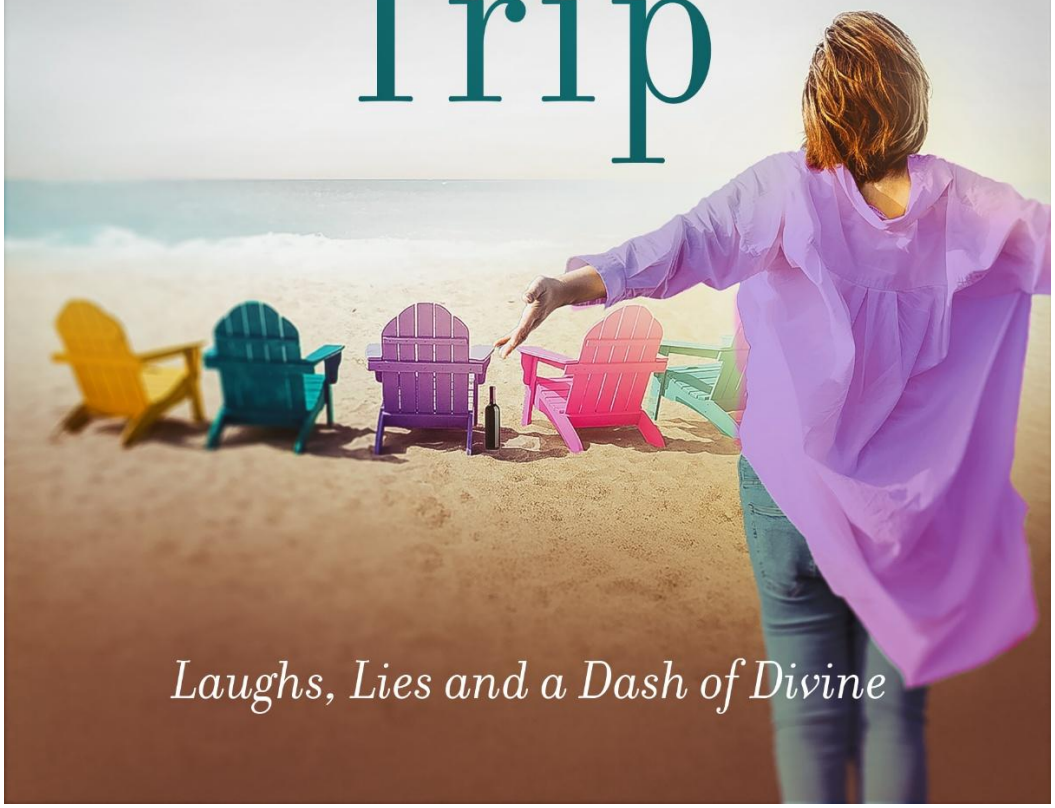
SPEAKER HALL OF FAME™, HUMORIST, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

Jane Jenkins Herlong

Beach Trip



Laughs, Lies and a Dash of Divine

Author's Note

April 3, 2022, was supposed to be a celebration—my birthday.

Instead, it became a blur of fluorescent lights and hospital hallways. Thomas and I had been in three emergency rooms at three hospitals, all within a few days. He'd been hanging upside down on his inversion table when a searing pain slammed into his head—sudden, sharp, and far worse than any headache.

The good news? No serious damage.

The bad news? I had to say, for what felt like the hundredth time, "Thomas, you are not Batman. And you are definitely not twelve. Please stop hanging upside down on that thing."

Then came the call.

"Jane … Mary died in her sleep."

The air went still. My heart dropped straight to the soles of my feet.

Mary, my dear friend and beach buddy of over forty years was suddenly gone.

No time to cry. No space to process.

Not then.

But maybe now—four years later.

Mary Holmes Johnston. Every page holds a piece of her joy, her grace, her quiet strength, and the wisdom she generously shared.

I'm writing this story because I miss Mary, plain and simple. What started as stories turned into something more: a love letter made of laughter, heartache, forgiveness, and the kind of friendship that doesn't fade, even after goodbye.

Yes, some parts are exaggerated, but only because I wanted Mary's beautiful qualities to shine a little brighter, her wisdom to ring a little louder, and her joy to linger a little longer. That's the gift of humor; it lets us hold on to what matters, even when life tries to take it away.

