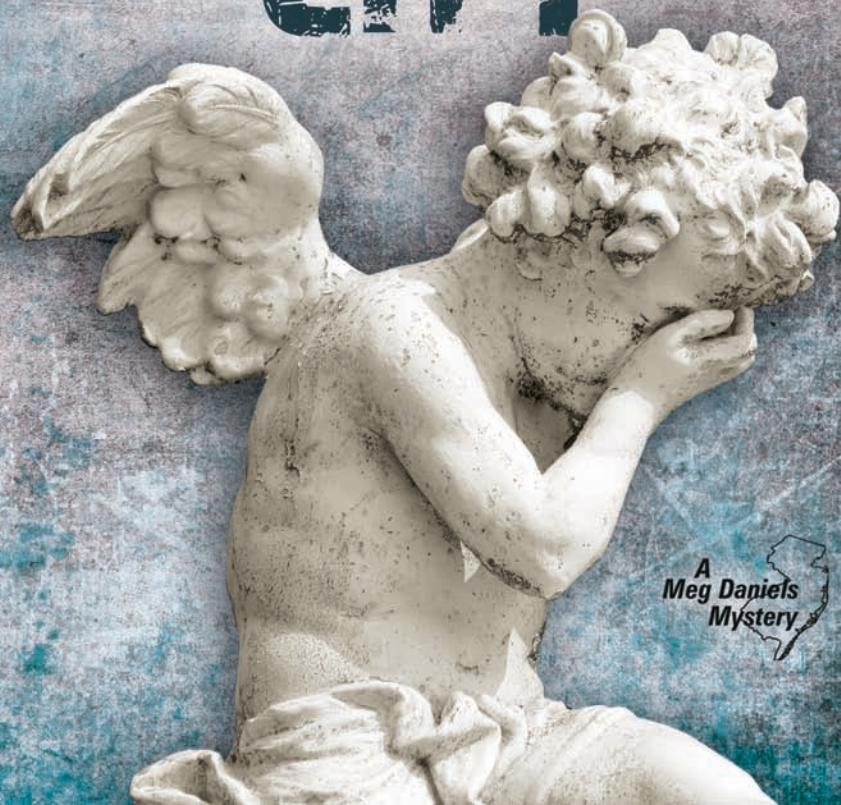


From the Author of *Wrong Beach Island*

JANE KELLY

**MISSING YOU  
IN ATLANTIC  
CITY**



A  Meg Daniels  
Mystery

# Chapter I

Johnny Boyle was not Italian but he wanted to be. Not just Italian, a specific Italian, another Jersey boy: Francis Albert Sinatra. Frank. Ol' Blue Eyes. The Chairman of the Board.

So Johnny used an Italian stage name: Johnny Angelini. The first time I saw him, he was crooning "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning" in an Atlantic City casino bar. Johnny sounded less like a Sinatra impersonator and more like an acolyte, performing in the image of his musical God. With his insouciant attitude, a classic repertoire, and a classic tuxedo, Johnny Angelini screamed Rat Pack.

When he finished singing "Come Rain or Come Shine," in chatter reminiscent of his idol, Johnny thanked the composers. Looking around the room, I was willing to bet the names Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer were lost on the patrons. For the next number, Johnny picked up the tempo, moving back and forth across the stage, assuring everyone in the audience that, despite their overwhelming indifference, he got a kick out of them.

"He's pointing at you," I said, nudging Andy.

Andy didn't even open his eyes to reply. "He points at everyone when he sings this one. I've seen him do it before."

“The microphone cord makes me nervous. I’m afraid he’ll trip over it.”  
Andy was unconcerned. “He’s a pro.”

Up on stage, Johnny ended the song without a misstep. “Thanks to Mr. Cole Porter,” Johnny said. “Stick around for another of his best when I come back.”

The audience members, probably hoping to return to the gambling tables before Johnny returned to the stage, did not appear to care. The entertainer did not appear to mind. Maybe he’d grown used to a lukewarm response to his act. I, however, could not listen to the scattered and weak applause without contrasting the fantasies of the young Johnny Boyle with the reality of the middle-aged performer. Surely he hadn’t spent hours perfecting his moves in the mirror in the hope that his reflection would be replaced by twenty people talking over his act.

“Watching people perform in places like this makes me sad,” I said. “I don’t think any singer dreams of this gig.”

Andy opened his eyes. “Not true. For one thing, it’s steady work.” Andy didn’t think that Johnny saw anything tragic in warbling American standards under the gaze of the saints, prophets, and cherubs of the fake Sistine Chapel ceiling and over the bells, whistles, and general clamor of the casino. “He has an education that could land him a high six-figure salary at a prestigious New York law firm—or at least he would have when he graduated from Yale Law twenty years ago.”

