



ALL
THAT
Really
MATTERS

A NOVEL

NICOLE DEESE

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For Mandy

Your unapologetic love for *all things beautiful*
is as inspiring as your unwavering support
for your chosen tribe.
I'm blessed to be counted among them.

I adore you.



Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.
Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,
not looking to your own interests
but each of you to the interests of the others.

PHILIPPIANS 2:3–4





Molly

I used to marvel at the way my Great Mimi's arthritic fingers would pinch her eyeliner pencil and trace a perfect stroke of midnight black along her upper lash line. The way her tired, nearly translucent skin would transform into a picture of regal elegance with only a few pats and swipes of color. For an eleven-year-old girl whose mother had never owned a single tube of mascara, it was a magical experience.

I'd watch my Mimi's routine with my elbows propped onto a gold-leaf vanity and eyebrows disappearing behind poorly cut bangs. My mouth would form an opera-worthy O as she became a living, breathing masterpiece, her best features showcased and enhanced, her flaws minimized and concealed.

And in those final few seconds before she closed her makeup drawer and blotted her ruby red lips, she'd hand me her blush brush and say with a wink, "Molly, when you feel good in your own skin, it's easy to help someone else feel good in theirs."

I'd pat the remaining rouge onto the apples of my pale cheeks and smile at the stringy-haired girl in the mirror, promising myself that one day I would do just that: I would help someone else feel the way my Mimi had always made me feel. And now, sixteen years

and 606,000 Instagram followers later, I'd kept my promise to that often misunderstood little girl, one emboldened cat-eye and sheer lip tutorial at a time.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

I snapped the compact of my recently reviewed translucent face powder closed—four-out-of-five lip smacks, dinged for a shorter wear life than advertised—and primed my hair one last time in the mirror before following the sound of my oven's cry.

"See, Ethan? I told you I could finish getting ready before the oven preheated. That took what, five minutes? Hey, maybe that could be an idea for a future post series. 'How to Get Date-Ready in Five Minutes or Less.' Or wait—'How to Get Date-Ready in Five Minutes *and* Five Products or Less' is even better. Then I can feature that new Hollywood Nights collection that just came in. I'll have Val add it to the schedule." I rounded the corner into the kitchen, expecting to see my boyfriend on the recliner in my living room. Only he wasn't there.

"Ethan?" I slid the glass pan of chicken marsala into the oven and lifted the charcuterie board I'd spent nearly an hour preparing. There was something strangely satisfying about arranging cheeses, meats, nuts, figs, and olives.

"The chicken will take about forty minutes to bake, but our appetizers will go great with that wine you bought last month. I've been saving it." I wove around the island, gathering the glasses and balancing the cheese board on my palm like the trained waitress I was not. If my twin brother were here, this would be his cue to crack a joke about my propensity to drop plates of food, even though that had only happened *one time*. Granted, it had been on Thanksgiving Day, and granted, I had been carrying our twenty-five-pound stuffed turkey, but still, there should be a statute of limitations on bad family jokes.

I continued my balancing act into the living room. "I'm sure your appetite is still on East Coast time, but—" I stopped abruptly at the sight of my boyfriend stretched out on my sofa, eyes closed.

"Ethan?" I set both the appetizers and stemware on the coffee

table and tiptoed over to him—quite a feat in four-inch cork-wedge heels. I approached him as if he were a wind-up toy ready to spring into action at any moment, which was perhaps the most fitting description of Ethan Carrington.

But there was no springing.

Apparently it didn't matter how much time a woman spent creating the perfect cat-eye if the man she wanted to impress was unconscious. I crouched low and waved a hand over his face before he released a snore that had me cupping a hand over my own mouth to stifle a laugh. This had to be the most anticlimactic start to a date ever.

I covered him with a vegan angora throw from a boutique in Canada I'd promoted last autumn, then decided to capitalize on the rare moment. After all, Ethan's favorite marketing motto was *Never miss an opportunity to relate to your audience*.

