



Jacket (\$2,150) and dress
(\$1,885), **Lanvin**. *Miami*
Design District, 107 NE
39th St., 305-864-4250;
lanvin.com

OPPOSITE PAGE: Embroidered
dress, **Valentino** (\$17,500).
Bal Harbour Shops, 9700
Collins Ave., 305-867-1215;
valentino.com



STATUS SYMBOL

With a hit TV show, two movies this year, and the paparazzi documenting her every move, It girl Ashley Benson morphs into Hollywood's elite.

by PATTY ADAMS MARTINEZ photography by RANDALL SLAVIN

It used to be you knew you had made it in Hollywood when your agent called with the news that you were starring in a TV show or had landed a huge part in a movie. But these days, you know you're on the A-list when Internet trolls create a death hoax about you, complete with a Facebook page for fans to leave their condolences. In November, Ashley Benson joined the ranks of other former child stars like Miley Cyrus and Britney Spears, as well as acting legends like Tom Hanks, Harrison Ford, and George Clooney, who've all suffered false demises at the hands of an anonymous keyboard.

Benson, 26, is most definitely alive and well. However, she is embracing her dark side. Not in her personal life, or even as Hanna Marin on her addictive who-done-it drama, *Pretty Little Liars*—but on her head. The golden girl has recently gone brunette, and at the moment she's driving through Beverly Hills on her way to get her formerly flaxen hair touched up to become an even richer chestnut hue. This may not sound like headline news, but in the world of TMZ and Twitter, where young starlets are monitored more closely than white-collar criminals, it definitely is.

The social media darling—with nearly 10 million followers on Instagram and nearly 4 million devotees on Twitter—is dressed down in a black sweater, jeans, and black knee-high boots as she's feverishly running errands. On the schedule after her hair appointment: a workout, a fitting for an awards show, a magazine photo shoot tomorrow, and another the following day. Then immediately after the awards show, she's off to New York. It's all just par for the course when you're an in-demand actress.

Now going into season 6B on January 12, *Pretty Little Liars*—the high school drama captivating an audience of teens and 20- and even 30-somethings—has included murder, secrets, lies, cover-ups, and most recently a transgender reveal, which has kept viewers on the edge of their seats (and live tweeting along the way). Benson feels her fashion-loving character, Hanna, has evolved more than any of her costars—including Lucy Hale, Shay Mitchell, and Troian Bellisario. “When you first meet Hanna, she's the popular girl, but in her past she was an overweight outcast until Alison (Sasha Pieterse) gives her a full makeover,” says Benson. “So when Alison disappears, Hanna becomes the school's queen bee.”

But life isn't easy in fictional high school. “Hanna went through a drinking phase, then a semi-depressed stage where she wore a lot of

black, before she finally accepted herself,” says Benson, who loves playing Hanna because she considers her “sarcastic with no filter”—much like herself off-screen.

When the show returns, there will have been a five-year time jump. “Hanna has graduated college and has moved on,” continues Benson. “She's in a new relationship and is engaged. She's very confident in who she is. She works in fashion now and is the most successful out of all of the girls.”

Spoiler alert for “Haleb,” aka Hanna and boyfriend Caleb (Tyler Blackburn), fans: The female half of that duo admits she was sad when she learned she and costar Blackburn's characters had split. “But I'm excited for people to hate that they're not together,” says Benson with a laugh. “There's going to be twists and turns in her new relationship, and Caleb's going to be there. He's very much a part of her life. Fans are going to be surprised at how everything has turned out, but I think it will be a fun journey for them.”

Benson, an Anaheim, California, native, started dancing competitively in ballet, jazz, and hip-hop when she was just 4 years old. By age 8, she was modeling for the Ford Modeling Agency in print ads, and at 9 she landed her first commercial, a TV spot for Disneyland, her very first professional acting audition. “I loved being on-set and never wanted to leave, and I have loved being on-set ever since,” says Benson, who admits she was one of those precocious children who practiced her Oscars speech in her bedroom starting at age 10.

