

Not What You Think

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Chapter 1

Nicola Peters finished getting dressed, tied her fair curls in a ponytail, and sat patiently in her chair awaiting Jack Collins' return. It was a mild June day, but despite the warm temperatures, she couldn't help but shiver.

She heard him knock softly on the door. "Are you OK in there?"

"Sure, I'm dressed now. You can come back in." Dr Collins was such a sweetheart, Nicola thought. She had been seeing him for a long time and, at this stage, there was little point in trying to preserve her modesty.

With her medical chart in hand, the doctor came back into the room and sat down beside her.

"Well, Nicola, I'm pleased to advise that you're in pretty good shape."

She beamed up at him. "Really?"

"Yes. The back pain and tiredness you've been experiencing recently are probably down to stress and overwork but -"

"I had suspected that," she interrupted, nodding sagely, "but I thought I'd get it checked out - just to be sure."

"Well, you're absolutely right. Now, your blood pressure has dropped a little from your last reading - which is good news - although I do feel that you could benefit from some more exercise."

Nicola glanced downwards, and grimaced. "Doctor, you don't have to tell me that. And, at my age, things can only get worse."

"Will you listen to yourself? I wish I could still see the world through the eyes of a thirty-year-old. But, for your own sake, we should try and do something about that weight. Go out and about, do some shopping, out with the dog - anything to get the blood moving."

She groaned. "OK, I promise I'll make the effort. Thanks, doctor."

Nicola left the surgery, and made her way out front towards her car. It was quarter past eleven, and she was due back at work for twelve - not a lot of time to spare. The rumbling in her tummy reminded her that she had skipped breakfast, and she resolved to stop off somewhere on her way to work.



The traffic from town to Rathfarnham was crazy, and she was quickly running out of time to stop off anywhere for lunch. It was times like this, she thought irritably, that she really missed her bicycle. When she cycled, she used to zip around the city in no time - not to mention the fact that the exercise was good for the figure. But these days, unfortunately, she was stuck with the blasted car.

Up ahead, Nicola spied a sign for the Nutgrove Shopping Centre. Perfect! She could pop in, grab a salad roll (and, despite Dr Collins' advice, some chocolate) and be in and out of there in no time. The carpark looked busy, and there didn't seem to be any spaces up front near the entrance. Nicola looked impatiently from left to right. She really didn't have the time to go searching for a space further down and . . . oh, blast it, one of the mother and baby ones would have to do - there were a few of them vacant and she wouldn't be more than a minute in the shop. Anyway, she thought to herself, you didn't get dirty looks when you parked in these spaces, unlike the disabled ones, which often drew menacing stares from all around.

She made it back to the office just before twelve.

"The boss-man's gone out to lunch," Sally, the receptionist, told her. "He said to tell you he'd speak to you later."

"Thanks, Sally. I'm just going to grab a bite at my desk now but if you need anything give me a shout."

Just after two o'clock, Nicola put her hands behind her head, and yawned. Despite the sunshine earlier, the day had now turned wet and dreary - typical Irish summer - and she just wasn't in the mood for all this paperwork. Unfortunately, as it was once again the end of the month, invoices needed paying and the accounts needing updating. She couldn't wait until Motiv8 Leisure Club was doing well enough to employ an accountant full-time to look after this stuff. Then she could concentrate on actually running the place.

Nicola moved across to the window and adjusted the lateral blinds to let some much-needed light into the room. She stared idly at the River Dodder below for a few moments, until the telephone startled her out of her reverie.

The receptionist sounded out of breath with excitement.

"Nicola, you will never guess who's on the line! One of the features editors from that new Mode magazine!"

Nicola tightened her ponytail and smiled. Sally could be so juvenile sometimes. Irish features and fashion magazine, Mode, had recently been launched, amid much hype and furore, upon the unsuspecting public. Starstruck Sally had obviously been lapping up the coverage.

"Well, look, if she's enquiring about membership, just give her the information and -"

"No, no!" Nicola could mentally picture Sally waving her arms excitedly in the air. "They want to do a feature on us!"

"A feature - on the club?"

"Yes! Her name is Fidelma Corrigan and she's on line two. Will you take it?"

"Of course." Nicola was intrigued. A feature on Motiv8 Leisure Club! What had they done to deserve this?