Andy’s point was that Johnny “Angelini” Boyle preferred crooning at the Artistical Hotel and Casino in Atlantic City, New Jersey, to the career of a high-powered attorney. “And it’s a credit to Johnny that the hotel has kept him on for ten years,” he said with conviction. “Management wants its customers happy.”

It seemed to me the audience wasn’t so much happy as rude. Apparently, Johnny didn’t agree. Tepid applause was still applause. The singer had a big smile on his face as he left the stage and headed our way.

“Andrea Beckino—I heard you were around, mi buiddio!”

*Why bother learning Italian when you could take perfectly good English words and Italianize them?* I wondered.

“Johnny!” Andy stood and wrapped an arm around the singer. It did not encircle the man’s entire body. Johnny wasn’t fat, just wide. Very wide.

“This is my friend, Meg Daniels.”

“Friend, eh?” Johnny raised his voice to be heard over the din that engulfed us. “I had my eye on you two romantics during my set.”

What the singer viewed as romance was actually Andy dozing on my shoulder after a twelve-hour day at his desk deep in the bowels of the Artistical. Andy wasn’t cut out for office work.

With great theatricality, the singer winked at me. “I would say that you are far more than friends.”

“Good friends,” I clarified. “For over six years now.”

Johnny had more to say on the subject but Andy interrupted. “Johnny, please sit down and chat—about something else. Buy you a drink?”

Andy pulled out a chair—just one example of the Artistical’s interpretation of 16th-century Italian seating—and Johnny dropped onto the velour seat. A waitress materialized beside him with a tumbler. I guessed two things: that the glass contained Johnny’s usual and that Johnny’s usual was whiskey with ice. Johnny drank the liquid down and began to talk, not only about something else, but about everything else.

Apparently, voice training was required to make oneself heard over the casino clatter. It also allowed Johnny to talk for long periods of time without taking a breath that would permit anyone else to get a word in edgewise. I didn’t mind. Johnny’s stories weren’t what I would call interesting, but his delivery was entertaining. Years of handling audiences, I guess.

Eventually Johnny circled back to his original topic. “So, Andy, tell me about you two.” Johnny leaned forward and winked again with theatrical exaggeration. “I recognize *amore* when I see it.”

“We both work for the Artistical’s property in the Bahamas. It’s quite the resort. I handle security, and Meg’s the VIP concierge. I was asked to come to the Atlantic City location to do a security audit, and since we don’t get a lot of celebs in the Bahamas in July and August, Meg decided to use some vacation time and join me. I’m in the middle of—”



“Yeah, security,” Johnny interrupted. “That’s something I’d like to talk to you about.”

The singer removed a Gucci wallet from his back pocket and laid it open on the faux marble tabletop. In the space where most people would store a driver’s license, Johnny kept a picture. “That’s my mama. Beautiful, wasn’t she?”

Andy picked up the billfold and studied the photo before passing it to me. The woman, wrapped in the arms of a young man, wrapped a baby in her own.

“Is this ... ?” I pointed to the baby.

“Yep. That’s me as a *bambino*, on my christening day with Mama and Papa.”

The woman in the black-and-white photo was young, or had been when wildly bouffant hairdos were in style. Her hair, as dark as Johnny’s, contrasted with her pale complexion. I suspected that her eyes, pale in the picture, were the same bright blue as her son’s. Her smile, small and tentative, made me wonder if the big hair and heavy makeup disguised a shy woman.

“She disappeared fifty years ago.” Half a century later, Johnny’s sadness at the loss of a mother he never knew percolated just under the surface. “Vanished without a trace.”

“Johnny, I am sorry.” Andy grasped his friend’s knee in that way that guys do during life’s emotional peaks—like during a missed fourth down in the closing minutes of a playoff game. “I never knew.”

“I never told.”

Neither Andy nor I asked any questions. If Johnny wanted to talk about his mother, he would. And, it turned out, he did.

“Mama was nineteen, and I was only six months old when she disappeared into thin air. She left the restaurant where she was waitressing one night in ’64 during the Democratic National Convention and hasn’t been seen since. Cops never found a trace of her. No purse. No wedding ring. No nothing.”

“It must be really hard, not knowing ...” Andy’s voice was as soft as it could be and still be heard in the noisy lounge.

“Standing on that stage, I always scan the audience hoping that one night she’ll be sitting out there. When I was a kid, I convinced myself that she’d hit her head and got amnesia and that all she’d have to do was see me and she’d remember everything.”