At 14, she signed a three-year contract with *Days of Our Lives*, and at 18, the actress—who grew up idolizing the likes of Scarlett Johansson, Michelle Williams, Natalie Portman, and Meryl Streep—starred in the third straight-to-video sequel to *Bring It On*, called *Bring It On: In It to Win It*, which might as well be Benson's life motto. “Once I set my sights on something, I really do everything in my power to achieve it,” says the admittedly type-A thespian.

That includes being on a hit TV show; *Pretty Little Liars* is ABC Family's number-one series of all time, and since its debut in 2010, it has been the subject of over 100 million tweets.

Benson's no stranger to rejection, however. “I was just told I was too fat for a part,” she reveals half-bewildered, half-upset. “I'm a size 2! I cried for 30 minutes, but then you have to let it roll off your shoulders or it could cause a serious eating disorder. A lot of people in this industry hear they need to lose weight more times than they should. It does make you stronger, though. Because if you let that affect you, you can't be in this industry—you'd go crazy.”

Scarf (worn as headpiece), **Mulberry** (\$395), mulberry.com





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IN MY POWER TO
ACHIEVE IT.”

Dress, Thakoon (\$1,190).
thakoon.com. Armory large
ring, Atelier Swarovski by
Fredrikson Stallard (\$300).
734 Lincoln Road, Miami
Beach, 305-538-4877;
swarovski.com

OPPOSITE PAGE: Jacket,
Isabel Marant (\$1,735).
isabelmarant.com. Kelly
one-piece swimsuit, Onia
(\$195). Intermix, Bal Harbour
Shops, 9700 Collins Ave.,
305-993-1232;
intermixonline.com

BEAUTY: Bumble and bumble
Dryspun Finish (4 oz. for \$30)
and Thickening Hairspray
(8 oz. for \$29). Brownes
Merchants & Trading Co.,
1688 Jefferson Ave., Miami
Beach, 305-538-7544;
brownesbeauty.com. Dior
DiorSkin Nude (\$50),
Diorblush in Mimi Bronze
(\$43), Diorshow Mascara in
Pro Black (\$28), and Rouge
Dior in Trompe L'oeil (\$35).
Saks Fifth Avenue, Dadeland
Mall, 7687 Kendall Dr., Miami,
305-662-8655; *saks.com*

Unrealistic beauty ideals are why Benson recently spoke out on social media about the dangers of Photoshop. “I saw photos from a shoot of myself just the other day and thought, What the hell? That doesn’t even look like me! I was so disappointed,” she says. “I hate to think that girls are like, ‘She’s so skinny! Her skin is so perfect! I have pimples just like they do.’” To prove it, the outspoken actress posted a photo of herself with dots of zit cream on her face on Instagram. Why? “Because I wanted to show people I’m not perfect—no one is.”

While she has achieved great success at a young age, unlike other child stars who have been in the headlines more for arrests and bad behavior than career milestones, Benson has never taken her eyes off her work. She can empathize with those who have gotten caught up in the fame, fortune, and pressure that come along with it, though. “I definitely see why some people can go a little nuts,” she says. “Being successful at such a young age—and I feel I never got to that level, but I’ve seen friends who have—is very difficult because you’re being told yes a thousand times more than you’re being told no. You’re making a lot of money, there are a lot of temptations, and there are no consequences no matter what you’re doing.”

Benson, who *The Daily Mail* recently reported looked “worse for wear” leaving The Nice Guy bar in West Hollywood, is not saying she’s a saint. “It’s fun to have drinks with friends, but I would never want to do anything that would sabotage my career,” she emphasizes. “I’d rather have dinner and drinks at someone’s house than go batshit crazy in public. It’s not my scene.”

She is living the glamorous life, though, no matter where she is—including Miami. “I flew there for a photo shoot once and brought Selena Gomez with me,” she says nonchalantly. “We hung out on a yacht, then went to the Ultra Music Festival [where she was photographed with Ellie Goulding and Skrillex], and stayed out all night. I don’t think you could ever get bored in Miami.”

