did he only imagine it?

Does it see him?

Do I?

He whirls. Dear God!

"Don't you see?" the officer trills, rolling into the finale. "Now we know who to rescue first!"

All over the auditorium, hands fly up: questions.

"Of course you want to know how we discovered his power. Science is an exact discipline, but to tell the truth, it was an accident."

Bill leans forward as she describes a routine training exercise, the black dog going through its paces like all the others until, without prompting, it stops cold. Sits down in front of the trainer. Refuses to budge. In spite of threats it sits like a rock until its original trainer—young man, too young to have a heart condition—clutches his throat and drops like a felled redwood. Infarction, the coroner says. It's nothing, the chief says. It's just coincidence.

"But I," the speaker says, "as an expert, I knew we were onto something big." She whispers into the microphone, "I took him home."

There the ambitious forensics officer devised a series of tests for the black dog ...

Matter-of-factly, she details visits to hospitals and hospices, in which the dog paces the complex of halls like a moving shadow and then. Sits. Is present at the exact moment when the soul leaves the body. He is unfailing in his accuracy. The black dog is right every single time. Trainer and dog move on to wards where patients are more viable. Some will make it. Some may not. The dog sits down. Doctors send in the crash cart and save the patient. See how valuable this is?

Bill tunes out of her recital. What it took to get the commissioners' approval. Startup money. Training and experiments. The first disaster—factory explosion—in which medics follow the black dog into the ruins and make sensational, last-minute rescues. The building collapse in which at least a dozen are yanked back from the brink of death. Certain fires. The list goes on, but by this time Bill Siefert is thinking of one thing and one thing only.

He has to see the dog.

"In emergency situations like these," she says, "prioritization is imperative. Why rush to help people strong enough to make it until we get around to them when there are cases in which immediate rescue means the difference between life and death? Why lose hours excavating victims who are already corpses?"

Buzzing with pride, she moves on into the pitch. "Therefore, the response time of our disaster relief units and our success rates depend heavily on the services of the black dog. You can see it is essential to breed thousands like him." Now she romances the crowd in that deep, sexy whisper, "And that's where you come in."

As one, they nod. Yes yes. Oh, yes yes.

"At the moment, the black dog is unique, but I am happy to report that our veterinary unit has used genetic material from our black dog to impregnate thirty black bitches. We hope to replicate his genetic set. He is, after all, this year's gold star winner for valor under extreme circumstances in the Vidalia implosion and the West Virginia mine disaster. My triumph." She raises her voice like a ringmaster preparing to bring on the lions: *ta-da*. "The miraculous black dog."

Everybody cranes.

Speakers vibrate with the communal shout, "Bring on the dog."

She raises a hand like a traffic cop. "And with your support ..."

But the crowd is waiting for the grand entrance. They squirm in their seats, straining to see the animal, but nothing happens.

Smiling, the glossy, imposing speaker dangles the bait. How much will they pay to see? "And once we receive your support ..."

On the floor of the auditorium, city officials and invited guests shift in their seats, chanting, "Bring on the dog." The cry starts as a ripple but gathers force. "The dog." It rolls in like a long comber, growing until it breaks on the shore. "The dog!"

"Now, we are prepared to take your pledges."

Somewhere outside himself, fixed on something he cannot see, Bill Siefert scours the shadows behind her, searching. He thinks he sees ... He sees ... No, he doesn't see ... Where is it, he wonders, changed. What is it?

You don't want to know.

With a start, he returns to himself, shuddering.

Why is this so important to him?

It isn't just the sensational story: *Interview With the Black Dog*. Skeptical Bill Siefert, who came here to debunk, has been sucked in. He is changed and threatened by the possibility of something that he will never understand. Like a thousand others, he wants to see the animal, but the dog is nowhere present. And yet ...

Yet.

Bill's head jerks so abruptly that his neck snaps. He doesn't know it yet but in the realm of colliding fates he has chosen the black dog, or the black dog has chosen him. For whatever reasons, they are in communication. In a universe of particles, in an arena of conflating sights and sounds and stimuli, he and the black dog are yoked in a way that both draws and terrifies him. All at once and through no cause Bill Siefert can divine, he comprehends its size and shape, the yellow eyes burning. Without seeing, he knows.

A question boils inside him. **Name. What is your name?**

Words come in from somewhere new and strange. **What makes you think I have a name?**

"My God!"