I whipped out my phone and proceeded to take a ten-second story, featuring my adorable sleeping boyfriend, a tray of untouched appetizers, and one pouty-lipped me. I captioned a post with *Jet lag is the thief of romance*.

Not even eight seconds later, my phone began to vibrate with notifications—likes, comments, emojis. An immediate endorphin boost. The temptation to scroll through them proved too much. After all, my manager-turned-boyfriend showed no signs of waking any time soon, and truth was, even if he had woken up, he'd tell me to reply to at least the first twenty or so commenters. Something to do with increased visibility and reach.

You're so cute, Molly! And so is your boy toy!
Hubba hubba . . .

Ah, sorry girl! But at least that maxi dress is
ADORBS on you! Link please???

Good hair days like that should never be wasted
tho. Wake him up already!

I liked a few dozen comments, replying in kind to their emoji strings and creative hashtags, then scrolled through the rest of

my feed, hovering over the latest post by Felicity Fashion Fix, the snotty diva and ex-client of Ethan's who once stole an entire vlog series idea from me two days before mine went live. I breathed out my nose the way Val always encouraged me to and tried to let go of the negative static in my chest . . . but not before glancing at Felicity's latest follower count. 415,687. *What?* How on earth did she get such a big jump in followers so quickly? *What is she doing?* Besides stealing other people's ideas, of course.

When Ethan finally began to stir, it took a hefty force of will to silence my phone and shove it in the crack of the chair cushion. Yet I did it with a smile, because that was what committed couples did for each other. At least, that was what I'd read from a popular blogger I followed: "*Healthy couples ignore the pressures of social media to be socially present in their relationship.*" I'd saved the pretty graphic to my photo reel just two days ago. Ethan and I didn't get much face-to-face time since he traveled for business roughly three weeks out of the month, but perhaps the strain of a long-distance relationship would dissipate if we practiced being more *socially present* with the time we did have together.

"Hey there, sleepyhead," I crooned from the recliner, where I'd kicked off my shoes and tucked my frozen feet under the skirt of my dress. Most days, springtime in northeast Washington was just a less snowy version of winter. "Welcome back."

He jolted at the sound of my voice and blinked. "Molly?"

"Happy date night."

Ethan rubbed at his eyes again. "What time is it?"

I glanced at the wall clock, surprised at how much time had passed while I'd been scrolling my feed. "A little after six."

He pushed himself up to a seated position. "You should have woken me. I don't even remember dozing off."

"No way, you looked way too peaceful to disturb." And it was nice to see him without a screen on his lap or in his hand. Ethan wasn't the greatest at leaving his work behind. Then again, neither was I. "Besides, you've been up since two in the morning Pacific

time. Dozing off for a few minutes seems perfectly acceptable—even for someone as immune to naps as you are.”

He ran a hand through his thick butterscotch-colored locks, and my breath actually hitched in my chest at the sight. In no way did he look like a man who’d spent his entire day traveling on an airplane. He smiled at me with those same midnight blue eyes that had won him many a client—myself included.

“Well, I hope you don’t hold it against me, because I’ve been looking forward to tonight. To being with you.” His expression cleared, then sharpened on my face. “There’s actually something big we need to discuss. I wanted to tell you in person.”

The professional tone made my palms grow damp. “Something to do with the agency?” There’d been a lot of changes happening within the Cobalt Group recently. Most had been great—bigger sponsors to partner with their contracted influencers, which, of course, meant bigger paychecks, bigger referrals, and a bigger bottom line. But nobody was immune to the volatile nature of our industry. There was always somebody waiting to rise to the top. Somebody willing to do more at whatever cost.

“Wait,” I said, remembering the chicken. “Before you answer that, I need to check on our dinner first.”

As if on cue, the oven timer buzzed as I scrambled to my feet to make for the kitchen. But Ethan’s hand reached out for mine, and he tugged me toward him. He held out my arm to turn me this way and that. “You look really good, babe. That dress is on point. Did your fans choose it?”