I passed the photo back to Johnny and he stared at it as he spoke. “My Papa—Andy, you met my father once or twice—he’s always been convinced she was murdered. He’s dying now. He had cancer before, and we thought he had it beaten, but it looks like it’s back.” Johnny shook his head. “He won’t consider treatment this time. He won’t even go to the doctor to find out for sure. He lies on the couch all day, ready to die. And now that he knows he’s going, after years of not talking about Mama at all, I hear him crying over her. I know he feels responsible. Time and time again, I hear him say, ‘I shouldn’t have let him get away with it.’”

Andy asked the obvious question. “Do you know who he’s talking about?”

“I ask, but he says he doesn’t want to talk about it, that nothing can be done at this point.”

Andy knew where this conversation was headed. “Johnny, I wish I could look into this for you, but I’m not a PI anymore. I’m up here on assignment, working twelve-hour days. I’ve only got two weeks left. I wish I could help, but I can’t.”

Johnny took a long look at the picture, then put his wallet back in his pocket. This big man looked small. “I’ve tried not to dwell on this, Andy, but with Papa dying, I can’t get it out of my mind. What happened to her? Why would anyone want to hurt her? Sometimes—and this is the worst—sometimes I wonder if maybe she didn’t love us, didn’t love me, and ran off with someone. Papa says no. He says he knows she’s dead. He says a husband knows. He can’t tell me why or how. He just knows.” In an attempt to keep the tears welling in his eyes from flowing down his cheeks, Johnny looked to the ersatz Sistine Chapel ceiling. His effort failed. Tears left his eyes and headed for his jaw line.

I followed Johnny's gaze and looked at God's fingers reaching across the ceiling to Adam. The digits were not as delicately etched as the ones in Rome but the image still reinforced my need to reach out to Johnny. My eyes met Andy's. It seemed we were helpless to ease his friend's pain. Or were we?

"Johnny, I'm not a professional investigator but I've helped Andy on a few cases. Maybe I could gather a little background information for him to review." I looked to Andy. His shrug said 'Okay with me.'

"Oh, no. You're busy working." Johnny wiped a tear from his cheek.

"*Andy* is working," I said. "I'm on vacation. I'll be happy to take a break from sunbathing to ask around about this. Do a little research at the library."

"No, no."

I thought 'no, no' meant he was going to refuse my offer, but it didn't. It meant that going to the library would not be necessary.

"Papa kept a file," Johnny said. "I have all the clippings. Are you staying here? I'll drop them off tomorrow."

## Chapter 2

At 8:55 the next morning, I was still in bed with my head under my pillow, avoiding the glare of the bright summer sun off the Atlantic. “Later,” I responded to the knocking at my door. It must have been Marjorie’s day off. As the regular housekeeper, she knew I wasn’t interested in service before 10 AM.

It took a moment for me to realize that the banging was not going to stop. I went to the door.

“Johnny says I should make sure you get this.” A bellman handed me a large brown envelope and departed.

I squinted to read the writing on the front:

*Meg Daniels, as promised*

*Johnny Boyle (Angelini)*

I grabbed my morning Coke from the mini-bar, sat on the edge of the bed, and stared into space for several minutes. The Mid-Atlantic region had been locked in a heat wave for close to a week. No matter how enticing the beach looked, I knew the truth and wouldn’t be able to handle it, not on a 100-plus-degree day. I couldn’t handle much of *anything* on a 100-plus-degree day.



Even in my air-conditioned hotel room, it took me a few minutes to muster the energy to open the envelope. Inside I found two items: a binder containing newspaper clippings and handwritten notes neatly tucked into plastic sleeves, and a smaller envelope full of photographs.

I settled onto the bed with the files and got lost in the world of Betty and Buddy Boyle and their young son Johnny. At least until my phone buzzed.

*Help me!*

The first text message of the day from Andy. Working in an office seemed to bring out his inner middle-school child:

*Wish I were on the beach*

*Sitting at a desk = BORING*

*Can't wait to meet u ;)*

Did I mention that this man had passed his fortieth birthday?

I typed back *44 minutes*, the time left until our daily 11 AM meeting at Café Monet for breakfast—well, my breakfast, his lunch—and the only time I saw Andy wide awake. His status at our evening beach rendezvous ranged from dozing to out cold.

Thanks to abundant man-made flora and fauna, Café Monet looked like an oddly static garden, but the clatter of the casino's bells, whistles, and sirens was a constant reminder that a fortune might be waiting only a few steps away.