The video teams on either side of Bill turn to stare. He shoves his knuckles into his mouth, sealing it shut.

The forensics officer is saying, "Now, I know many of you are wondering why we haven't brought our marvelous black dog onstage tonight, and under ordinary circumstances we would, but these are not ordinary circumstances and this is not an ordinary dog."

The audience grumbles.

She raises a stern hand. "You will have to content yourself with the video of his last rescue. As you will see, we fitted him with a collar cam and a pin spot to bring you this remarkable footage. You will not see the black dog today. In a minute my associates will pass among you with hand mikes, because of course I am anxious to answer your questions," she says in a way that makes clear that she has no patience with questions. "Especially yours, Mr. Mayor, since I am here to seek your support for this ambitious project. Of course you deserve an explanation. You won't see the amazing black dog today, but if you will direct your attention to the monitors in the arms of the chairs where you are sitting, you can see one of the miracles he performs daily in the line of duty."

Murky videos blink to life on a thousand monitors. Because the camera is mounted on the collar, the people who sat here so patiently won't see the dog tonight, not even on video. Still, the audience shivers as the camera rushes into tight spaces and through dark corridors on the back of something huge and powerful. Everybody but Bill Siefert will see, and everybody but Bill will hear the forensics officer's warning.

By that time he's bolted out of the press box ("pardon me, excuse me, excuse me, pardon me") and through the exit at the end of the corridor, down flight after flight of stairs into the belly of the place. He is running hard. Hunting the beast. He wants to lock his hands in its thick, leonine ruff so he can look it in the face while he asks certain questions.

Therefore he will not hear the forensics officer say, in conclusion, "We cannot show you the black dog on stage here in the auditorium. This is for his protection. And for yours."

She says, "Believe me, this is for your own safety."

The crowd protests until she raises her hand for silence.

She says, "In a crowd this size, there are bound to be some ... Well, you can imagine. I mean, actuarial

tables suggest that several of you are already ..." Discreetly, she breaks off. "Think what that would do to him! Sensory overload, and before we can perpetuate the breed. And as for you. Well. Think what would happen if he sat down in front of one of you!"

There is a long silence.

"The presence of the black dog has terrible implications."

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For the black dog, the responsibility is tremendous. In a ruined building or an arena full of strangers he must go to the feet of the dying like a bullet to the heart. No, to the first to die. He must sit quietly, when more than anything he wants to lift his head and howl to the heavens. Even here, deep in the belly of the building, he is painfully aware of the hundreds of hearts of hundreds of strangers rustling and thrumming in the vast auditorium above, the cumulative pressure of their failing bodies. There are too many to save!

This is the prodigious engine that drives him. Before they know, he knows.

Can the black dog predict the future?

No. The future predicts him.

Now every hair on his huge body shimmers and ripples over powerful muscles as he pads along the corridors toward the space under the stage where his mistress stands. He is heading for the sunken orchestra pit. Above, his mistress is speaking to all the sad, vulnerable humans. He can hear their ruined bellies crying out. Lungs failing. Hearts stuttering. He knows which will falter and stop.

In spite of his size, the black dog goes silently with his great head lifted, scanning the corridor with yellow eyes. His jaws are clenched on the necessary.

He is carrying it in his teeth. *For her.*

Bill Siefert is already compromised, and, like Bill, you must proceed with caution. Stay back if you are anywhere in the vicinity. Be still. The black dog is approaching. No matter who you are or how strong or how arrogantly healthy, this is the time when you must be very, very careful. Do not run if you see him coming, because no matter what you try, whatever is going to happen next will happen.

Do not be afraid of the black dog. Feel sorry for him.

Imagine the burden of foreknowledge. The pressure. The choices he has to make. In this world there are billions of humans marching toward death, thousands are at the gate at this very moment, and he cannot reach them all.

He does what he can.

His mistress does not know that he is racing to save her. Nor can the forensics officer, strutting and preening to massive applause in her best Armani suit, guess that tonight her pet—no, her creation—is coming for her, trotting purposefully through the maze of corridors with the necessary tightly clamped in

his soft mouth.

Stand back. Hold still. Stay out of his way. Be grateful he isn't coming for you.