The features writer was polite and charming, and explained to Nicola that the magazine would be running an extensive Health and Leisure supplement in a forthcoming issue. Would Motiv8 like to participate? They really would be mad to miss this type of exposure at such a competitive advertising rate . . . blah-de-blah, blah. Nicola rolled her eyes. Quit the sales jingle and cut to the bottom line, she urged silently.

When the woman eventually quoted a rate, Nicola discovered that it really was too good an opportunity to pass up.

"We'd love to do it," she told her warmly. If the club signed only three new members as a result of this feature, then the advertising would have paid for itself.

"We'd like to concentrate specifically on the club's Alternative Therapies, Ms Peters. I understand your new Hydrotherapy Unit has resulted in a surge of membership? And of course you carry the usual - aromatherapy massage, health spa, Jacuzzi etc, etc . . ."

Nicola listened absently. The exposure would mean fantastic publicity for the centre, which would hopefully translate into a rush for membership. Which in turn might translate into an actual pat on the back from Ken - for once.

When Ken Harris - her manager from a previous job in another leisure facility - had contacted her a year ago and offered her an executive post in his new leisure centre, Nicola didn't have to think twice. After almost two years, she'd had enough of life in London. She'd worked with Ken in The Metamorph Club, one of Dublin's most popular city fitness centres, and knew it would be a good move. Ken knew the business inside out, having worked in the leisure industry from an early age.

Still, it had been a difficult first year for the club. While he and his partners had spared no expense in converting what had once been an old mill in Rathfarnham into a state-of-the-art leisure club, initial registrations had been slow, and their membership figures were well under target.

Nicola had been surprised by the size of the place once the builders had finished with it. From the outside, it looked nondescript but once inside clients never failed to be taken aback by the spacious and airy reception area which had been decorated in soothing cream and purple. Huge banana-

plants, palms and ficus trees created a tropical and luxurious feel, as did the vivid modernist prints hanging on the cream-coloured walls.

A relaxation and meditation room was situated just off the main reception, and the glass-fronted gym enabled staff to keep an eye on any overenthusiastic fitness fanatics. A twenty-metre, mosaic-tiled swimming-pool and Jacuzzi had been installed, on what had once been the site of an extensive grain silo. The centre also featured the essential steam room and sauna, but the most popular, and most utilised area by far, was the alternative therapies area. Nicola's first mission had been to employ a qualified aromatherapist, but her coup de maître had been her insistence on the hydrotherapy unit - having experienced first-hand the popularity and benefits of hydrotherapy treatments in London.

Luckily, Ken didn't object too much to her ambitious managerial plans, and had given her a loose rein on things. However, he wouldn't budge on the staff issue and Nicola, instead of using her sales abilities and promotional aptitude to recruit more members, had been forced to look after the more mundane, everyday administration of the club.

"Just until we find our feet," he had said, when Nicola had complained about her growing pile of paperwork for about the umpteenth time.

"But we won't find our feet unless I have more time to get the brand out there. Ken, we don't even have a website - let alone any kind of profile."

But he had been insistent, and Nicola had had to relent - for the time being. Maybe this feature would be just the thing to give the entire project a lift, and justify that she had what it took to really manage the place, if only he'd let her.

The Mode features writer was still talking on the other end of the telephone.

"I'm just getting participants finalised at the moment," Fidelma was saying, "and we'll also need some background info on the centre. So could I contact you again at a later date to arrange the interview? And just so we won't take up too much of your time, we should probably do the photoshoot then too."

"Sure, just give me plenty of notice. Things can get a little hectic around here," Nicola said, not particularly looking forward to the photo shoot.

"Okay, I'll talk to you in a couple of weeks, and we'll arrange a date between us. Thanks again."

"Thank you too." Nicola rang off, and sat back in her seat and smiled. The day was beginning to improve.

She was just about to try Ken's office extension to let him know about the feature, when he appeared in the doorway.

"Ms Peters, all these half-days just aren't good enough, I'm afraid," he said, without preamble.

"Well, I'm very sorry, Mr Harris, but I do recall telling you that I had an important appointment this morning."

"That's not the point, Ms Peters. We need you here - I need you here."