At its heart, this is the story of a beach trip shared by five girlfriends who met in college. And yes, it's a love story, but not the romantic kind. It's a heart-connection that shows up, holds space, and never leaves. But beneath the chaos, there was something deeply real.

It's messy. It's funny. It's tender.

And like any good girls' trip, it became exactly what they didn't know they needed.

You won't meet the girls all at once, but little by little, they'll unfold like a well-worn beach towel. One misplaces more than her sunglasses these days. Other moves through the world with a quiet bravery, holding tightly to moments others take for granted. One still sets an extra place on the table. Another tiptoes through a

marriage that no longer feels like home. And then there's the preacher's wife—sassy, sanctified, and unpredictable enough to keep the rest of them from falling apart.

This is more than a girls' trip. It's a reckoning wrapped in laughter, carried on ocean breezes. So, as you read, think about your own beach trips—the sunburns and laughs, yes—but also the difficult truths that rise up when the tide pulls everything else away.

Because of this weekend? It's not just about memories. It's about mending.

Chapter One

Mary Jo eased her Bronco past the old convenience store off Highway 501, its rusted Sinclair dinosaur sign swaying in the wind. Funny … once the green logo gleamed like new. She pictured the Second Floor Girls piled into her Camaro, barefoot and sunburned, laughing too loud as they dashed inside for cheap beer like it was a rite of passage.

That first beach trip—Lord, they'd worn that story out for thirty years. And it never got old.

The memory played in her mind like an eight-track stuck on repeat. The flashing blue lights, the officer leaning into the window.

"You drinkin'?" he asked.

And Bertie, quick as lightning, "You buyin'?"

Somehow, they got off with a warning—bolder, luckier, sure the good times would never end.

Mary Jo knuckled her eye, clearing her vision. Forever had ended too soon. Last year's trip blurred beneath a cloud of grief. Charles was gone. A heart attack. No warning. No time. Her world spun off its axis. More than once, she'd stop at green lights, plow through red ones. Couldn't focus. Couldn't breathe. The weight of loss pressed down on everything.

Her counselor had said, "One day you'll laugh through the tears." And eventually, she would—at the vet's office of all places. After dropping off her oversized German Shepherd to be neutered, the vet called her back into the room.

"Mary Jo, I can't charge you for this. This dog's already been fixed."

She squinted at the poor thing and deadpanned, "Well, mind double-checkin'? He sure doesn't act like it."

That was the first time laughter truly returned. Like Charles, Fritz had a bit of horny in him. Humor hadn't left her, it had just taken the long way home.

The day before leaving for their annual beach trip, Mary Jo had held up her swimsuit and chuckled. What used to be a bikini was now a full-on cover-up. Lands' End, page 62. Mercy, she used to shop on page 15. She gave her backside a playful pinch and shook her head. *If the Lord wanted me to have a Brazilian booty, He'd have mailed a coupon for a Delta voucher.*

But humor wasn't the only thing she had packed. Before zipping her suitcase, she walked into the dining room and looked at Charles' portrait. Silent words rose from her soul.

Charles … I've held on to you for so long. Through vows, through memories, through silence. But Jackie—one of my Second Floor Girls, you know the one—she needs me. Not the half-alive version I've been. The full Mary Jo. The one who laughs, who lifts, who walks beside her. She needs that Mary Jo. Maybe even all the way to the end.

She steadied herself with a chair. I don't want to let you go, my dear Charles. But maybe … I need to let you let me go.

Because that's what the Second Floor Girls—or SFG as they called it—did. Held space for each other, one friend at a time. They stayed close when the world went quiet.

Soft as sea foam. Steady as grace.