There are so many! Earlier, a voice cried out to him. Nothing, he thinks, just something he heard. Voice. Yes. That will come, but in due time, because more important to the black dog than this new element in his troublesome cosmos is doing what the black dog does. The voice cries out. It is the other: searching. The dog's head comes up, but there isn't time. Asking, but the black dog does not brook questions. There are too many. There isn't time. There isn't time! For the black dog tonight, there is only one. Upstairs, she is still talking. Because she is his mistress, because in spite of her commanding, clinical approach, the black dog has grown fond of her in the way of all dogs.

She does, after all, forget sometimes and scratch his ears. Therefore instead of vaulting the ladder and bounding onstage to sit down at her feet, the black dog will wait down here. He will give her a chance to do what she does as he must do what he does. He may want to spare her public humiliation, if that's a concept the noble creature grasps. For the black dog, pride is irrelevant. All that matters is responsibility.

What he must do.

Of all the failing hearts and bodies in departure mode tonight, exuding death smells in the great, echoing coffin above, even in the realm of a hundred simultaneous deaths he would choose her. When his mistress comes down the ladder he will drop the cell phone at her feet so she has a minute to call 911. Then he will sit down. He'll sit with his flag tail thumping the floor and beg her to save herself.

The others, he will not necessarily save.

The black dog is heavy with foreknowledge. He does not exactly see the blood clot floating into his trainer's brain, but he knows it. When it strikes its mark and that part of the brain explodes, the black dog will sense it in the way he knows what exactly is failing inside of you, which part of the mechanism you wear so proudly will break and cut you loose from whatever you think you are.

Until the black dog's handler began emanating death smells in the house today, the whole last-minute rescue thing was something she asked him to do, and being a good dog, he did as told. Ordinarily he does what he does in his own time and as he has always done it, but it seemed to please her when he did as she said. She and the big, clumsy men she yoked to him on rescue missions rushed in with their medicine and electric paddles, jerking people back from death, and that is their business. The hero thing was her idea.

The black dog does what he does.

Overhead the applause crescendos and the auditorium floor thrums with the footsteps of a thousand people leaving. His mistress has started down, into the cavity. She descends in a funnel of light at the far end of the corridor. Long stretch: not much time. Must reach her. Drop the phone into her hand. Give her a minute. Sit. She'll know.

Running with his head lifted and every muscle taut with urgency, the black dog is fixed on the orderly progression, the necessary timing. First this. Then this.

Then all at once a human blunders out of a side passage and skids to a stop in front of him, flailing like a flagman on train tracks. It is barking and barking. "Is that you?"

The one he knows, and does not know why he knows it. The thing has a bad smell. It has an ugly bark.

The black dog growls. *Not now.*

It goes, bark bark. "Doggie, stop. I have to see you!" Blarg blarg.

The black dog growls again. No time. *Move.*

It just keeps barking. "Doggie, I have to ask you a question."

Shut up so I can hear her breathe!

She's on the ladder! She's halfway down! He growls again, but the human in his path is like a balloon, getting bigger and bigger until it fills the corridor. In times like this even a rescue dog must drop whatever he is carrying to bare his teeth.

"Come on, dog." The human's bark falters. "Please." Then it does the unthinkable. It lunges for the black dog's collar.

The black dog does what he has to. He rakes the human's arm with his fangs and grunts in recognition. He tastes blood, but only a little, and it is vile. At least he has distracted it so he can move on. Whining, the creature frets over its wound. The black dog puts his huge paws on its back to push it down, vaults over it, and runs on, bent on rescue.

Too late. In the lost time his mistress dropped like a felled redwood; she is unconscious. Worse: while he was grappling with the human, the window of opportunity slammed shut. This isn't the black dog's fault, even though grief and frustration make him throw back his great head and howl his grief. It is the human's.

The creature with his mark on it made him drop the phone.

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What was that? What is it? Trembling, Bill tries to sit up. Ahead, the black dog looks up from the body it has been nosing—Bill wonders, *What happened? Did it kill somebody?*—whirls, and charges. He cowers as the great beast covers the distance between them in enormous, terrifying leaps. With its red jaws wide and its yellow eyes suffused with blood and turning a murderous orange, it comes.

"Don't! Don't kill me," Bill cries. Still the great beast rushes down on him, and as Bill Siefert collapses and waits for death, the black dog plants one huge paw on his chest, squeezing the breath out of him and, with an efficiency signifying complete indifference, stalks over him and moves on.

The form passing over Bill is huge, warm and heavily muscled, bigger than a Newfoundland with its thick, shimmering black fur soft and rich and every muscle and tendon humming with power. Its passage is swift but the sensation lingers. It is like being overshadowed by a lover.