“You’d know if you stopped by my pages more than every couple of weeks,” I teased as I swiveled my hips to show the flare of the skirt as it swept over my bare toes. Once again, my online poll had proven itself accurate. This particular maxi dress had won over three other options categorized under “Best Home Date Dress” by nearly seven thousand votes.

I pecked his cheek and unhooked my hand from his. “I’ve got to get that chicken out or we’ll be eating charcoal for dinner.” I made my way from the sofa to the kitchen. “Oh, and don’t think

I forgot about your promise to take pictures for me while you were at Fashion Week.”

He chuckled and slid out his phone from his back pocket. “I managed to take a few, but I doubt they’ll meet your queenly standards. Not all of us can be top-trending influencers.”

Ethan’s hyperspeed mode usually left little time for snapping quality pictures of anything. Over the last nine months of our dating life, I’d received many a blurred selfie—Ethan in front of the Golden Gate Bridge for a triathlon, Ethan wearing his scuba gear on the coast of Fiji, Ethan jumping out of an airplane. There was never much context to his photos, other than his signature cheekbones and jewel-toned eyes, but even in the chaos of his shots, his zest for taking all that life could give him was palpable.

Ethan’s all-gas-little-brake personality had found me at the perfect time.

After so many years of playing the role of outsider in a family who strived after intangible things, someone finally understood me—believed in me, even.

Allowing the pan of chicken to cool on top of the stove, I made him up a plate of smoked gouda and dry salami from the charcuterie board, arranging several crackers around the edges, and then poured him a glass of red wine. I placed both on the table and sat next to him. He didn’t touch either offering.

Instead, he perched on the edge of my couch as if ready to sprint. “Babe, I had a meeting with Mr. Greggorio yesterday. About you.”

About me? Mr. Greggorio was Ethan’s partner at Cobalt, only he had about thirty years on Ethan in life and in running a successful marketing agency. His name always sparked a flurry of nerves. Maybe because Ethan had never once referred to him by a name other than Mr. Greggorio. Then again, perhaps wealthy, yacht-owning Italian men who agented all kinds of entertainment, talent, and business professionals didn’t have first names? “But my numbers are on the rise. I just passed the six hundred thousand mark.”

Ethan turned on the magnetism he was known for. “Oh, he

knows. He's been keeping tabs on you himself. In fact, he's been doing a lot more than that."

I had no response for this. None. Mr. Greggorio didn't deal with influencer riffraff like me. He handled Cobalt's VIP clientele only—partnering with product lines associated with sponsors and companies that ranked in the top brands and corporations worldwide. I wasn't even certain he'd remembered me after our first meeting last year when I signed on as an influencer with them—a low-level one at that. My numbers had barely brushed the one hundred thousand mark, and my brand had been anything but focused. But Ethan had believed in my talent, in what I could do for the fashion and beauty industry as a whole, and he'd signed me on the spot.

We went on our first date just two months later. He'd flown me to dinner at the Space Needle—just under an hour flight from Spokane, Washington.

He stood now and paced my living room floor, his new flat-front chinos flexing with each step without a single wrinkle in sight—a fashion miracle considering his earlier state of hibernation. He stopped without warning and turned on the heel of his loafer. "He says you have the *It Factor*. The special quality that separates the fakes from the real thing." His grin revealed freshly whitened teeth. "Do you have any idea how many clients Mr. Greggorio has worked with in his lifetime?"

If I was stunned before, then I was practically catatonic now. I gave the tiniest shake of my head.

"Thousands." He laughed. "*Thousands*, Molly!" A wild spark ignited his gaze. "And I'm not the only one he told that to, either. He pitched you to the media moguls at Netflix. They're looking to recruit fresh talent for a new feel-good series slated for next year. And their response to him was, '*Molly McKenzie is already on our radar.*'"

"*What?*" I leapt off the sofa, unsure of what to do with my body other than gawk and flail my arms like a flightless bird. "No. No way. You're lying to me. This can't be real. Tell me you're lying." A scratchy, unrecognizable whisper escaped my throat. "Are you lying?"