"Oh, really?" she said, brazenly. "I thought you were more than capable of running things when I'm not around, Mr Harris."

"Well, you thought wrong."

Nicola grinned as he came round her desk and planted a kiss lightly on her forehead. "I can't cope without you."

"Saddo," she teased, wrapping her arms around him.

"So, how did it go with Dr Collins?" he asked, crouching down alongside her chair.

"Fine."

Ken's eyes widened and he sat back on his haunches. "Just fine? Did you tell him about the tiredness?"

She shrugged. "He reckons it's nothing to worry about, but my blood pressure is still too high, and I need to get more exercise."

"Well, didn't I tell you should give the swimming a go?" he said gently. "You couldn't be in a better place for exercise, after all." He stood up. "Oh, and now that I think of it, the Wheelchair Association were enquiring about the Hydrotherapy Unit. Can you contact them about it? Organise some kind of a discount, maybe?"

"Sounds promising," she said thoughtfully, straight back in business-mode. "I'll give them a ring later."

"And I wondered what your thoughts might be on a Mother and Baby swimming morning?"

Nicola grimaced. "Not so sure. It could be disadvantageous if we're trying for exclusivity - what with the carry-on of some of them." Some members brought their toddlers along to the swimming-pool, and didn't pay as much attention to the children's behaviour as the management and staff would have liked.

"Well, we have to do something, Nicola. The numbers aren't coming through these last few months."

Nicola studied him. Lately, Ken was looking jaded and more than a little dishevelled. The other partners were probably giving him grief, she thought, although Ken would never admit to worrying about things like that. His dark hair, normally closely cropped, was beginning to curl just above his ears,

and his chocolate-brown eyes - arguably his best feature - were today devoid of their trademark sparkle.

"Well, I might have just the thing for that," she said, trying to put his mind at ease by outlining the upcoming advertising feature and how it should benefit the Motiv8 profile.

"Great!" As expected, Ken was pleased. "I knew I hired you for more than your looks!"

"Ha!"

When she and Ken had got together some months back, Nicola wasn't sure at first whether or not she should continue working at the club. The two had known one other professionally for some time and had enjoyed an amiable, while not altogether friendly, association over the years. Nicola was only a few months into her manager's job at Motiv8 when she and Ken had begun getting to know one another on a more intimate basis. She had always thought him a bit of a workaholic, but as the months went by she began to view her old colleague in a brand-new light. Soon, Nicola had inadvertently fallen in love with Ken Harris, and when he eventually admitted he felt the same way, they had never looked back. He was everything Nicola had ever wanted in a man: honest, selfless, uncomplicated and, she supposed, attractive in an easy-going kind of way.

From the very beginning, she and Ken were determined that they would make a success of Motiv8 Leisure Club, but decided that if they ever found that working together was damaging their relationship, they would have no hesitation in doing something about it. So far, that hadn't happened, and the two were blissfully content in both aspects.

"Oh, another thing," Ken said, remembering, "Laura was on the phone for you earlier." He smiled. "She sounded kind of harassed, actually - all this wedding business must be getting to her."

Laura, Nicola's closest friend, was getting married in a few months' time.

"I'd better give her a call then," she said, grateful for any excuse to avoid her paperwork.

Just then her extension buzzed.

"Is Ken with you?" the receptionist asked over the intercom. "The accountant is looking for him." The staff were fully aware of Nicola and Ken's relationship, but because they kept things professional at work, it didn't bother them.

"I'll send him down to you, Sally."

Ken groaned. "That blasted accountant is the last person I want to see. I know he'll have nothing but bad news for me." He gave her another quick kiss. "Are you sure you don't want me to call over to your place later?"

Nicola shook her head. "Nah, you enjoy your golf in peace - I'm baby-sitting Kerry tonight. Anyway," she added, grinning mischievously "I could do with a night off from you - you can be a bit of a handful sometimes."

"I'll remember that," Ken teased, his brown eyes twinkling, "the next time you get a hankering for Ben & Jerry's and old muggins here has to drive halfway across Dublin to get it for you!"

"Well, at least you're good for something!"

"Oh yeah?" He began to tickle her. "And what about last night, eh? You didn't have too many complaints then!"

"OK, OK, I'm sorry!" she said, giggling. "You're a man of many talents - really!"

