

MAYA HENRY
LOOKING FORWARD



**INSPIRED BY
TRUE EVENTS**

ILLUSTRATED BY THOMAS WARMING

LOOKING FORWARD

by
MAYA
HENRY



LOOKING FORWARD, Print Replica Edition, April 2024.

Published by
MARS BOOKS PUBLISHING,
17503 La Cantera Pkwy #104-251
San Antonio, TX 78257
Copyright © 2024 by MARS BOOKS.

LOOKING FORWARD™

(including all prominent characters featured herein), its logo, and all character likenesses are trademarks of MARS BOOKS PUBLISHING, unless otherwise noted. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means (except for short excerpts for review purposes) without the expressed written permission of MARS BOOKS. All names, characters, events, or locales in this publication are entirely fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons (living or dead), events or places, without 'satirical' intent, is coincidental.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OR ITS ASSIGNS.

FULL COLOR PRINT REPLICA EBOOK

Illustrations by Thomas Warming

Graphic Design by Bill Cunningham / Pulp 2.0



CONTENT WARNING

This book contains sensitive material
relating to:
abuse, violence, self-harm,
drug and alcohol use, eating disorders,
and abortion.

BOOK PLAYLIST



Run for the Hills
No Goodbyes
the 1
How to Get the Bird
(Taylor's Version)

Butterflies
Paper Rings
Bless the Broken Road
everytime
Make Me (Cry)
You're Losing Me
(From the Vault)

The Crying Game
Thru Your Phone
Traitor
How do You Sleep?
Hate that I Love You
Favorite Crime
More

Flower Shop
White Horse
(Taylor's Version)
Lose You to Love Me
Glimpse of Us
Your Power

Tate McRae
Dua Lipa
Taylor Swift
Taylor Swift

Kacey Musgraves
Taylor Swift
Pascal Flatts
Ariana Grande
Noah Cyrus, Labrinth
Taylor Swift

Nicki Minaj, Jessie Ware

Cardi B
Olivia Rodrigo
Sam Smith
Brianna, Ne-Yo

Olivia Rodrigo
Halsey
ERNEST, Morgan Wallen
Taylor Swift

Selena Gomez
Joi
Billie Eilish



STAR POWER A-ROLL TRANSCRIPTION

August 2008

Oliver Smith: (singing)

I see no path
I see no light
I see no end in sight
I'm lost without you
You're not my girl
You're what I live for
forever and ever
I'm lost without you

Song completes; sounds of cheering and applause.
Camera close-up of judges Charissa Carling, Sebastian Cromwell, and Leonard Walls and guest judge LeeLee Mitz.

Charissa Carling: Wow, Oliver. You've certainly got stage presence. And your voice is great.

Clapping.

Oliver Smith: Thank you, Charissa.

LOOKING FORWARD

MAYA HENRY

Charissa Carling: You're going places, Oliver.

Claps and hoots.

Leonard Walls: You really do have a great vocal range and confidence for sixteen.

Sebastian Cromwell: When you first auditioned, you were fourteen, yes?

Oliver Smith: Yes, you invited me to the final auditions.

Charissa Carling: (teasing) And you didn't pass him to the next level, did you, Seb?

Sebastian Cromwell: True. I just didn't think you were ready then. But what did I tell you, Oliver?

Oliver Smith: You said work on my voice and come back in two years.

Sebastian Cromwell: I did. And now it is two years later and... you have improved, no doubt.

Enthusiastic applause from audience.

Sebastian Cromwell: But I am casting the next great band here, and every member has to be top of their game. So, the real question... have you improved enough?

Charissa Carling: Of course he has, Seb! I thought so then too.

Sebastian Cromwell: So that's a yes from Charissa. Leonard?

Leonard Walls: You know my answer. I'm a yes. Applause.

Sebastian Cromwell: Our guest judge, LeeLee... what do you think?

LeeLee Mitz: I want to do a duet with him someday. That's a yes!

Sebastian Cromwell: So, it comes down to me. Well...

Tension-building music begins to play.

Sebastian Cromwell: I was right then, and I am right now. I think we're in business. You're going to the finals, Oliver.

Huge applause.



PROLOGUE

Oliver Smith is standing inside the bedroom, looking like a stranger. A scary one.

He is hunched over, moaning like an animal, his shirt ripped and sweaty hair plastered to his face. To his left, a huge chunk of the wall is gone, the remains a pile of plaster at his feet.

Wait, I think. How did he punch a hole that big in the wall with his fist?

A split second later, I get my answer. I watch as Oliver heaves himself upright with a groan, rears back, and lifts his arm. That's when I see what he's holding.

Oh my God.

It wasn't always like this. In the beginning, it was perfect. The kind of story little girls picture in their princess dreams. Oliver singing to me

LOOKING FORWARD

from the stage, like I was the only girl in the world; it was practically a rom-com come to life. Then those early days—Paris, secret meetings in a hotel suite, love letters and texts and the oh-my-God sex—life was just giddy goosebumps. Our own private universe and our bright, shiny future.

Italy, that was the real beginning. Oliver and I in an Italian villa, eyes locking as I walked down a runway painted in gold.

Then came the rest of it.

The secrets and manic episodes, the leaks to the press, publicists and Gerry and Dr. Gigi doing damage control. The drugs and rage and broken glass and tears.

Every time we hit a low, I'd tell myself it would get better. Relationships are complicated, right? And even more so when your partner belongs to the world. Of course, it wasn't going to be easy, but I'd make it work. It was worth it.

That's how it is, I told myself. *That's what you do when you are in love.*

Now I understand: love is beautiful, but it can make you blind to what is obvious.

Love makes you blind, until you have no choice but to face the truth. Until it is standing in front of you, in a drugged-out rage, holding an axe.

Sure, this started out as a love story. But the ending is a surprise.

I, Mallory Hunt, have stepped into my own real-life horror movie.

I met Oliver two years ago. Only now, all this time later, do I finally see things clearly.