He laughed. “Not even I could tell a lie that good.”

I flung myself at him, and he caught my waist and spun me around. “Oh my goodness! I know you said it would happen someday, that you’d take my brand places I couldn’t even begin to imagine, but I . . . I just can’t believe it’s actually happening!”

Ethan lowered me to the ground and cupped my face in his hands. “As long as you stay focused on the goals ahead, I will work to make your wildest dreams come true.” He smiled as if to let his words soak in. “But before I can submit your official audition to the producers this summer, we need to eliminate every potential weak spot in your résumé to edge out your competitors.”

“Sure, of course.” Whatever cloud-like euphoria had inflated my entire being only moments ago had sprung a leak. Ethan reached for his briefcase, and just like that, Manager Ethan had shown Boyfriend Ethan to the door.

“I wrote some key targets down for you on my last flight. I know how much you like to visualize your goals.”

“Right. Thanks.” My gaze dropped to his briefcase as he popped open the lock. “Whatever I need to do, I’ll do it.”

A slight curve lifted the corner of Ethan’s mouth. “That’s exactly what I told Mr. Greggorio you’d say.”

He scooted the appetizer board and wine glasses to a separate side table.

“So you’re wanting to go over all this right now, then?” I asked, glancing back at our cooling dinner.

“Waiting time is wasted time.” An Ethan quotable if ever there was one. Ethan was not someone who believed patience was a virtue.

“Right.” I took the bullet point list from his hand, and my gaze immediately snagged on the first objective listed.

1 million subscribers

“A million subscribers? By the end of August?”

“Gaining the edge is never easy.”

I raised my questioning gaze to his confident one. “But that’s . . .” On principle, I didn’t say the word *impossible*, but gosh, if there ever was a time for that word, it was right now. “That’s almost four hundred thousand subscribers in just three months.”

“Yes, it is. And I have a strategy for how to get us there.”

“Does it include praying for a miracle?” My joke fell flat with a quick shake of Ethan’s head.

“You know I don’t believe in miracles. I believe in hard work, dedication, and plenty of grit. All things you have in spades. And all things that make us such great partners.” He grabbed another document from his briefcase and laid it out flat. Pie graphs and algorithm reports I didn’t have the first clue how to read stared back at me. “Between your campaign photo shoot next week with Hollywood Nights Cosmetics and the endorsement quotes Fashion Emporium is adding to their stores, I estimate your boost will be around twelve to thirteen percent.” He traced a line with his finger, indicating the growth he’d already mapped out. “But that leaves a large gap to fill while I work on getting you some more widespread campaigns. We also need to find the right celebrity collaboration, someone who will take your hand and pull you up to their level—I have a few ideas already in the works. But there’s something else as well.” When he looked up at me, I got that strange woozy feeling I had whenever I glanced down in a glass elevator.

“What?”

“We need to show a different side of you to the public eye, work to expand the reach of the woman behind Makeup Matters with Molly. Which is why item two is so important.”

I slid my focus down the page as his second point assaulted me in an entirely new way.

Partner with a human-interest cause

A burning sensation flared in my lower gut, a premonition I knew all too well. “What kind of human-interest cause?”

“It actually needs to be something quite specific.” Ethan

leaned in, as if the discovery he was about to share was too confidential for my living room. “After calling in a lot of favors and piecing together several off-the-record conversations, I was able to figure out the producer’s hook for the show you’d be in the running to host.” He held his breath for a full three seconds. “It’s called *Project New You*, highlighting America’s underprivileged youth. It will be a more holistic approach to the usual makeover show—not only focused on the physical side of things. The older teens who are featured will be chosen by a nomination system—teachers, mentors, foster parents, etc. The kind of show that leaves you reaching for a tissue and a tub of ice cream by the end of it.”

