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is good publicity...

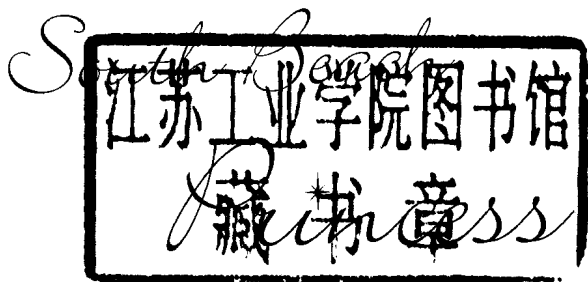
Secrets of a South Beach

PRINCESS

MARY KENNEDY

Author of *Tales of a
Hollywood Gossip Queen*

Secrets of a



Mary Kennedy



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*Secrets of a
South Beach Princess*

For Katie

Acknowledgments

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One

"You look amazing. Really hot. You've got it, babe. You are somethin' else!"

I didn't even turn my head as the photographer's voice drifted over me, soft and seductive as a tropical breeze. The words didn't make my insides go quivery, or my heart ping even a tiny bit faster inside my chest, because the sexy voice didn't match the fire-hydrant body. What a disappointment!

Ron Gerber may have had a voice that could drive girls wild, but he was actually a rumpled little man, short and middle-aged, a dead ringer for my father's ancient accountant. If I closed my eyes, I could pretend he was Brad Pitt, I thought wryly. The trouble was, it would take a tremendous leap of the imagination to believe in that

weird little fantasy, and my energy was already zapped by the ninety-five degree Florida heat. The humidity was sky high, the dew point was off the charts, and the air was so thick it was like breathing cotton.

Not only was Ron an annoying little munchkin, he was the biggest slave driver I've ever met. He'd kept up a non-stop patter since we'd started the poolside photo shoot a couple of hours earlier, presumably to encourage me to work even harder.

What was with the crazy chatter? Was he trying to help me relax, to put me at ease? Did he really think I was feeling a little nervous or uneasy, because I wasn't a professional model? Or maybe he was the one who was feeling a tad anxious and uncertain, a little out of his league? Maybe that was the problem!

Note to self: Remember to tell Murray, my new publicist, to puleeze stop scheduling back-to-back photo shoots! Ever since I landed a feature in *Teen Vogue* last year, Dad had decided I needed a "professional" managing my publicity. That's how Murray Fisher came into the picture. I thought a publicist's job was to make my life easier, but ever since I signed on with Murray, I feel like I'm running in front of a train. Dad calls him a dynamo, but I call him exhausting.

I forced my attention back to Ron, who was fiddling endlessly with the camera, muttering to himself. Ron was a freelancer for *Hot Wire*, a south Florida entertainment

magazine, and this was his first big break, a double photo spread on "South Beach Sizzles."

I had already given an interview to the dweeb writer of the piece earlier in the day, and was feeling totally tapped out. Who would ever think that talking about yourself for hours on end could be so exhausting?

"Amber, can you give me that Princess Di look? You know, sort of demure and sexy at the same time?"

"I think so." I tried not to grimace as I shifted my weight, the skin on my bare feet burning from the blazing tiles. My thigh muscles were on fire, and I could feel a trickle of sweat running down my back as I leaned out over the pool. I was standing at the edge, toes curled, looking as if I was going to dive into the fabulous blue water any second. If only!

The late afternoon sun was still bouncing off the creamy tiles surrounding the pool, and the famous Florida humidity hadn't let up. We had done shot after shot in the blistering heat, and still Ron wasn't satisfied.

"Remember what I told you? Duck your head, lick your lips, and then look up at the camera. But just with the eyes; don't tilt the chin up. Definitely don't tilt the chin up."

"No chin up," I repeated, dutifully.

"Right. Good girl." I almost expected him to pat me on the head like a well-trained Labrador. "Like I said, that's not a good angle for you. But with the chin tucked down,

and the eyes up—that's perfection!" He kissed his fingertips like a cheesy waiter in a French restaurant presenting a soufflé.

"Fine, I understand. Let's just get the shot," I said, wishing he would hurry up and leave.

He raised the camera and then lowered it for a last bit of advice. "This time, when you look at the camera, put everything you've got into it. Really project. Pro—ject. Let it all come out through those gorgeous eyes of yours. Just say to yourself, 'I'm hot, I'm sexy, I'm perfect!' It'll show in the eyes, believe me. It always does." His voice was appropriately solemn, as if he were Yoda explaining the secrets of the universe to Luke Skywalker.