I have no choice. The truth is standing right in front of me, arm reared back and hand clutching . . .

Oh my God.

"Wait!" I shout. "Oliver, just stop for a—"

Too late. The axe is already swinging through the air, sharp blade gleaming in the fancy lighting.

PART ONE



R&R'S MODA DIVINO IS A ROMAN FEAST FOR THE EYES

Dusk is setting, the orange sunset rippling across the water of Lake Como. Just beyond, the mountains are bathed in purple shadow. This is my view from the sprawling garden of Villa Conti, the legendary estate named for the count for whom it was built in the early 18th century. Constructed with the goal of showing off his great fortune and taste to Italian society – as well as housing a rotating cast of mistresses – Villa Conti succeeds. Yet, in this fashion editor's mind, it is hard to imagine the place ever looking as lavishly awe-inspiring as it does this very night.

This is no ordinary night, after all. This is the rarest and most hallowed of occasions in the fashion world: the annual summer edition of R&R's Moda Divino.

Now, sitting amidst a thousand tiny flickering candles as evening falls, the select guests have been transported somewhere else entirely – another world, another time. We have been thrust from the modern world into an era of gods and goddesses, where gladiators fight beasts and women seem to float by in their billowing tunics, every inch of flesh dripping with gold.

Every Moda theme is a charming surprise, and this year does not disappoint. This time, the audience has time traveled back to ancient Rome, only

with a twist: this is a Roman feast for the eyes, with all the sumptuous, decadent delights one has come to expect from R&R's biannual, uber-exclusive Moda Divino event.

Only a select few VIPs ever have the honor of attending Moda, and for those who do, it is an experience none will ever forget. The womenswear show always opens Moda's four-day fashion buffet and serves as a highlight; even now, before the models have even appeared, the show has begun.

Count Conti's gardens are among the most lauded in the city, drawing horticulturists and tourists alike, yet this editor doubts they have ever looked as miraculous as they do this night. In my assigned seat by a long twisting pathway – one that will momentarily transform into a runway – I take in the scene, making mental notes. I would never dare take physical notes; Moda is a notoriously press-free zone, and as one of the few editors lucky enough to score a

coveted invite, the last thing I want to do is commit a faux pas. Instead, I try to engrave the images in my memory, which is not difficult. This scene is unforgettable.

The R&R set design team have outdone themselves, giving us the Roman Empire with a neoclassical, futuristic flair. At the front entrance, two massive white pillars rise to the sky, each topped by a white marble lion. Other marble figures and trophy-shaped bowls are scattered about, their ivory surfaces gleaming beneath the setting sun. The towering privet hedges have undergone a makeover as well, painstakingly sheared into looming animal shapes.

At the center of it, the magnificent fountain is lit to a golden hue, the rippling water blending with the rising music. Nearby, the orchestra has begun to play. Wearing simple white robes and gold-leaf crowns, they lift their instruments – a lute, a skin drum, a bagpipe, a wooden flute – releasing the first haunting