Aren't you going to kill me? Bill gasps, struggling for breath as the black dog passes over him and

goes on running.

Did it answer? Does he imagine it? In the instant when the enormous paw compressed his chest and its full weight landed on his heart, Bill thinks he heard or comprehended what the creature may have told him. **It isn't time.**

Right now no one in the auditorium knows what has happened down here in the pit, but the implications are prodigious. The forensics officer, its mistress, is dead. Nobody else can control the animal.

The black dog is on the loose.

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"Wait!" the human barks as the black dog passes over it, but when he plants his paw in the creature's chest there is a shift in the air. He recognizes it at once. It is the human, pleading: **Wait.** He lifts his head, considering. Did it speak? **Oh please, please wait.** Fragile as the human is inside its thin pink skin, the creature is communicating.

A talking human? How? In time he will have to deal with the matter. What it wants. The human asks, **What are you?** But the black dog has his own imperatives and without answering rushes on.

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There is a brief flurry after Bill's story breaks. Since he was there when it happened, since he found the body, since he *saw* the thing, it is a big story. Blood clot to the brain, but that doesn't stop false charges against the animal. "I was there," Bill says breathlessly. "He tried to get me too. I alone am left," he says. "I alone am left to tell the tale," he says, and by the time he has told his story on every known talk show, he is temporarily famous and eminently employable.

There will be a statewide search and bogus reports of countless sightings. The spawn of the black dog—litters artificially inseminated and carefully reared—turn out to be depressingly devoid of powers and are destroyed. For a short time Bill makes news with his *Encounter With the Black Dog*, but only for a little while. He quits his job to write an existential book under the same title, but by the time he has it finished, the black dog is a dead issue. After a brief memorial service for the city's top forensics officer, felled by a cerebral embolism on the night of her triumph, the mayor and the police commissioner will forget. After corruption hearings and a series of firings, the city will forget. In time Bill Siefert will forget. Almost.

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Meanwhile the black dog runs on. He will not forgive the human he left squirming in the corridor that night, nor can he know why he and it are somehow yoked, but they are. Never mind. In the realm of the

black dog there are imperatives that supersede all else.

If their fates are intertwined, then everything will come down when it comes down. When, is a matter of no particular importance to him. The time will come, and when it does, the black dog will know it. Until then, unencumbered by police handlers, harnesses and leashes, and the mistress he almost loved, the black dog runs loose in the world. Not free, exactly, because he is still driven by imperatives. Even so he is free, with nobody to answer to.

Loose in the world, he does what the black dog does.

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Bill is not a superficial person, but you can't go on dwelling on a mysterious moment in your past.

He used to think the black dog would make him rich, and if it didn't make him rich it would make him famous. All he had to do was figure out how. If he could find it again, if he could catch the thing, then he could follow his big story, *Encounter With the Black Dog*, with *Capture of the Black Dog*, to be followed by *Interview With the Black Dog* and, finally, *Secrets of the Black Dog*, but he had no idea how to go about it. Or collect the reward. Then the police department gave up on the case and withdrew the reward, so that was the end of that.

Siefert never caught the black dog, and he never got that book contract. His lecture, *Encounter With the Black Dog*, never made him rich and it didn't make him famous, but it did help his career. He is a local television anchor now. He married a nice girl from the valley, ten years younger. They bought a house just on the other side of the hills.

Still, Bill knows he must have tangled with the black dog for a reason. Like most people in the world, he has to proceed on faith, which in his own way, he is doing. He used to think that if the encounter wasn't about fame or money, it must be about power. Years pass. That hope has come and gone, so Bill has to wonder whether whatever happened back there had left him marked in some other way. If only he could figure it out!

A family man now, Siefert tells himself he's finally let it go, but whether or not he knows it, he and the black dog are by no means done.

Even now there are nights when he sits up in bed and wonders. Sitting next to his sleeping wife with his knees drawn up and his arms locked around them, he gnaws on his bare kneecaps and wonders. What happened back then? Was the black dog trying to tell him something that night in the darkened corridor? What? Why were its yellow eyes turning orange, and if they turn red, what happens then? If he and the black dog were thrown together for a reason, it's no reason he can divine.

