

# THE SURROGATE

By Lynn Katz

## PROLOGUE

Florida was her first mistake. It was impossible to ignore those cheap hotel prices. And the low airfare. Besides—with a finicky window air conditioner in her one-bedroom Hartford apartment, she thought, *August in Key West might be nice.*

Ernest Hemingway was her second mistake. In all fairness to Hemingway, there were other writers' homes she might have chosen that particular summer. And she could have avoided Key West by following that writer's footsteps across the Atlantic Ocean all the way to Paris.

In the end, it came down to mistakes more substantial than Jenn Cooper's choice of summer vacation and decisions more consequential than any dead writer's house. In the end, she had only herself to blame.

## CHAPTER 1

The heavy rain had turned into a persistent drizzle by afternoon. I abandoned Duval Street for the relative calm of a side road and meandered through unpaved back alleyways. Random raindrops made dents in the puddles. As I closed my umbrella and pulled at the hood of my rain poncho, the ding of a bell pierced the thick air. Before I had time to heed the warning, a bicycle flew by, and an arm brushed against my shoulder. Losing my balance, I slid sideways into a muddy rut in the road, somehow managing to remain upright. *Damn!*

"Sorry," a man called, his bicycle brakes screeching. He disembarked, turned his bike around, and trudged closer to where I stood in my footbath of warm rainwater. "Hey, Jennifer. Whatcha still doing here? I thought ya left town," the man said, staring at me, squinting. "Almost didn't recognize you in that. . . whatever it is you're wearing," he said, laughing.

I squinted back at him. Did I know the man? He didn't seem familiar. Wedged firmly between the tacky mud beneath my feet and curiosity, I stood in that puddle racking my brain. *Who was this man?* He stared directly at me as though we were old friends. He was about my height, perhaps in his forties despite his leathery skin. He wore a baseball cap, cargo shorts, and a red, rain parka. I was certain I'd never seen the man before.

He tilted his head. "You okay, Jennifer?" The only person who'd ever called me Jennifer had been my mother who passed away years earlier. My high school students called me Miss Cooper. My work colleagues referred to me as Jenn. Never Jennifer. So, who was this guy? "What are you up to?" he

asked. I had to say something, but for the life of me, I couldn't come up with the right words or any words for that matter.

I studied his face, looking for clues. I tried to lift one foot, embarrassed by the sucking sound of my sandal pulling away from the mud. I considered asking the man his name. I should have cleared things up right away, corrected his mistake, told him that my name was Jenn Cooper not someone he thought he knew. Someone else named Jennifer.

At the time, standing there in the alleyway, my ankles encased in an unforgiving mixture of dirt and water, fusing me into a state of inertia, it seemed easier to answer the man's question. I had no energy for a conversation about mistaken identity. And yet, I struggled to articulate a reasonable answer to his question. What *was* I doing here?

"I'm leaving in a few days. I need to get home," I said. Not knowing what else to say, I erred on the side of the truth. "School starts in less than two weeks." That should have set him straight, or at least it should have helped him figure out he had the wrong woman, the wrong Jennifer.

"That's too bad. Hope this visit wasn't a complete waste of time for ya." He smiled, knowingly. "I thought you'd try to get in touch with me again. You look exhausted," he said. "Call when you get back. We should talk, okay?" Then the stranger on the bicycle winked at me and waited for a response. I had to say something. Anything to end this nonsensical small talk.

"Well, good to see you," I said, clearing my throat, glancing at an invisible watch on my wrist, willing the man to leave me in peace. He shook his head, peering at me from beneath the brim of his baseball cap. As he took off on his bicycle, he waved goodbye and rang his rusty old bicycle bell again like a six-year-old child. I watched him weave around ruts and puddles, disappearing, and then reappearing again, narrowly missing pedestrians and a few random Key West roosters as he made his way down the unpaved road.

I tried to shake off a sudden wave of panic and confusion brought on by my strange encounter with the man on a bicycle. I pushed forward and continued wandering the familiar Key West neighborhoods. My legs ached from walking miles in thinly soled sandals now soaked and muddy. I desperately needed a new pair. First, I needed to rest my blistered feet and shrug off the weight of dread pressing on my shoulders like an invisible barbell.