"How many times have you used the word *cacophony*?" I slipped into the booth across from Andy.

"To my knowledge, I've never used the word *cacophony*. Although I would be happy to right now, as in, How about that cacophony coming from the casino floor?"

"After three weeks living in this hotel, the cacophony is really getting to me." I rubbed my temples.

"Well, try to remember that the cacophony is part of the casino experience, created for the enjoyment of the Artistical's paying customers. Employees staying here in comped premium rooms need not complain. That racket pays our bills."

“I know, I know, but you can’t get anywhere from our room without passing through the casino. Look at the ocean, right out there.” I pointed to the window visible only to patrons seated in the restaurant. “Without that window, who would even know there was an ocean around here?”

“Hey,” Andy protested. “Let’s pay a little respect to the hotel architects. An ocean is not an easy thing to hide. A pond, a lake, even a river—maybe. But an entire ocean? That wasn’t easy.”

“I know the casino has rules about no clocks or windows, but wouldn’t it be more relaxing if the restaurant, at least, was open to the crash of waves on the beach?”

“If it was, gamblers might venture outside and squander valuable betting dollars on frivolous things like bathing suits, beach towels, and sun screen—which those of us who have spent the last month locked in windowless rooms lit only by monitor glow could definitely use.” He looked at his once-tanned arms. “Lucky you can get to the beach before the sun goes down.”

He exaggerated, since the sun wasn’t *completely* down at 7 PM when he got off work. However, I had to admit that his tan was fading and that the sun-streaks in his hair were beginning to suggest gray more than blond. But I felt certain that his physical condition was as temporary as his current work assignment.

He pointed to the envelope in front of me. “What’s that?”

“Johnny didn’t waste any time. It’s everything the family saved about his mom’s disappearance. A bellman dropped it off before nine, which, considering Johnny’s last show ended at 2 AM, is rather impressive.”

“Are you sure you want to take this on?” Andy appeared concerned. “This is supposed to be a vacation for you.”

“We live at the beach. I can miss a day or two of my seashore vacation.” I unfolded a sheet of white lined paper with a rough edge that had been torn out of a copy book, the old bound kind, without spirals.

“This is the saddest thing.” I held the page up so Andy could see the childish printing. “It’s signed ‘Johnny Boyle, Age 10, August 27, 1974’—the tenth anniversary of his mother’s disappearance. At the top of the page he

wrote: 'My Mother' and what follows is a list of simple facts about Betty Boyle."

Ignoring grammar and spelling errors, I read the words aloud just as young Johnny had written them.

*My Mother:  
Was beautiful  
Was married to my father  
Liked going to the movies with her parents  
Learned to dance with her father  
Sang to me "Johnny Angel"  
Culd sew  
Made my christning dress  
Made a lot of her clothes  
Loved the color purple  
Liked violets as her favorite flower  
Wanted to go to school  
Wanted to be a travel agent  
Wanted to go to Paris  
Will be nineteen years old forever  
Loved me very much*

"How old did you say he was he when he wrote that?" Andy asked.

"Ten."

"Hmmm. 'Will be nineteen years old forever.'"

I nodded. "That struck me as a rather sophisticated concept for a ten-year-old to grasp." I pulled out a group of black-and-white snapshots and handed them to Andy. "A note on the envelope these came out of describes them as the only surviving photos of Betty Brophy Boyle's childhood. When she got married, she must have become the house photographer because there are loads of pictures of her two boys. Not many of her."

While Andy studied a photo of Betty as a child, standing at the ocean's edge in overalls, I ordered French toast for me and the usual for Andy. He

turned the photo over and read aloud. “Betty, age 5.” I took the photo from his hand. Even at five, the child’s smile seemed tentative. If the writing on the envelope was to be believed, only one other picture of Betty’s childhood survived. Standing in the midst of a large group of girls in long white dresses, she wore the same shy grin. Someone had printed *Eighth grade graduation, 1958* on the back.

Only in the next picture, which was a copy of the photo Johnny had showed us the night before, did Betty’s eyes match the smile on her lips. Wrapped in the arms of a young man with slicked-down hair—her husband, Buddy—Betty rested her cheek on the head of a chubby, happy baby in a long white christening gown. A notation said the photo was of John James Boyle, the man I’d seen perform as Johnny Angelini.

“They look like a happy family,” Andy observed.

“Did Johnny ever suggest otherwise?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know Johnny all that well. By the time I met him, he must have been forty or close to it. If I even realized that his mother wasn’t around, I would have assumed she’d died of natural causes. No one ever said a word to me about her disappearance.” He laid the photos on top of the folder.