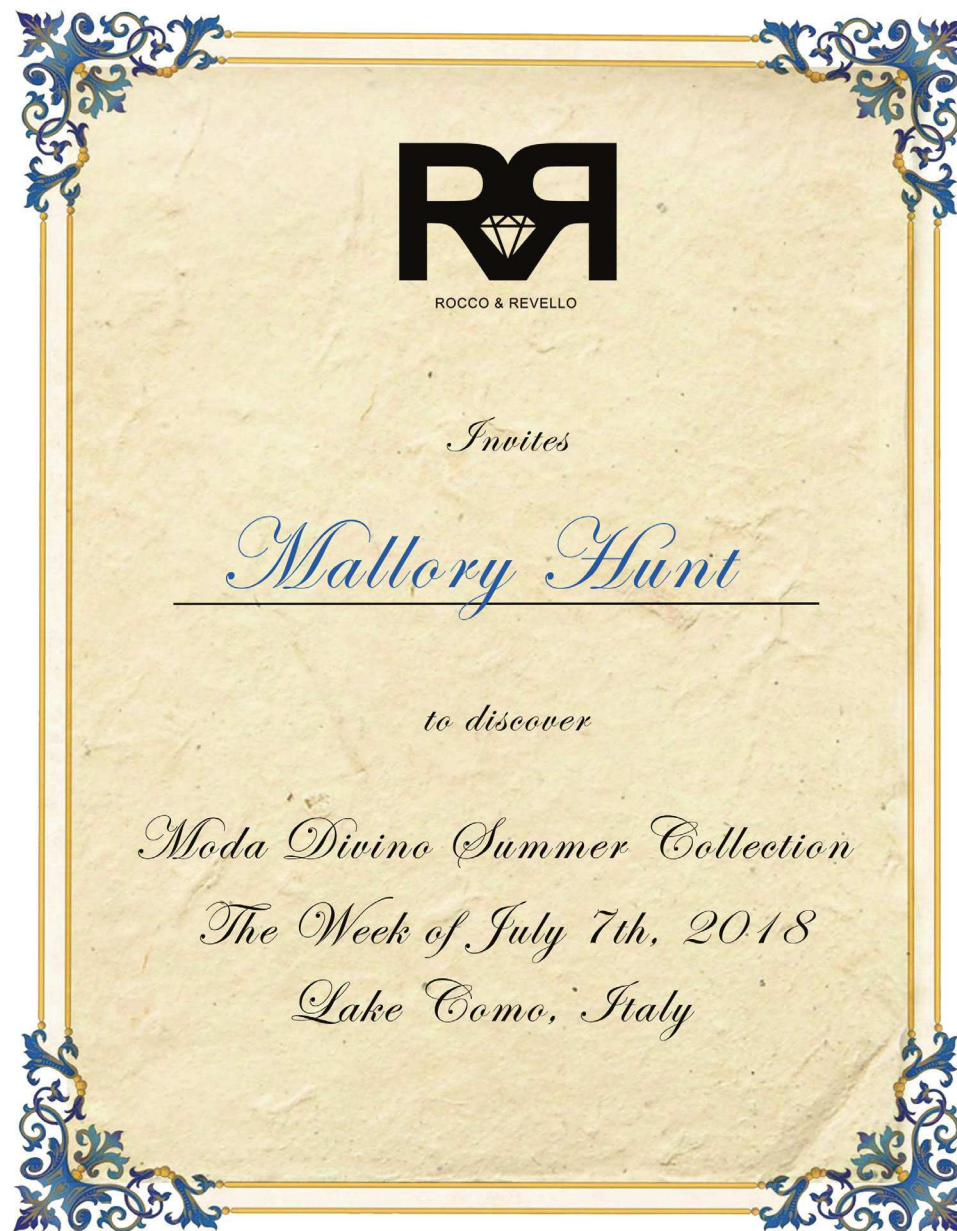
BY LILLIAN CRALL
JULY 10, 2018

notes into the now-darkening sky.

That very moment, a woman appears, offering me a drink. When I accept, she pulls on a gold rope; at the end is a handsome young man, wearing little more than a golden breastplate, flesh-colored tights and a white cape. He leans, his bare chest glimmering as he hands me a goblet of champagne.

R&R's Moda Divino events are known to be the most extraordinary, exclusive affairs in the couture world, and only the highest caliber private clientele are given an invite. For that honor, they expect fashion greatness; so far, this Moda does not disappoint.

Even more, the show has yet to officially begin.



(cont. on page 63)

CHAPTER ONE

Lake Como, Italy

If you could describe a place as “storybook,” this would be it. Lake Como, Italy, in early July. Near dusk, this exclusive enclave at the foot of the Alps takes on a surreal quality, like a museum painting come to life.

I’ve never seen a place this beautiful. Not in my whole life.

Everything you read about this place is true. Every view is an Instagram shot; even the air smells expensive.

I have walked into a real-life fairy tale. So now, only one question remains.

Why do I still feel like total shit?

Once upon a time, I was the kind of girl who dreamed of visiting a place like this. The kind of girl who, when given the chance, would be so excited that she would spend weeks planning the trip beforehand. Highlighting travel guides and memorizing the important parts— words

like *Baroque* and *enclave*—then fantasizing how she might look sailing across the shimmering Italian lake in a quaint ferry, Chanel sunglasses on and wind whipping her hair, on her way to an eighteenth-century villa straight out of a costume drama starring Kate Winslet. Once, I was the kind of girl who'd get lost in the idea of a place like this, imagining all the possibilities it might hold.

That was two months ago. I am not that girl anymore.

I have finally arrived, and I feel nothing.

Snap out of it, I tell myself. *Remember how lucky you are*. I have just turned eighteen. I have my whole life ahead of me.

So why do I feel so old?

"Excuse me!" calls a voice. "Attention, please!"

At the entrance to the tent stands a short, frazzled woman. Only a few years older than me, I estimate, she is dressed in all black, a wireless headset strapped across her messy hair, clipboard in hand. Francesca, that's her name. The assistant stage manager, looking so out of place in this chaotic, glamorous scene.

She tries calling for attention again, but no one seems to care. I watch her scan everyone inside the tent, flustered. She spots me, even though I'm trying to be invisible behind the craft services table. The best place to hide backstage at a fashion show? Near the food. No model is about to chow down before her runway walk. I figured this was a great way to be invisible and try to get my head together before the show.

Now I've been spotted.

If anything, Francesca is the one embarrassed that I caught her trying to get everyone's attention and being ignored. That I caught her looking helpless and out of place. Then again, I probably have the same expression on my face.

It's been a long day, and the show hasn't even started.

When the day began, I had no idea what was coming. Ironically, it was Francesca who I met first. Early in the morning, she met me at the front of the villa, then checked my name off on her clipboard. *Mallory Hunt*, she said in her thick Italian accent. *Follow me*. She was the one to lead me into an enormous entry hall, moving so fast I only had a moment to

take in the gold-leaf designs on the curved ceiling above, the massive chandelier, the ten-foot-high fresco painting adorning the walls.

I should have felt like a princess, being there. I should have been thrilled to be invited to walk in such an esteemed runway show. Week of shows, really, attended by real VIPs. But now that the day had come and I was finally in Lake Como, I couldn't pay attention to all the beautiful things.

All I could think about was Marco's face, screwed up in anger. Looking at me like I barely deserved to exist. All I could think about was Luna, boarding a plane to Singapore.

A month ago, I'd had a BFF and a boyfriend. Now the BFF was moving two thousand miles away, and the boyfriend was gone forever.

I tried to focus on the woman in front of me, trying to keep up with her brisk steps through the villa. Despite my dark mood, I could feel the excitement. People rushed back and forth with racks of clothing and supplies, full of energy. *Moda Divino* was a big deal, and tonight's show was the big launch of the four-day fashion extravaganza. As for this *Moda* theme—they all have one—I still had no idea. *R&R* were notoriously secretive about their shows, especially *Moda*. Models and clients were kept in the dark for fear of leaks.

I'd had my initial dress fitting a day earlier at our hotel across the lake, though I couldn't make much of the half-constructed garment—billowy white layers of tulle, which the dressers draped and twisted around, all the while discussing their progress in hushed Italian. Whatever was going to happen, it would be extravagant, that was for sure.

The *R&R* label was known for a theatrical flair and edge; designers Rocco and Revello were legendary for taking risks. From the press pictures put out after the last *Moda*, it had a religious theme, with gowns that vaguely resemble nun habits, only sexy, and the men's line featuring slim-fit trousers and high necks that were a clear nod to priest collars. Only these collars were embellished with sparkles and worn over bare chests.

