

Chris stood there, almost beyond moving. He had just been sacked, for the first time in his life, and it was scary. He hardly dare look down in case he was literally rather than metaphorically standing on a cliff edge with nothing below but the distant baying of black dogs, circling the rocks below, baying and howling, eager for his life.

He walked through the outer office, not looking right or left. He had tunnel vision anyway, with the panic, and wasn't sure how he would react if anyone spoke to him. He was on the pavement, in a daze, when he felt a hand on his arm. With exaggerated care, he turned and saw one of the part-timers standing there, a look of concern on her face.

'Chris?' she said, from an immense distance away. 'Are you all right?'

He nodded, then put his hand to his head. Somehow he wasn't sure whether he was making the right movements. Everything was disjointed and weird. That was it; this was all a dream and he'd wake up soon. 'Fine,' he said, but he couldn't hear his own voice.

'No, no you're not,' the woman said. He realised to his horror that he couldn't remember her name. Couldn't actually even remember if he had ever known it. 'We don't really know each other very well,' she said. 'My name's Cassie, I'm only in on Mondays and Wednesdays. But I've noticed how you haven't looked well these past few ... well, months, actually. Someone in my family suffers from depression too, so I suppose ...'

'I don't get depression!' His voice came out much louder than he had meant it to and people turned to stare.

Cassie smiled. She had a nice smile; she reminded him a lot of his sister. 'No, of course not. But you're not well, are you? Everything been getting on top of you, I expect. You've got a little one, I understand. How old is he now?'

‘Three. Kyle’s three.’

‘A lot of work, a three year old. And this job can be very stressful.’ Her voice was starting to get through without the cottonwool muffling and he looked at her instead of through her. ‘Would you like to go and get a coffee?’

‘But ...’ he gestured in the general direction of the office.

‘Oh, don’t worry about them. I don’t. If they don’t like it, they can lump it. Sometimes people have to come first. So ... coffee?’

Making up his mind was very difficult, suddenly. He wasn’t sure whether he was even going to be able to put one foot in front of the other, let alone decide between a million different coffees. He wanted to shake his head, but even that was a choice too far. She took his hesitation for consent.

‘Great. Look, don’t let’s do the Starbucks Costa Nero route; let’s go to a nice greasy spoon; there’s one down the road, look. Come on.’ She took his arm and towed him along behind her. She was just a little thing, but very determined. ‘I know a coffee can’t solve everything, but it goes a long way down that road, I think. Is it today that your other half works?’

However did she know that? He nodded.

‘Well, while we’re having a drink, why don’t you text her? Arrange to meet for lunch. You need to talk this through. And then, we can have a good old chat.’ She stopped towing him for a while and turned him around to face her. Just a little, middle-aged woman in a grey suit, nothing special. But he could feel the care coming off her in waves. A tear coursed down his cheek and without hesitation she reached up and wiped it away. ‘That’s a good start,’ she said, kindly and returned to the towing technique. ‘You’ve had a bitch of a day; let’s see if we can put at least some of it right. You don’t want the black dog to get you.’

He stopped as though she had shot him. ‘Black dog? How do you know about the dog?’ Who

had been talking? What was happening?

She looked at him fixedly. 'It's the best analogy I've heard for depression. Winston Churchill used to refer to it in his diaries. Some people feel it is something less ... well, less *alive*, a blanket, fog, something like that. But for others, it's more malevolent, more living and out to get them. Depression ...'

'... which I don't have ...'

'... which you *do* have, Chris, trust me on this, depression takes people all kinds of ways. You just need to recognize it and learn to deal with it. Not snap out of it. Not work your way out of it. Just deal with it and don't let it win. Mental illness is no slur ...'

He pulled away from her. Who was this woman to speak to him like this? Calling him mental? 'I don't think coffee is a good idea, not today, Cassie. I don't want to ...' He was snarling at her, though he couldn't hear it. 'Just because your brother or somebody gets a bit down in the mouth now and then you think you can talk to me about mental illness. Well, I don't get depression. I've just had a bad day, like you say. I'll be fine. New job. New house, maybe. We'll move, that's it. Somewhere new. So, you can take your mental illness chat somewhere else and I feel sorry, Cassie, to be honest, I feel sorry for whatever poor bugger in your family suffers from whatever it is, because you'll talk the hind leg off him, I should think.' And he stormed off down the road, shoulders set, legs stiff with anger and pain.

She watched him go and this time the tear she wiped away was her own. 'No, Chris,' she whispered, 'no, I won't talk anyone's hind leg off. Because I don't talk to myself.' And with a sigh, she turned back to the office, the black dog wagging its tail behind her.