Even with her access to everything, Benson says her lifestyle is actually extremely tame compared to most 20-somethings, famous or not. In fact the actress, who grew up in a strict household with a sheriff as a grandfather, was shocked while shooting the film *Spring Breakers* in nearby St. Petersburg. “Since I’ve never been to college, I was asking everyone, ‘Is this what spring break is really like?’ But most of the people in the background shots were really there on spring break, so all of that making out and getting naked was real.”

The provocative 2012 movie, which follows a group of girls’ adventures robbing a restaurant

to pay for their beach getaway, involves drug use, violence, and Benson filming a threesome with James Franco and Vanessa Hudgens. It was quite the departure from the series that made Benson famous—and her own upbringing, for that matter.

“Once I read *Spring Breakers*, I felt like I had to do it, because I wanted to get out of my comfort zone, and I wanted people to see a different side of me,” she continues. “I knew I was taking a risk, but I didn’t think it was one that would damage my career.” And she was right. *Pretty Little Liars* has only become more popular, which has opened up doors in the movie world as well. But with the series likely ending after its seventh season, Benson feels “it’s time,” she says. “I really want to move on in my career and dive into more great film parts.”

To that note, she has a small part coming up in this year’s *Elvis & Nixon* as an airline stewardess opposite *Boardwalk Empire*’s Michael Shannon as Elvis. Then she has a bigger role in the coming-of-age drama *Chronically Metropolitan*, where she stars as a New York gallerista whose ex (played by *Red Riding Hood*’s Shiloh Fernandez) returns to the Big Apple to win her back just as she’s about to marry someone else.

Now that the self-described “shy girl with a fear of public situations” is so recognizable, Benson has to be extra careful of what she does while out and about, because she’s not only getting photographed on red carpets wearing Dolce & Gabbana, or even just by the paparazzi. “With everyone having a camera on their phones and Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Vine, every moment of your life can be documented by anyone who happens to see you,” she says. “It’s annoying, but it comes with the job.”

Dealing with Internet rumors is unfortunately part of the job as well—including false stories that she was pregnant or that she’s dated various male *Pretty Little Liars* costars (rumors that are not true—she hasn’t dated any of them). The latest tabloid fodder had her dating *Twilight* star Taylor Lautner one week and actor-musician Nat Wolff soon after. “I’ve known Taylor since he was 12 years old, and he’s one of my best friends, and Nat is a good friend, too,” says Benson, who previously dated Justin Bieber’s stylist, Ryan Good, but now reveals she’s more likely to be cuddled up with her Brussels griffon dog, Walter, and her Maltese-shih tzu, Olive, than any guy. “Every time [the press says I’m dating one of my friends], we text each other like, ‘Ugh, did you see this?’ It’s almost a joke at this point. The press makes everyone’s life out to be much more exciting than it really is. Trust me.” **OD**



Top and culottes (prices on request), **Bottega Veneta**.
Bal Harbour Shops, 9700
Collins Ave., 305-864-6247;
bottegabeneta.com. Woven
metal bracelet, **Oscar de la
Renta** (\$390). Bal Harbour
Shops, 305-868-7986;
oscardelarenta.com

“I WANTED TO
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NOT PERFECT
—NO ONE IS.”





Dress, **Fendi** (\$2,100). *Saks Fifth Avenue, Bal Harbour Shops, 9700 Collins Ave., 305-865-1100; saks.com.* Platform sandals, **Michael Kors Collection** (\$795). *Bal Harbour Shops, 305-864-4144; michaelkors.com*

Photography by **Randall Slavin/ArtMix Creative**
Fashion styling by **Giolliosa & Natalie Fuller/sisterstyling.com**
Hair by **Bridget Brager** for **Bumble and bumble** at **The Wall Group**
Makeup by **Todd Delano** using **Diorskin Nude** at **Crosby Carter Management**
Photo assistants: **Rene Gomez and Annie Shak**
Shot on location at **Simon House**