Looking at the photos of Fall *Moda* in *Trend*, one of the few magazines invited to cover the secretive events, I'd been blown away. The whole thing was outrageous, like a blinged-out Vatican brought to life. I'd always loved fashion, even before I fell into modeling, and I'd admired their designs since I was a little girl flipping through my mom's

fashion magazines.

Today, I'd be walking in an actual R&R show, and not just any show—the biannual premiere event, *Moda Divino*. A decadent, over-the-top fashion event. Forget some runway; this was a totally immersive experience, down to the location. Instead of cramped dressing rooms backstage, I was in a historic villa, being led through tiled archways to cavernous rooms beneath elaborate carved ceilings, the morning sunlight streaming through their French windows. I felt like Francesca was leading me through a museum, only one filled with frantic dressers and half-dressed girls, with Beyoncé blaring over the sound system.

I should have been thrilled. Like, over-the-moon ecstatic. This should have been one of the coolest mornings of my eighteen-year-old life. I'd always dreamed of a modeling job like this, where fashion and art came together.

I followed Francesca, telling myself to get it together. Reminding myself how lucky I was to be at this hallowed event. I tried to focus on Francesca reciting the schedule, half of which I'd missed.

After the final touch-ups, we will move everyone to the tents, she continued. The show begins at, how do you say in English? The time between the day and night.

Sunset? I said.

Yes, yes. *So the show begins then, she continued, adding that the extensive preparations would make the timing tight. This is why we hurry, she quipped over her shoulder, to fit in everything that—*

She yelped and hopped back as a tall woman barreled across the hallway with a trailing entourage, nearly colliding with us. Francesca stumbled, catching herself on the wall, but the tall woman didn't miss a beat, giving us a pointed look like it was our fault. She didn't even apologize, striding forward, still spitting orders in Russian to the young women trailing her.

One of them gave a little shrug as she passed. *An emergency, she hissed. Anya cannot find her iPhone and requires an urgent Instagram post.*

Francesca leaned against the wall, trying to catch her breath. Looking in her eyes, I could see she wasn't quite as confident as she projected. In fact, she was a hot mess desperately trying to keep it together.

I could relate.

You're doing a great job, I said quietly. That was . . . not cool of her. Who was that woman?

Yes, said Francesca. *Not cool. She collected herself, forcing a smile. Anya Gringorov. Her great-great-grandfather was a tsar. I am not used to this . . . variety of models. This whole event is . . . what do you call it? Anarchy, yes. That is the word.*

Your first *Moda Divino*? I asked.

She looked embarrassed. *How could you tell?*

Mine too.

She grinned at me. *Then we had better hurry, yes? We both have a great deal to . . . how do you say it? Prove.*

As we made our way toward the back of the villa—*fuck, this place is huge*—it was clear this was unlike any other event in existence. I knew that before I came, but seeing it in person was different. The air was frantic with preparations—runners sprinting by with set decorations, dressers pacing back and forth with fabric. To my left, an ornate wooden library had been transformed into a makeup room with lighted mirrors—not the portable kind, either—and a crew of makeup artists rushed back and forth. A little way down, a drawing room had become a makeshift dressing area, the antique furniture pushed aside to make room for racks of garments.

Every place we passed, groups of people gathered, chatting and laughing and drinking champagne. Unlike the few shows I'd walked in, this felt like a social event, and it was hard to tell the models from the invited guests. I knew that in a few cases, they were the same.

Just like every other part of *Moda*, the actual shows were unique as well. Instead of a regular casting call, the R&R team handpicked the models for various reasons. There were the usual high-tier runway girls, the kind who did national campaigns and walked Fashion Week in Paris and New York, but there were also the special guests. Friends of R&R themselves, or people they admired—actresses, socialites, even a royal or two. Then there were women like Anya. She was gorgeous, don't get me wrong—six feet tall, high cheekbones, eyes like a curious cat—but not a regular in the modeling scene, I could tell. I mean, in an ordinary show, you'd never throw an attitude like hers unless you were Gisele level or something, and Gisele is a professional. But as Russian nobility, no doubt Anya's family were among the chosen few invited to *Moda*.

And since she was there, and obviously stunning, R&R had asked her to model as well.

Some of this I knew before I came—*Moda's* exclusive, close-knit party atmosphere was legendary, as were the people who received the exclusive invites—but seeing it in person was a shock.

I understood why Francesca felt nervous, and now that I'd seen her almost get run over by Russian nobility, I guess she felt more comfortable. Suddenly, she went from going over the schedule to sharing her personal history. Though only in her mid-twenties, she explained, she was not new to the fashion world. She'd been a runner at tons of shows, even a few during Italian Fashion Week. When she'd gotten the call for this one, she was thrilled. *A dream, working for R&R, she said. Even more, Moda Divino. I never thought I would be here. I just did not expect it would be quite so . . . unusual.*

I never thought I would either, but here I was.

It felt like a freak accident, an unexpected gift—Mallory Hunt, some girl from Tennessee, being invited to such a prestigious event. Not just me, but my whole family, and best of all, I'd be walking down the runway in couture created by one of the most esteemed design teams in the world. Not because of connections, either, or influential parents.

Don't get me wrong, my family had influence and was well-known in Tennessee and beyond—when your father is on every billboard off I-40, you can't avoid that kind of thing— but not in the way most *Moda* guests were. We had money, sure; just ask my father. If anything, he'd be the first to tell you how rich he was or show off his latest toy—a vintage sports car, a Rolex, even a plane. *I earned it, after all, he'd tell you in his Tennessee drawl. Made it from nothing, so why not spend it how I want?*

But this kind of event? Not his usual thing. But he'd be here too, and so would my mom and brother. And the craziest part? The reason was . . . *me.*

I was chosen for a single reason: Rocco liked me. Then he met my mom and brother and father, and he liked them too.

Still, as I followed Francesca, it felt surreal.

There is so much prep, so you models will rotate stations, Francesca continued. Last-minute fittings, makeup, nails, hair, florist for the hair as well . . .

Florist? I repeated. *For my hair—*

You will see, she chirped, that's your first stop. Here we go!