"Okay, I got it." I hesitated. "But why am I looking up at the camera? Wouldn't I be looking down at the water? If I was getting ready to dive in, I mean?"

Ron lowered his camera again and gave me a disgusted look. "That's not what I'm going for," he explained with heavy patience. "I want it to look like you were just about to dive in the pool and then . . . bingo! Something distracts you and you look up at the camera."

Something distracts me? What, like a macaw suddenly drops down from the sky and lands on my head? Orlando Bloom strolls across the deck in a Speedo? This guy was starting to annoy me!

"Okay, whatever you say." I let a little sigh escape, realizing this was a losing battle. A no-win situation as my fa-

ther would say. I took a deep breath, determined to get this over with as quickly as I could.

I bent from the waist and shot my arms straight out over my head, the inside of my elbows touching my ears. I looked like I was ready to do a killer jackknife. My legs trembled from the strain, my toes were frying on the hot concrete as they curled over the edge. If I moved one millimeter, I knew I'd be in serious danger of toppling head-first into the pool.

What a shot that would be! The paparazzi would love it and I'd probably get a mention on *Access Hollywood* from Billy Bush. But the downside is the tabloids might pick up the story and put an awful spin on it, like "Hotel Heiress Falls in Pool After Downing Too Many Jell-O Shots in the Tropical Sun."

It wouldn't matter how many times I denied it, people would still think it was true. The funny thing is, I don't even drink alcohol, can't stand the taste, but the "Jell-O shots" story would follow me forever. Sometimes the wilder, more improbable the story, the harder it clings. A story doesn't have to be true to make the news, it just has to be interesting. Or better yet, scandalous.

"Remember the lips, Amber, the lips!" Ron yelled. "Duck the chin, lick the lips, then look at the camera!"

Oh yeah, the lips. *Duck, lick, look*, I repeated like a mantra. *Duck, lick, look*.

"Okay, that's it," Ron said excitedly. "Hold the pose,

Amber, just like that. Perfect! Don't move an inch. I just have to finish this roll and change the film. It'll only take a second, hon." Ron darted around the gawking tourists to get a few quick shots before dropping to his knees and fiddling with the camera.

"Ron, I—"

"Don't move, don't talk, don't do anything."

I heard Ron cursing softly to himself as he jammed a new roll of film in the camera. Maybe he wasn't enjoying this either. I sensed someone coming very close to my left elbow but didn't dare turn my head.

They say everyone has a "personal zone" of space surrounding them, and I don't like anyone invading mine. An acting coach once told me that I have a very large zone, meaning that I need lots of space around me to feel secure. Maybe it's come from living in the limelight for such a long time. I tend to feel threatened, even invaded, when someone gets too close, and I move fast to put up an invisible wall around me.

"Hey, isn't it hard to stand still like that? You look like you're gonna fall in the pool. It must be hard to pose like that. You look like one of those department store dummies, you know, mannequins, or whatever they call them."

I sneaked a peek, just in time to see Ron scowling at the gawky kid in biker shorts and blinding Hawaiian T-shirt. "Don't talk to her, okay? She has to concentrate. We're trying to do a photo shoot here, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Hey, man, chill out, I was just being friendly." The dude held his hands out in front of him, palms up, in a "don't-shoot-me" gesture.

"And don't block the sun," Ron growled, getting back into position.

I didn't say a word, knowing Surfer-Boy would stare hard for a moment or two, and then move on. The trick was to stay absolutely still and ignore him. Sure enough, a few seconds later, I heard the distinctive "ping" of the diving board as he moved past me and plunged into the deep end of the hotel swimming pool.

"Keep holding that pose, hon, I need to add a filter." Ron dropped to his knees, fiddling in his camera bag.

"Okay, okay," I said through gritted teeth. How hard could it be to take a picture? I wondered. My stomach was cramping, my leg muscles were about to give out, and I was sure I was going to fall headfirst into the shimmering pool any second.

"Ohmigod, is that her? Britney Spears? It is! It's gotta be her! Except I thought she had an ivy tattoo on her ankle? Or was it a heart tattoo on her shoulder? I never can remember."

A pair of excited high-pitched voices, punctuated by girlish laughter, and suddenly I was enveloped in a suffocating cloud of Hawaiian Tropic. The teenage girls, whoever they were, must have taken a bath in the stuff, I thought, trying not to gag. They stood next to me for a

moment, dripping chlorinated water on my feet, while they debated my identity and finger-combed their streaky, sopping wet hair.