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And the dog. Every year since his collision with the human, everything the black dog does takes a little longer to do. The slowing tempo is gradual but apparent. Whether it is the by-product of that night, the

black dog could not tell you. Is it that unwanted encounter with an unlike animal that is mysteriously linked to him? The unbidden memory of his lost mistress? The other human's bark-bark-bark, its smell, his own resentment? Insofar as it is the function of the black dog to wonder, he wonders.

Alone in his slowing body, he lifts his head and howls without making a sound.

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Bill Siefert is middle-aged now, father of two, secure in his career and still happily married. There were years when he would have been thrilled to see the black dog because he was ambitious and reckless and too young to be afraid of the creature. Even though he has more to lose now, he has become-- not careless, exactly, but less vigilant.

Then he goes to the ER with a bellyache and wakes up in a hospital room—a double—groggy and minus his appendix. No big. He'll be fine. A lump in the next bed, supported by ticking monitors and a welter of tubes and drains, tells him it's a double.

It is night in the room, and in the shadows, there is a deeper shadow. Twin lights wink and glow yellow.

Bill shudders. **Is that you?**

He gropes for the buzzer to get help but it isn't anywhere he can find. Nice wife, kids, they have a bigger house. He cries, "You can't be here for me, it's just an appendix!"

The black dog blinks but does not move. At least it's still standing.

He doesn't mean to whimper, but he does. "You don't get it, I'm up for the network anchor job!"

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Bark bark bark, why won't the human stop barking and communicate? The black dog creates the silence into which thoughts can fall. In time the creature in the bed quits flailing and lets the words out. **Don't take me.** The smell it gives off is feral, frantic. *Not me, I'm young! I have so much to lose.*

Exactly.

The human points to the next bed. **Take him.**

Still standing, the black dog considers. Nothing will happen until he sits down, and he is not ready.

Although his mission is preordained, he does not know what he will do now, now that they have come to the convergence—only that he and the barking human have been brought together for a reason.

Please.

It seems right to wait until he knows. **All right.**

He moves on to the other bed in the room and sits down. He sits until the old soul parts from the old body. For reasons the black dog is not built to contemplate, his bones rattle with foreknowledge.

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Bill Siefert emerges from the hospital changed. He can't say what drives him now, but he has lost his ambition. His children find him indifferent. His wife says he is drifting.

This is not precisely the case. He is troubled, distracted. He has become cruelly aware of the multitude of scents, miseries, and toxic humors of the people around him: the lump in his wife's breast, the rales in the lungs of his producer.

It makes him frantic. Can he make her get a checkup so soon after the last one, and for no reason he can give her? Can he get his producer to the doctor in time to forestall his death, at least for now? He does not know. The pressure is terrible, the responsibility tremendous.

His narrow escape from the black dog troubles him. He is not so much changed as sensitized. Where he used to be self-contained and live his life however, he hears a chorus of outcries and farewell wails crowding in. It is like coming into a room where a million people are calling out to him.

Still, a man has to live his life and support his family, so painful as it is—the voices multiply, a million fingers clawing at his heart—Bill goes to New York with a DVD of his best newscasts for the last round of interviews with the Manhattan network affiliates. Only a strategic cocktail party stands between him and that spot as weekend anchor. Not what he wanted as a kid, but better than he expected.

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The black dog is dying. He knows it now. This explains everything, but in his life in service, the black dog has never stopped for explanations. For now, he will do what the black dog does.

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The top of New York. Siefert has retreated to the penthouse balcony at the top of the glittering network tower. He told them he needed time to consider the offer, but it was the pain that drove him out here, the pressure of the unexpected. Alone for the first time since he arrived, he inhales air so cold that it's like breathing distilled brandy. Maybe he is a little drunk. That must account for it. When he sees the black dog sitting on the wide cement rail with the wind lifting its shimmering hair, he is not surprised. He isn't even frightened.

The black dog blinks its yellow eyes. **You know why I'm here.**

He does. He doesn't. **Time to die?** In a way, it would be a relief. He waits for the eyes to turn orange. Red. For it to finish him.

In your dreams.

He does not say, *Why are you here?* He doesn't have to.

You're not the agent I would have chosen.

"If it's about that time I ran into you in the hall ..."

The black dog turns its magnificent head to taste the wind and lets out a wild, exuberant cry. **It's your turn,** the black dog either says or doesn't say. Then it is gone.

It won't matter whether this last is spoken, dreamed, or imagined. Siefert understands. Grimacing with unspeakable pain, he turns. Goes inside. Sits down in front of a network vice president.

The End

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