We had reached a small room at the back of the villa—rustic, with stone flooring and wooden counters; I figured it must have been some sort of pantry. But for some reason, every surface was covered in clear vinyl, like the kind old ladies used to protect their furniture.

It gets a bit messy, you see, said Francesca. She grinned, then stepped back to give me a view of the room.

At the center, a model, clad only in a thong bikini bottom and a beautifully detailed bustier. On either side, a seamstress, adjusting and poking at her for a last-minute fitting. Every inch of the garment looked hand sewn, made of fine Italian floral lace and glimmering metallic sparkle. At the same time, a florist was shoving flowers into the model's braided updo. R&R, the masters of sexy, feminine, and bling, had taken things to a whole new level.

These materials like lace are a sign of prosperity and social standing, Francesca read off a page on her clipboard. Special and intricate . . . she looked at me, eyes wide with wonder. Today, Mallory . . . you will be a princess.

I remember back when
I held you in my arms

It was true then
I was blinded by your charms

You left me hanging girl
that's right
You left me hanging girl
overnight

—“You Left Me”
5Forward debut album,
Pretty Little Outcasts

CHAPTER TWO

Brentwood, Tennessee

My family didn't always have money. My mom's parents came from Argentina with nothing, and my dad grew up a poor farm boy. But together, they built a legal empire. By the time I was six, we were officially rich, though I was too young to understand the difference.

When we moved to Brentwood, no one would let me forget it. Not just the rich part—right outside Nashville, it was the wealthiest neighborhood in the state—but everything else too. With my brown hair, baby fat, and Argentinean background, I stood out in the sea of blonde, blue-eyed future debutantes.

Then I met Luna, and since that first day of first grade, we were inseparable. After that, the other girls didn't matter. Luna and I had dreams—way bigger than Brentwood or even Tennessee. She wanted to travel and see the world; I wanted to do something with fashion. Design it, photograph it, I wasn't sure; I just wanted that feeling I got when I looked

at the latest spreads in *Trend* magazine, like I was being transported to another, more decadent universe.

Luna didn't think that was crazy. She understood my obsession with fashion—my favorite hobby was putting together looks from my mother's closet—and I never made fun of her pop culture obsessions. I watched *High School Musical* and *Glee* with her, and when she got into the Jonas Brothers, I memorized all their hits so we could both sing along. When she went through her Justin Bieber phase, so did I. Although I didn't share her fangirl devotion to those shows and groups, I learned to appreciate them because she did.

Luna never worried what other girls thought of her, and they left us alone. Then came middle school. Over the summer, I started playing golf and grew a few inches, so the baby fat melted away. I also started getting boobs, which was a shock, since none of the other girls were developing quite as fast.

Suddenly, all the girls who usually ignored Luna and me were paying attention, mainly because their boyfriends were. I may have been invisible to the mean girls in school, but I wasn't to the guys anymore. They hovered around me, trying to flirt, but I was shy around guys and not quite sure what they wanted from me. As for the mean girls, I was suddenly on their radar; they'd whisper when I passed by and talk smack under their breath. *She thinks she's so great, they'd say. I heard she's actually an illegal immigrant. I mean, she can kinda pass, but she's totally foreign. Did you see her grandma when she picked her up? Doesn't even speak English.*

Illegal, spoiled brat, skank, mute . . . they called me all sorts of things. Never mind I was born and raised in Tennessee and never hid my background—I was proud of my heritage. Never mind that I hadn't even kissed a guy yet and didn't do anything to those girls. They were still after me.

Why are they so mean? I asked Luna one day after school. I was in my room, tears coming down my face. *I mean, I don't even look in their direction.*

It isn't about what you do, said Luna. It's who you are.

What does that mean?

They're jealous, girl, said Luna.

Jealous of what? I asked.

Because you're prettier than all of them, she said, taking my hand. Like I always told you.

I didn't believe her, but she made me feel better just by being there. By telling me those girls didn't matter. *We have each other, she said. One good friend is all you need. Who cares about those bitches? I'd rather be a pretty little outcast with you.*

I groaned. "Pretty Little Outcast" was the title of a hit song by one of her obsessions, 5Forward. Unlike with Bieber and the Jonas Brothers, this fangirl phase had gone on for years. She still believed that if she tried hard enough, I'd turn into a Forwarder—what the superfans called themselves—just like her. So far, it hadn't worked.

But that day, I smiled at her. *Put on the song, I said. Let's have a dance party.*

I didn't believe the pretty thing no matter how often it was said. When my mom's friend Mateo asked me to model—a childhood friend who also had Argentinean parents, he'd turned his love of sewing into a fashion career—I thought he was joking. He insisted he was serious; his first collection was launching, and he'd landed a layout in a Latin magazine.

I reluctantly agreed. When I saw the final product, I could hardly believe it. Was that girl really me? I looked so glamorous and—for once, I thought—beautiful.

He thought I was a natural, and not just in terms of modeling. Mateo asked my opinion on the pieces I was wearing, the garment combinations, the accessories and even the set draping. *You're better than most production designers, he said. You have a real eye, darling.*

I felt comfortable offering those opinions, being behind the scenes. The modeling itself felt strange, though. Was I doing it right? By the end of the shoot, I'd stopped worrying and just had fun, dancing to Beyonce as the camera clicked away, Mateo gushing over every pose. It felt like a weird thing to do for a job, and I had no expectations for the images themselves. I mean, the only "shoots" I'd ever done were official family photos, Instagrams and selfies.

Then I saw the final product, and hardly recognized the girl in front of me. She looked so posed and elegant and...yeah, gorgeous. *Was that really me?*

I told myself it was the makeup and pose, the retouching. Then I got contacted by a local agent. She'd seen the photos and wanted to meet me. Then she wanted to submit me for jobs.