"I think Britney's prettier," one of them said thoughtfully. "And Britney has a cuter nose. There's something about her profile that doesn't look right." She paused. "But it could be her, I guess, even though her stomach looks a little puffy in that suit," she added pointedly. *My stomach looks puffy?* I winced, unconsciously sucking in my gut. "Actually, I think it is her," she said finally.

Do they think I'm deaf? I wondered. I held my pose, staring into the pool, trying to tune out their mindless chatter and ignore the sting of their insulting remarks.

"Hey, you two!" Ron yelled, waving his arm like a traffic cop. "Get out of the shot!" The girls stared at Ron, and then giggled and nudged each other. Ron's face was tomato red and he looked like he was going to have a heart attack any second.

"Oh, chill out, don't get your panties in a twist," one of them drawled. "We'll be out of here in a sec." She let her eyes rove over me from head to toe before turning to her friend.

"No, that's not Britney, you idiot, it's definitely the other one," she said decisively. She sounded smug, sure of herself, and probably read *Teen People* cover to cover every week.

"What other one?"

"You know, the one who used to have the cute husband. Jessica Simpson. The one who didn't know the difference between chicken and tuna fish."

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. *Jessica Simpson? Wrong again!* I nearly said. *Try Amber Fielding.*

I'm surprised they didn't recognize me. In fact, I'll probably never have the luxury of being anonymous again. Murray (the "dynamo") had snared a full-page feature about me in the Style section of the Sunday *Miami Herald*, and it had created some major buzz.

Ever since the edition had hit the street that morning, the phone had been ringing off the hook, the invitations to charity galas had tripled, and a couple of tourists had recognized me as I zipped down Collins Ave in my white T-Bird convertible.

But more importantly, I was starting to get offers of "celebrity endorsements," and my father was sifting through them very carefully, with Murray's help. Dad's in the hotel business, not the entertainment business, but he understands money, and knows how to spot a good deal. He also knows how to protect me from scam artists, and there are lots of those around in glitzy Miami Beach.

An hour later, I finally got rid of Ron, took a quick plunge in the pool, and sprawled, exhausted, into a beach chair. I felt a shadow on my face, and wondered if yet another "number one fan" was standing there, ogling me.

No sense in sitting up, I decided. If you sit up, they al-

ways pester you for an autograph or a picture. I gave a tiny sigh and wriggled my toes in contentment. Ah, the curse of being famous.

I kept my eyes squinted tightly shut under my oversized Jackie-O Chanel shades and fiddled with the earbuds on my iPod. J.Lo was belting out a salsa number, and I didn't want to miss a single note. I was basking in the sun by the Italian-tiled hotel pool, just like a lizard, buffeted by warmth and sunshine.

It couldn't get any better than this.

It was a typical June day. The sky was an aqua blue, and the sound of the pounding surf across the boardwalk was soothing, almost mesmerizing. One of the things I love about living in South Beach is that you can hear the ocean all day long. It's a backdrop to every conversation, like someone has written the perfect musical score to accompany a movie of your life.

The only thing separating The Fielding Hotel from the Atlantic Ocean is Collins Ave, also known as A1A. My father recognized a prime piece of real estate when he bought the Venetian-style hotel ten years ago and did it up in a trendy Art Deco style with lots of neon trim and *Miami Vice* pastels.

We live in the penthouse suite, an amazing place with glass walls overlooking the ocean, an atrium filled with tropical plants, a wave pool, and a Jacuzzi. When I take the private elevator up to the top floor, I feel just like a

princess (which happens to be my father's nickname for me).

I was so relaxed from the sun, my bones felt like they had liquified. It was too much trouble to move, or even open my eyes. I let myself sink back into my blue-and-white chaise lounge, and pretended I was floating on the glassy sea, wondering if my secret admirer would get bored and move away.

"Love the suit. Didn't know they made them that small."

Eww. What a creepy thing to say. I decided to ignore this guy, whoever he was. I didn't even do slit eyes, to scope him out. Instead, I kept my eyes tightly shut.

"You must have had it hand made." He didn't give up easily, that's for sure. Funny, it sounded like he had moved a little farther away. That was odd. The brave ones always come closer; they want to talk to you, touch you, become your new best friend.

"I'd love to get a picture of that."

I just bet he would! So he liked the way I looked in my bathing suit and he wanted a picture. Big deal. Who didn't? I was wearing my new black La Playa bikini, and had slathered myself from head to toe with Bain de Soleil, hoping to get a perfect St. Tropez tan.

I decided to play dead. That's the only way to get rid of the really persistent ones. A long minute passed, and then a strange request came from The Voice.