The buoy keeping my hopes afloat sank inch by inch.

I opened my mouth to say something—anything—but then closed it tight again. So many thoughts spun inside my head at once, pinging against memories better left undisturbed. Though I “helped and supported” women on the other side of a digital screen several times a week via makeup tutorials and comparables and as-honest-as-I’m-allowed-to-be product reviews, helping people in the outside world was a different beast entirely. A much scarier, much more exposing beast. One I was quite familiar with, considering both my parents and my brother had given their souls to serve in full-time ministry.

Sometimes I wondered just how many prayer teams around the nation—perhaps the world, even—were committed to praying for the McKenzies’ prodigal daughter, the girl who made a living profiting from one of the seven deadly sins: vanity.

Seeing as Ethan and I didn’t share much about our pasts, he didn’t take my silence for the fear that it was, the fear that stepping too close to the humanitarian line would only end in failure and disappointment for everybody involved. There was only one person in my life who would have believed otherwise, but Mimi had died nearly four years ago. Before I’d even hit five thousand subscribers on the channel she’d encouraged me to start. Had she known this day would come? Had she envisioned me hosting an

on-demand show? I could almost feel her fingers rake through my hair as she said, “*Share your spark with the world, Molly. Stop trying to hide what God created to be seen.*” Was this the big break she’d been hoping I’d find?

“The producers are going to need to see more of your empathetic side. More heart. More compassion. More generosity and selflessness. They’re impressed by your charm and wit, and no one would ever question your natural charisma on screen, but for this to move forward, we need to see the host of Makeup Matters with Molly get her hands a bit dirtier in the muck of real life. Because as it is right now, you’re just a pretty face with an addictive personality.”

The sting of his words throbbed in the back of my throat, and I swallowed against the ache. I’d never cried in front of Ethan, and I wasn’t planning to start now. “I’m more than that.”

He glanced up from the paperwork, brows crimped in confusion. “What?”

“I’m more than a pretty face.”

“Oh, babe. I know that. Of course I know that.” He touched my knee, squeezed, smiled. “But it’s my job to assess how you might be perceived by the public eye, even though I know you have the potential to be so much more.”

Only, his use of *potential* didn’t quite pluck out the insult dart he’d thrown.

“You don’t need to look so worried. I’ve got all this covered for you. It’s not like I’m suggesting you go live in a homeless shelter for a month and serve rice and beans with the kitchen staff.” He chuckled. “We’ll find a good match for you somewhere. Something with older kids that you can pop in to see once a week. Hear some hard stories you can retell, take some heart-jerker pics, and then be done with it. Simple.”

He paused, and I could almost feel the way he redirected the energy buzzing around us. “My assistant is already compiling a list of local charities and nonprofits for us to go through. The closest we can get to the premise of the show, the better. Plus, we’ll need

to steer clear from what other influencers in your space have going on right now. Felicity is—”

“Felicity?” Just the sound of her name made my hackles rise. “What does she have to do with this?”

“Have you seen her latest numbers?” he asked, as if I’d missed a presidential election.

“I may have glanced at them once or twice in the last few weeks.”

“Well, since she added the no-kill shelters as a cause she supports, her numbers have skyrocketed. And it’s no wonder why. People care *more* about successful people who pay it forward. Partnering with a cause will grow your influence, *and* it will give you a giant leg up in your audition submission.”

I huffed a sigh. “I have a hard time believing that any self-respecting animal would choose to be in the same room as Felicity. She’s basically the platinum blond version of Cruella de Vil.”

“While that may be true,” Ethan said, all managerial-like, “the numbers speak for themselves. She’s grown nearly eighteen percent across all her platforms in the last four months.”

“Eighteen percent?” I slumped back in my chair. “Wow.”

“Yep. And,” he said, tapping my knee, “I have no doubt you can do even better. You have more personality and charisma in your left earlobe than Felicity Fakes It.”