I thought it was a fluke, an accident, and the modeling felt weird. Just standing there and posing, it felt unnatural. But my mom and Abuela were so proud, and my dad was all about the press. That was part of what made him different in the legal field; he was never afraid to market himself or his firm, and getting a Hunt out there only helped his image as a local business legend and family man. *That's my girl*, he said. *Try and get your full name in the picture caption. If not, next time see if you can get that written into the contract.*

Eventually, I had a whole portfolio of work. That's when I got a call from an agent in New York.

By the time I was eighteen, I had an actual career. I wasn't a household name or anything, but I worked quite a bit. I'd even had a couple of covers in foreign markets. Even though I wasn't passionate about modeling itself, I loved being around fashion. Watching the stylists work, meeting designers, seeing how the garments were designed and fit and displayed, getting to put on these incredible one-of-a-kind creations—it was like being that little girl in my mother's closet again.

The posing part was boring, but it was worth it. I also liked the paycheck. It felt good, making money of my own, even if my family had plenty. While lots of girls in my neighborhood aimed to attend Vanderbilt, get into the best sorority, and meet a rich guy who'd take care of them, I couldn't imagine a life like that. I wanted to do something with my future, and guys came second.

In fact, Marco was the first one I ever kissed, and I met him at sixteen. Marco was my first everything.

Marco would also be the first man to break my heart, and I vowed he'd be the last too. But that didn't come until later.

Marco was the perfect boyfriend, that's what everyone said. He came from an established Venezuelan family but was raised in the States like me. A little bit older, he had started at his father's manufacturing company, made a name for himself, then invested in opening his own restaurant. Now, at twenty-two, he had opened two more and was on his way to being a true mogul.

He was also sweet and polite. It took him a long time to ask me out;

we went to his steakhouse all the time, and he always came out to chat with my family. *That kid is goin' places*, my dad always said. *Real entrepreneur, a lot like me at that age.* When Marco finally got up the nerve to ask me out, my family thought it was great.

We dated for six months before he finally took my virginity. I'd been ready way earlier, but he wanted to wait. *I want it to mean something*, he'd said. *Your first time.*

He didn't mind that I was inexperienced; in fact, he liked that about me. He said I was refreshing, with my open-hearted spirit; he said I had an innocent quality that made me special.

Looking back, I shouldn't have been so flattered.

Marco and I dated for a year, and he became everything to me. I'd gotten so absorbed in our relationship, I didn't care as much about modeling; I had gotten a lot of jobs in LA and Europe, and he didn't like me being away from him, even just for a week here or there. I thought it was sweet and showed just how much he loved me.

Although I kept working, I'd started to wonder how important it really was. Marco had become my whole life. Even his circle of friends had become my circle of friends.

As for Luna, she was a little wary, asking if the whole thing was moving too quickly. When I told her I was happy, she backed off. Even though I didn't see her as much, she couldn't complain—since she got her dream internship at one of the best ad agencies in Tennessee, she wasn't available as much either. They worked her long hours, but she figured it was worth it. *Just wait*, she said. *I'll end up this powerhouse exec creating national campaigns, and you'll be this international fashion tycoon.*

I told her that sounded perfect. Inside, I wasn't quite so sure. Marco didn't outright say it, but I could tell he wasn't into the modeling. He talked about our future a lot, but never in terms of me having a career. Instead, he spoke of our future home, our beautiful future children, our beautiful future life.

The way he said these things, it sounded romantic and destined. He was my first everything and I didn't know any better. *This was love*, I told myself. You stop being an *I* and become a *we*. If two people were lucky enough to find each other in this great, big world—to find the one—you put everything you have into that relationship.

Looking back, I'd realize only one of us was that invested. But at the

time, it seemed right. I'd seen many Rom-Coms, maybe. Either way, for Marco I was willing to let the modeling go.

Then Mateo called about the runway show.

In the end, I decided it was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. After all, it was for a designer I loved more than anything, and I'd always wanted to walk on a runway. Pretty soon, I got into the spirit, excited to walk a real runway for the man who gave me my first modeling job, and the first person to tell me I had talent. It was just a one time thing, I told myself. That's also what I told Marco.

He wasn't happy. *Why?* he kept asking. *It's a waste of your time.*

In the end, he reluctantly gave in. *Fine*, he said. *Do your little model walk, but I don't have time to go watch that kind of thing, you understand? I'm running a business.*

I told him of course, that was understandable, although I never really understood what kind of business he was doing. Working for his father, that's as specific as it got, and that work involved a lot of travel.

When it came to that kind of thing, I didn't ask questions. He didn't want me to, I could tell.

As for what I wanted, well...to keep Marco happy.

One fun modeling gig as a favor, that's what I told myself. An evening walking a runway in Nashville, and it didn't matter that Marco wouldn't be there. My whole family was coming, and it was more of a party than an actual modeling assignment.

A favor for Mateo, and for the rest of my life, I could say I walked a runway. Only once, but I did it.

Of course, I had no idea who would be watching from the audience, and what runways he'd see in my future.

I never thought Rocco would be at a fashion show in Nashville. He was too big and important for something like that. Later, I'd learn that he made a lot of effort to support promising, up-and-coming designers, and he'd made a point of being there. He'd been a mentor to Mateo for quite a while.

No one told me he was in the audience, which was probably for the best. I'd admired him and Revello for so long, it might have thrown me

off, knowing one of the founders of the legendary R&R label was right there, a few feet away, watching me do my best runway strut.

Afterward, he came up to me, and I could hardly speak, I was so excited. *You have a great look*, he said, which made me blush.

What about me? asked Junior—my brother, short for Henry Hunt Jr. *Don't you think I could model too?*

He was joking, but Rocco cocked his head and looked at him. *Sure*, he said. *You probably could. You've got a personality and good looks, just like your sister.* Then he turned to me again. *There are many beautiful girls, and yours is a unique kind of beauty. But what really makes a great model for our brand is something else. It is class, confidence. Mystery. They light up the stage. And you*, he said, gently lifting my chin, *have that and more.*

I was so flattered I was speechless; I had loved his designs forever. But Rocco was gracious and relatable and cool. He even stayed for a drink and chatted with my mom. My dad said hi and wandered off to mingle with the other guests; he wanted to expand his practice, and there were some influential people at the show. My mom and Rocco barely noticed. They got along right away, laughing like old friends.