"That's more like it." Ken stood up, and straightened his tie. "Now, no more skiving, please, Ms Peters," he said, feigning a bossy tone. "It looks to me as though you have plenty of work to do."

"I was working before I was so rudely interrupted!" Nicola countered, wide-eyed.

He was no sooner out the door than her extension buzzed again and this time it was Laura.

"Listen, is there any chance I could come over to your place tonight?" Nicola's best friend asked. "I need to talk to you about something."

"Of course you can . . . no, hold on - I'm baby-sitting and I told Kerry that I'd bring her to the cinema. So unless you want to come along -"

"No, thanks, I'll leave you to it," Laura said quickly. "I'm not really in the mood for the latest all-singing, alldancing Disney extravaganza."

"What's wrong? You seem very down in yourself." She remembered what Ken had said about Laura sounding harassed.

Her friend grunted. "It's this blasted wedding - my mother is really getting on my nerves about it. Now she's not happy with the photographer I've booked because he's" - she affected a sing-song tone - "'supposed to be a bit of a letch"! Nicola, I went to school with Kieran Molloy and he's as gay as Christmas! As far as I'm concerned he can letch all he wants!"

Nicola smiled, but she could understand her friend's frustration. Laura and her partner Neil had become engaged at Christmas, and had promptly set the wedding date for the coming September. They wanted a simple no-frills, fuss-free wedding, something that Maureen Fanning (who Nicola thought could make J-Lo look laid-back) couldn't tolerate. Not when she'd been dreaming about orchestrating her eldest daughter's Big Day for most of her life.

But there was a good reason for the couple's no-fuss approach. Neil's mother had recently discovered a malignant lump in her breast, and was about to undergo hospital treatment. Neil was anxious for his mother to have something to concentrate on other than her illness and wanted the wedding to happen sooner rather than later - just in case.

"Well, you could take off and get married yourselves, just the two of you," said Nicola. Like I did, she added silently.

"Are you mad? My mother would have a heart attack! She's bad enough as it is."

Nicola frowned. It wasn't like Laura to be so down in the dumps.

"Well, look, don't let her get to you. As long as you and Neil are happy with the wedding plans, then what else matters?"

"Yes, but you know my mother!" Laura groaned. "And, unfortunately, Neil isn't much help."

"He'd probably just prefer to keep out of it." Neil Connolly was as easy-going as they came, and one of the few people who could actually handle Maureen Fanning without resorting to extreme violence.

"To be honest, he's just too busy with the agency. At this very moment he's off on some fact-finding trip to Mauritius - lucky git."

Neil was a partner in his family's travel agency, and the business was currently attempting to break into the more exclusive faraway-shores market.

"Anyway, the wedding isn't the real reason I wanted to talk to you," Laura said cryptically.

"Oh?" Her tone piqued Nicola's interest. "I'm intrigued."

"Well, if I can't see you tonight, I'm afraid you'll just have to wait." There was a slight smile in her voice.

"That's not fair! What's going on, Laura?"

"Nope - I'd prefer to tell you face to face."

"Now I'm dying to know!" Nicola thought quickly. "OK - why don't you call over tomorrow night? Helen's coming over anyway, so you might as well join us." Nicola, Laura and Helen had been friends for many years but lately, Nicola thought, hadn't had many opportunities to get together. It would be nice for the three of them to have a bit of a natter.

But Laura hesitated, and for a moment Nicola wondered if she had said the wrong thing. "Unless you'd prefer to leave it for another night - just the two of us," she offered.

"No, no, it's fine. I'll bring a bottle of wine, will I?"

"Do. We'll have a bit of chat, get the latest on Helen's new man and, oh - I'll be able to show you my new wheels!"

"Not again!" Laura teased. "What did you get this time - a coupé, roadster, something along the lines of a Ferrari, maybe?"

"I wish. Look, I'd better go - I've another call coming in. See you tomorrow, round about eight?"

"Great, I'm looking forward to it!" Laura rang off, already sounding in much better form.

Nicola hit the other line. Was she ever going to get anything done today?

"Can you come down to the pool?" Sally sounded worried. "It's Mrs Murphy-Ryan and her twins again. You won't believe what they've done this time."