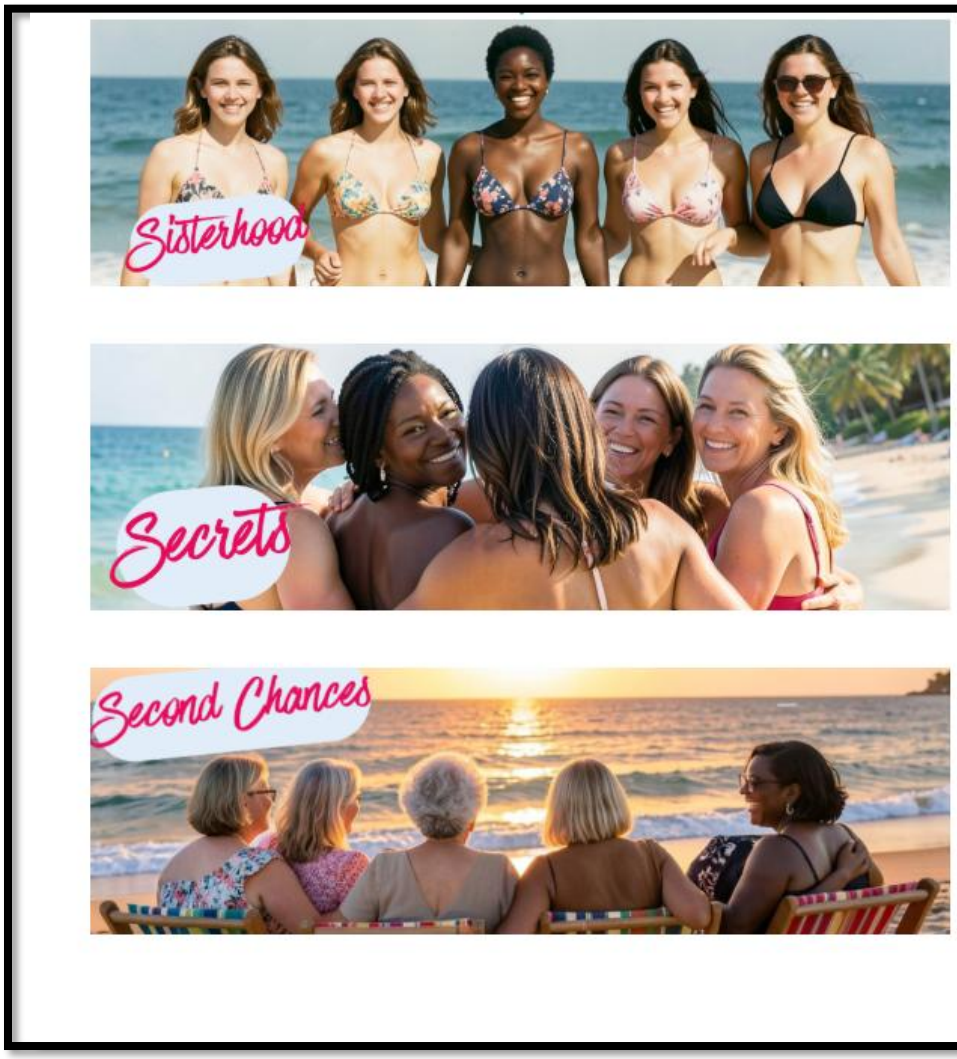
This year, though, Mary Jo wasn't sure grace and laughter would be enough. Jackie hadn't said much since the diagnosis. Not about her future. Not about anything.

So Mary Jo had slipped something extra into her suitcase—their senior yearbook. Just in case Jackie needed to see the words they once wrote to each other. Words Mary Jo couldn't yet say out loud.

Aiming the Bronco toward the exit ramp, she gripped the wheel tighter and whispered into the hum of the highway, "This year … we make space in our place for wounds to heal."

To order on Amazon, follow this link-

Meet the Sisterhood



About the Author

Jane Jenkins Herlong journeyed from her family's South Carolina tomato fields to the Miss America stage, Radio City Music Hall, and SiriusXM Comedy—plus a host of national streaming platforms. A Hall of Fame Speaker and award-winning author, Jane delivers clean comedy wrapped in unforgettable stories that uplift, entertain, and inspire audiences of all kinds.

Her book *Sweet Tea Secrets from the Deep-Fried South*—one of her five titles—landed on Cracker Barrel shelves nationwide. Once labeled dyslexic, Jane learned to turn every "no" into a "next," proving that humor, grit, and Lowcountry charm can take you farther than you ever dreamed.

Beach Trip, her debut novel, celebrates sisterhood, sass, and the strong women who show up, stand firm, and never let go.

For speaking information, visit **www.JaneHerlong.com** or email **ane@janeherlong.com**.