I must go, he finally said. *But what a lovely family. I think . . . I shall see you all again.* Then he turned to me. *Especially you, Miss Mallory Hunt.*

The next week, I got a call from my agent, Rose, in New York. That's when I found out. Rocco wanted me to walk at *Moda*, and he said to bring the whole family.

It was a dream come true. The official invite came a few days later.

When my brother found out we could all go, he was pretty excited.

It's gonna be pretty badass. That's how Junior described the event to his friends. *Oil moguls, Asian billionaires. Elon-level tycoons, y'know? Great for networking. And women—Saudi royalty, heiresses, and best of all models . . .*

Some of the women do important work too, I'd said, rolling my eyes. *It's not just a bunch of powerful guys and their side pieces. I mean, there's female entrepreneurs and—*

Yeah, yeah, said my brother, waving me off. *I'm just saying, these are top-tier people.*

Then how come they invited you? I grinned. *Oh, yeah, that's right—I'm the reason.*

Whatever, said my brother, smirking. I'm just saying, this is gonna be so sick.

Though I wouldn't admit it out loud at the time, I had to agree. In two months, I'd be walking for R&R in Italy. I had never been so excited. A personal request to model for an iconic brand, and a family so cool and tight-knit they'd been invited too. I was on a high—nothing could bring me down!

I had no idea what was coming.

Marco wasn't as excited about the show as I was. In fact, he was the opposite. He'd always been slightly jealous, but when I told him about *Moda*, he lost it.

Tell them no, he said. I thought it was cute, your little modeling hobby. But this is different.

I'd never seen him like this. Furious, spitting orders at me.

If we were going to be together, he explained, I needed to start taking my image seriously. He'd seen R&R fashion spreads, and they were not just extreme but disturbing. *All that skin and glitter, he spat out. It's trash. That's for whores!*

I didn't know what to say. He wasn't interested in fashion, so I avoided talking about the subject, even though it was a passion. But still, I'd thought he was supportive of my modeling and my dreams for the future. To be a designer, a stylist—to have a career in general.

Turned out I was wrong.

A man like him needed a woman with class, he informed me. A good woman with manners, who made a proper impression. *A woman like my mother, he said. Not a half-naked whore walking down a runway in Italy.*

His mother was pretty and quiet, always hovering around, doting and seeing to his needs. She kept the house perfect, never raised her voice. She didn't have a job, let alone any opinions. I tried to reason with him, but it didn't work. He forbade me from doing the R&R show, saying we'd be over.

Fine, I said. Then we're over.

I didn't mean it. I didn't think he meant it either, even after he stormed off. He'd calm down, I figured. He'd apologize.

We never spoke again.

I didn't know what to do. Where to turn. In the time since Marco had entered my life, I'd seen Luna less and less. When she and Marco were

together, it never went well. She thought he was egotistical; he thought she was too brash and opinionated. The more time I spent with him, the less I saw her. We still kept in touch but didn't hang out nearly as much. I'd texted her about the R&R show, and she'd responded with her usual exclamation points, saying we'd have to celebrate. But we didn't set a time or anything—by that point, she didn't expect it to happen.

During hard times, she was always the one I'd turned to. But now I couldn't expect that either. It would be weird, going MIA and then appearing like magic, expecting sympathy.

Then there was my mom. I couldn't go to her either. She'd always been there for me, more like a best friend than a parent. But things had gotten weird there too. Since I'd gotten a boyfriend, we'd spent less time together—and even crazier, I hadn't noticed that it was happening. But with Marco gone, I was home a lot more, lost in my misery and thoughts. Waiting for someone to ask if I was okay.

No one did.

My mom had stuff going on too, that was obvious. I'd been so busy with Marco, I'd barely noticed. But in the aftermath of my breakup, I realized what had been there for a long time—what I'd been too busy to notice. My mom wasn't herself, funny and laughing, always ready to gossip and discuss everything going on in my life. She was distracted, lost in thought. Near, but somewhere else.

When did this happen? I wondered. I spent so many nights at Marco's place, I didn't notice the changes in my very own home.

As for my dad, he was pretty much missing. He'd always been a workaholic, but now he was barely around at all. And when he was, he seemed preoccupied, avoiding everyone. Especially my mom.

I could hear the fights, too. The ones they tried to hide behind their closed bedroom door.

I needed to talk to someone, but who? My mom had her own stuff going on, and she didn't even know Marco and I had broken up. It seemed too complicated, telling her, and when she asked about him—always in a distracted way—I just made an excuse. He's on a business trip, I'd say. *He's busy with work stuff.*

Yes, she'd say, then sigh. *Aren't they always?*

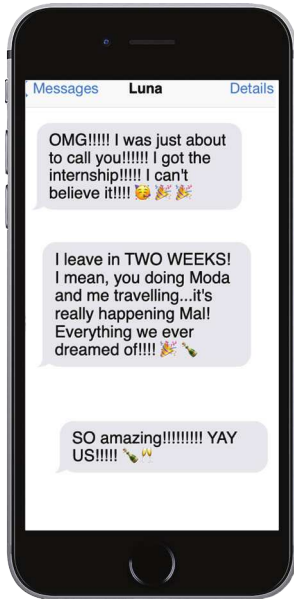
A week after my fight with Marco, I was going so crazy, I knew I had to make a move. Talk to someone. So I did what I'd always done before

disappearing into Marco world.

I texted Luna.

I didn't make it sound urgent or like a big deal. Just a quick *wuz up, girl, I miss you, whatcha doin'?*

The response came immediately.



Internship? For a second, I was confused. Then I remembered.