The rain picked up, and again I covered my head with my thin poncho. My hair stuck to my damp neck. I reached inside the hood, trying to smooth the frizzled ends of hair against my sweaty scalp. As I traipsed up and down the streets of Key West's commercial district, I glanced at the shop windows, half-heartedly searching for a new pair of sandals and some flint to spark my creative fires. Two weeks in Florida and I hadn't managed to write one word, not a sentence, not even an outline for the novel I promised myself I'd start this time. It was supposed to be a working vacation, and I'd squandered the time.

I stopped in front of a gallery and glanced at my reflection in the glass window. I almost didn't recognize the ragged woman looking back at me, tired, haggard, lost. I pulled the hood of my poncho away from my head again, scrounged in my straw bag until I found an old scrunchie, and deftly smoothed the hair off my neck into a quasi-ponytail, as if that might help my mood. Meanwhile, the Old Town neighborhood started to crowd up, as boisterous partiers gave up on capturing another picture-perfect sunset at Mallory Square.

I tried to shake my encounter with the stranger who acted as though he knew me. I'd never considered myself an irresponsible drinker, not even during my college days. But I wondered, *Was it possible I had too much to drink one night? Was it possible I had no memory of a drunken encounter with a random guy? Was this what a blackout felt like?*

But why did he refer to my trip as a potential waste of time? The man's question felt like a slap across my face. "You need a thicker skin," my mother used to tell me. Why did I care what some stranger thought? Why did I care what anyone thought, for that matter? My dead mother. My dead father. What did it matter? And yet I heard my father's voice poking at me from beyond the grave. "Those who can do, those who can't, teach." Determined to prove the dead man wrong, I'd wasted another summer vacation. Key West, Florida. Another town, another writer's home. Another futile attempt to begin drafting that novel I'd dreamed about for so many years.

I limped down a narrow street, wincing from the sting of blistered heels. I had to get off my feet, and so I stepped into one of the less crowded bars. Aptly named The Back Alley, the place had a few empty tables and plenty of vacant stools at the bar.

I collapsed onto the stool at the end of the bar. Slipping my wet sandals off my feet, I closed my eyes and sighed at the feeling of release. I startled when I sensed someone sliding onto the vacant stool adjacent to mine. I glanced down at long, tanned legs, and I angled my body away from the sudden intruder. I smelled her cloying perfume suggesting roses and desperation. I was tempted to move to the other end of the bar, but a bartender slid a menu in front of me and I felt trapped. I pushed the menu away. "No thank you. I'll just have a drink."

"So, what will it be tonight?" I ordered a Key Lime Martini and swiveled my stool away from the woman next to me. I focused on the singer strumming his guitar on the small stage.

When my drink arrived, I leaned into the martini glass, stealing several swallows of the foamy tartness, and then I took a few more sips. I decided I liked this pretentious drink. I licked the sweet and sour taste from my lips. Not that I'd ever been the martini-type. But this was Key West, and I believed in the adage *When in Rome*. I thought about visiting Rome someday soon. Or possibly Paris. Hemingway loved Paris.

I pulled a journal out of my soggy, straw purse and opened it to the next blank page. I scrawled reminders: *Buy Key Lime juice. Paris next summer?* I'd begun a new journal when I first arrived in Key West. A to-do list and a resting place for images, character sketches, story ideas for my novel. Possibly a final resting place. A graveyard of ideas. Entries separated by bullets. Pages and pages of bullets.

As I scribbled, I couldn't shake the presence of the woman next to me. I felt her eyes drilling holes into the side of my face. I slipped my journal and pen back into my bag and gulped down the rest of my first martini. The bartender caught my eye and raised his brows communicating in that universal bartender language. I nodded yes. I wanted another drink. I promised myself I'd slow down. I'd take my time with the next martini.

Along with her perfume, I smelled the loneliness drifting from the woman sitting next to me, hungry for conversation, preparing to pounce. I turned back to the singer on the stage and then risked a furtive glimpse in the woman's direction. Just a glance. The glance became a double-take, and then I found myself staring too. It was rude, but I couldn't look away.

I felt the blood draining from my face, and the sweat on my neck turned icy cold. I blinked my eyes repeatedly, waiting for my brain to catch up with the image before me. I continued staring into the woman's face, a complete stranger sitting next to me in a random bar in Key West, a few days before the end of another disappointing summer vacation. But hers was no stranger's face. It was my own face. My mirror image. Except for one problem: I wasn't looking into a mirror.