

And so, it begins – 13:47 15th June 2015

Claire would have shrieked if the bang had been any closer. However, it goes off near enough to where she's sitting on her favourite park bench to make her jump and slop hot coffee into the lap of her new apple-green skirt.

'Damn it!' she says, more concerned over the ruination of her newly-purchased garment than with working out what caused the bang. She wants to swear more graphically but the park is busy, due to it being a gloriously sunny day. Sitting on the bench next to Claire is a plump, middle-aged woman puffing self-consciously on a vape. The lady glances sympathetically at Claire and passes her a crumpled tissue to mop up some of the offending beige liquid.

'Thanks for that. I've only just bought this skirt on my way to work. I'm supposed to be going out for a special meal with my fiancé this evening to celebrate the anniversary of the day we met. Now it's all ruined. Knew I should've changed back into my old clothes after trying on this skirt,' Claire says; the woman seems less of a stranger after the coffee fiasco.

'Oh, what a shame,' says the friendly lady in the dowdy clothes. 'Looks like that coffee is sadly going to stain. You might've got away with it if it'd been patterned material.'

'There's not enough time to buy a replacement before returning to the office. I work across the road from here. I've only got fifteen minutes left before I must get back on the treadmill,' Claire says, although she loves her job in the illustration department of a thriving advertising agency.

As a sun-lover, it's always been a struggle for Claire to drag her petite body away from her favourite park bench. She thinks of the bench as her personal property, and heads for it every lunchbreak when the weather is inviting. It faces the sun and is situated in the perfect position to bronze her limbs as she eats her sandwiches and attempts to drink her coffee. Having a park set only a two-minute walk from the London advertising agency where she works is one of the perks of her job.

Whenever heading towards it, if she spots interlopers sitting on her bench, she curses inwardly and glares at them before reluctantly seeking out an inferior bench. On this particular day, Claire is the first to claim this paragon of benches. She's managed to eat her tuna roll before the plump woman sits next to her, fishes around in her handbag, pulls out a vape, and self-consciously puffs on it. Claire tries not to breathe her fishy breath over her and is relieved the woman is large enough to prevent anyone else from joining them.

'You work in one of the buildings across the road from here? What a coincidence! Yesterday, I started working in the accounts department of an advertising agency,' says the older, mousy-haired woman.

This slightly scruffy, out of condition, maternal-looking woman is not really Claire's idea of a typical accountant. She looks like she'd be more at home cooking delicious meals for an appreciative family. Claire inwardly scolds herself for judging books by their covers.

'You must've started working at the same place as me. I've been working in the illustration department at Bernard Wiggins Agency for over two years. My name's Claire, by the way. Dare say we'll be seeing a good deal more of each other from now on,' Claire says in her usual friendly manner. A sudden, stiff breeze blows through the leaves of the nearby trees and just as suddenly dies away.

'Lovely to meet you, Claire. I'm Pauline.' *I really must lose weight if I'm going to be surrounded by such lithe, pretty, young women in my new job.*