An advertising internship with an exclusive firm. She'd mentioned that a while back.

Not just any firm, either—an international one. International as in . . . Singapore.

I texted back, the screen blurry with my tears.

Right afterward, I threw the phone across the room. Then I went to the kitchen, ate three bowls of cereal and a pint of Ben & Jerry's, and made myself throw it all up.

Until then, I'd never considered bulimia. There were plenty of other ways to fuck with my metabolism, and I'd tried them all.

Before I started modeling, I'd never worried about my weight. A total cliché, sure, but true. Up until then, I didn't worry about that kind of thing. I was strong and athletic—not the skinniest girl around, but confident enough to show off my belly.

Then the modeling took off, and my agent Rose suggested I lose

a few pounds. I knew plenty of ways to make that happen; I'd heard the other girls discuss the options at shoots. Eating only celery for a week, cayenne cleanses, cinnamon gum and lemon juice to curb hunger—I tried them all, but never for very long. Only when a big shoot was coming up, or a client passed me over and Rose insinuated I was a bit "curvier" than the average model, would I up my game. A few weeks of deprivation and SoulCycle, I'd drop the weight quick, and things would go back to normal. Until the next booking, or the next magazine editor turned me down. It wasn't good for me, I knew that, but I figured it wouldn't be forever. Models have short careers, and besides, I didn't plan on doing it forever. It was just an experience until I had a longterm plan.

As for what that longterm plan would be . . . well, I would figure it out.

Bone broth for a few weeks, double hot yoga sessions, hunger pains. It all sucked, but it was temporary. And even then, I knew the limits. There were certain lines I wouldn't cross. No enemas, laxatives, or puking.

Okay, I'd tried the last one, but only a few times, and I knew models did it all the time. I'd listened as they discussed their various techniques—what to eat first so you'd recognize it in the toilet bowl and know you were done, the window period before real digestion began. How to get rid of the smell and what drops to use when your eyes turned red.

A few tries were enough to put me off the whole thing. It was way too much work, not to mention gross. If I needed to drop a few pounds before a shoot, well, I'd go with the standard techniques: gum, lettuce, a gallon of water a day and whatever new cleanse Goop was recommending.

But that night was different. Newly dumped, feeling alone and learning my best friend was moving halfway across the world . . . I just needed to do something. Anything to make my head stop spinning, to alleviate the pain for a short time.

That's how I found myself stuffing my face, then hunching over the toilet, retching. A few days later, it happened again.

In the weeks leading up to Moda, it became a regular thing. I told myself I was preparing for the Italian runway—I had to fit into R&R's notoriously bodycon looks, right? But in reality, there was more to it. When

LOOKING FORWARD

I was binging and purging, I didn't feel heartsick or worried. In those moments, I felt nothing but . . . release.

At those times, there was only me in the dark kitchen, crouched in front of the fridge, reaching for the first thing I saw. Cold pizza, leftover pasta. Abuela's chocolate cake—the kind I loved so much as a kid, that she always made especially for me. There was only me, Mallory, grabbing it with my hands, not even bothering with a fork. The icing was cool on my tongue, sharp and sweet. In those moments, for a brief period of time, the pain disappeared. No Marco, no BFF headed for Singapore, no distracted mom or MIA dad. There was nothing but sugar and my hand reaching out for another fistful, shoving it in my mouth, not even chewing, smearing brown frosting across my face.

Then came the relief—hunched over the toilet, finger down my throat. Cold marble under my knees, pushing all the excess out, and the sudden emptiness that felt like prayer. Like I was renewed and pure, at least for a while.

Then I'd do it again.

I don't remember much from those days—just sleepwalking through my life, wishing I had someone to talk to while avoiding every human in sight. Sleeping way too late, putting on a cheerful face for Mom and Abuela, then going right back to my depressed state.

Trying not to think about Marco. Thinking about Marco. Deciding I was unlovable and destined to be alone. Hating Marco, then almost texting him a million times.

Taking Luna to the airport, then saying goodbye before she boarded a flight to the other side of the world. Pretending my tears were the happy kind, full of excitement for her future and my own.

Going home and throwing up. Again.

In that weird, dark period, it was the only structure I had. Puking was the only time I really felt complete, full. That's how I spent the weeks leading up to my European runway debut—lost and unsure, trying to push away the bad thoughts by doing something to myself that was even worse. That's how I filled my days, until I finally had something I needed to do.

Pack my suitcase and board a flight . . . to Lake Como, Italy.

Fashion HAUTE COUTURE

(cont. from p. 22)

Within moments of the show beginning, the audience was exhilarated. A minute in, electrified. This Trend fashion reporter, for one, was right there with them. Wonder after wonder emerged from behind looming privet hedges, the models transformed into gilded delights, and we watched, mesmerized, as they made their way through the winding garden pathway, transcendent golden goddesses draped in mounds of tulle and frothy lace adorned with surprising metallic bursts. One decadent look followed another, each immaculately structured yet distinctly free, undeniably feminine yet conveying an innate strength.

The models were as eclectic as the looks, a mix of familiar icons and icons-to-be. There were staples of the royal circuit - Lady Vivian Shelbrook in a Grecian-inspired creamy white gown – and Hollywood royal Daphne LaTonya. The screen legend wore a simple lace frock and golden breastplate, the juxtaposition of delicate and fierce perfectly suited for a woman who broke sexual barriers before it was hashtag trendy. R&R muse and fashion favorite Devon Darhanger brought her usual

unapologetic glamour in a transparent kimono-shaped maxi that revealed every inch of shimmering gold flesh, exhilarating the audience as she always does.

Yet these beloved icons were not the only ones to shine (pun intended) in this Italian couture wonderland. There were new faces too, like young up- and-coming Tennessee native Mallory Hunt. An exotic cherub, her look was a standout. The fresh-faced, willowy brunette elicited excited whispers from the audience in her first haute runway show. Pretty sure it won't be her last...