“Felicity Fashion Fix,” I corrected on a chuckle, my mood slowly on the rise again.

He curled a long piece of my hair around his finger and tugged gently. “I don’t really care what her brand name is because she’s not my client anymore, you are.” He edged closer to me, taking my hands in his and rubbing his thumb over the inside of my wrists. “You’ve proven you know how to hook your viewers’ loyalty, Molly. Now you need to hook them in the heart. If you can do that, then I can get you a makeover show in front of millions that will make everything you’ve done to build your brand to this point seem trivial in comparison.”

I tried the phrase on for size—*hook them in the heart*—imagining how my twin brother would respond to such a statement.

“Oh!” I sat up straight and flattened my feet to the floor. “I’ve got it.”

“What? A nonprofit we can contact?”

I shook my head. “Not exactly, but I do know the person who can lead me to one. Miles. My brother has a connection to every nonprofit organization within a hundred-mile radius of here.” And beyond.

“Ah, yes. The preacher,” Ethan said, finally reaching for his glass of wine and reclining back on the sofa. “Weren’t the two of you supposed to do an interview together for your channels? I thought I suggested that a few months back—show your viewers the whole twin bonding thing you two have going. Did Val forget to put that on the schedule?”

I tried to ignore the raw way his tone rubbed against me whenever he spoke of my brother. Though he and Miles had only interacted twice, it was abundantly clear that neither of them was going to take up calling each other *bro* any time soon. Truth was, I often felt like a goalie between them, blocking any potential insult and negative jab.

I stood up, slipped between him and the chair, and made my way back to the kitchen. “He’s not interested in doing an interview for Makeup Matters, and I’m totally okay with that. It’s not his thing.”

Ethan laughed. “Why not? Are preachers banned from social media? Is that one of the twelve commandments?”

“Ten.”

“Ten what?”

“There are only ten commandments, not twelve.”

He pulled out his phone and tapped on the screen, either not hearing me or not caring to respond. “You should really change his mind on that. It’s a missed opportunity.”

It probably was, and yet I knew my brother. The same way I

knew my parents. Though at least Miles understood some of the benefits to social media and what my career as an influencer actually entailed. My parents, however, shared one flip phone between the two of them with no fancy apps or internet service—all in the name of frugality and stewardship.

As I pulled our plates down from the cupboard, I said nothing more on the topic of my family to Ethan. It was one of the clear boundary lines I'd drawn when we started dating. He hadn't known me as a child or as a lonely teenager searching for her place in a household she'd never quite measured up to. And I liked it that way. The two of us had come from two totally different lifestyles, two totally different histories, two totally different worlds, and perhaps that was what I enjoyed most about being with him. Our pasts didn't have to matter, because all we focused on was the future dreams we chased together. And in that aspect, we were very much the same. Ethan and I were a goal-making, goal-crushing machine. And signing on with his agency had been one of the best decisions I'd ever made.

He believed in me. And perhaps that was the only encouragement I needed to push toward my next goal.

“Hey.” He came up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders while I reached for a spatula. “What do you think about skipping the chicken tonight and going out to eat instead? I'm craving that little Italian place downtown, the one with the breaded artichokes and fresh caprese salad.” He brushed my hair off my back and planted a kiss to my neck. “We can continue this conversation over a nice plate of veal parmesan. And, bonus, there'll be no dishes needing to be washed.”

I glanced down at the chicken I'd been marinating all day, based on a recipe I'd chosen a week ago when he told me he'd be flying into town tonight. “I do love that place, but I've been looking forward to trying this chicken out all week, and—”

He spun me around and touched my chin. “Babe, once this deal goes through, the only meals you'll ever want to try will be cooked by professional chefs. Come on, let me treat you tonight.

I'm proud of you.” He went to the door and shrugged on his jacket before removing my blush cardigan from the rustic wall hook and holding it open. “After all, it’s not every day I get to celebrate the accomplishments of my best client, who also happens to be my beautiful girlfriend.”