I moved on to a collection of color photos. “Pictures of Johnny as a baby.” I pulled out one fading snapshot. “Look at this one. Notice anything?”

“It’s what we’d call a ‘selfie’ now. Betty snapped the picture by holding her arm out. Can’t see much of her but she did an excellent job getting Johnny in the frame.”

“Notice anything else?”

He shrugged.

“Anyone else?”

He studied the photo.

“Everyone is looking in one direction because ...” I led him to the answer.

“Because they’re looking at Martin Luther King, Jr.” He whistled. “Look how close she got!”

“You could also say, ‘Look how close she got Johnny to Martin Luther King, Jr.’ She made sure Johnny was part of the action when the convention came to town.”

“Who’s the cowgirl?” He held up a photo of a pretty young girl in a straw hat holding baby Johnny.

“A Jersey Johnson Girl. They served as hostesses at the convention. Story’s in one of the clippings.” I passed him another photo. “Betty found someone to handle the camera so she and Johnny could get into a picture with some of the civil rights protestors on the Boardwalk.”

“That’s pretty sweet how she took the kid everywhere with her.” Andy spoke softly.

“We can’t know what she would have become, but she certainly appeared to be a doting mother during his first six months.”

“What are the facts of her disappearance?” Andy was still a private investigator at heart.

“Thursday, August 27, 1964, she worked a party at the Bella Napoli restaurant on the 2300 block of Pacific Avenue. She left sometime around midnight. No one provided a precise time.”

“No timecards?”

“Not even a sign-out sheet as far as these records show. According to the notes, she worked later than usual and was in a hurry to get home. She was wearing a white uniform, a black apron, white rubber-soled shoes, and carrying a straw handbag.” I flipped through the yellow sheaves of paper. “A note from Johnny says his grandparents and father compiled these files. It looks as if they got as much information as they could from the police, then interviewed several people themselves to verify what the cops had told them.”

I handed the pages to Andy. He glanced through them. “I’ll read them later, assuming I can stay awake tonight.”

I wasn’t overly optimistic about that possibility. I continued, “According to the notes, the police interviewed Betty’s coworkers at Bella Napoli, but the only names mentioned here are the two owners and a cook. All three of them passed away in the late ’80s.” I paused. “Why no additional

names—kitchen staff, other waitresses? Even if the police did a superficial investigation, Buddy went looking for Betty the next day. Wouldn't he have spoken to her coworkers?"

"I doubt he started writing everything down the first day. These notes were probably started after the police stopped actively working the case—most seasonal workers would have been long gone by then."

"Everyone at the restaurant assumed Betty left via the back door that night, but no one remembered seeing her leave."

Andy flipped through an original copy of the 1964 Democratic National Convention program. "Thursday was a big night. Last day of the convention, and it ended with a birthday party for LBJ—went to midnight according to the schedule, although I thought I saw a clipping that the events ran late."

"Streets should have been busy, unless everybody was up on the Boardwalk for the parade and fireworks. She could have easily disappeared into the crowd up there," I said.

Andy gazed out the window and sighed. "This might be the only time I see the ocean today."

"It's a mere seven-and-a-half hours until our rendezvous on the beach. In the meantime, I thought I'd try to track down some of the people in these clippings."

"Fifty-year-old clippings?" He appeared amused. "I wish you luck."

"I want to at least be able to tell Johnny we tried. I'm going to work on the assumption that she was murdered. If she'd had an accident, her body would probably have turned up. As hopeful as Johnny's amnesia theory is, I don't think it's feasible. And I can't believe she is still living with an abductor after fifty years."

"Suicide?"

"It doesn't seem her family even considered the possibility. If I uncover something to suggest it, I'll investigate, but I'm not headed down that road."

Andy leafed through the newspaper clippings. "Not much to go on here. It doesn't look as if the story got much play."



“Most of these articles are about the convention. There are only two about Betty’s disappearance, and reading between the lines, the cops thought she ran away.” I picked up the photo of Betty holding baby Johnny in his christening gown. “I know looks can be deceiving, but from this photo, I’d say there’s no way she would have left this beautiful little boy behind. I’m going to start by testing that assumption.”

“Uh huh.” Andy had become engrossed in fifty-year-old political news.

“One of the few names I have to work with is a next-door neighbor, Lorraine Wasserman.” I pointed to a handwritten notation on a sheet from a yellow legal pad. “Looks like the Boyles lived on Arctic Avenue at the time.”

Andy glanced at the note. “That was decades ago.”

“Yes, but Lorraine Wasserman is still listed as living there according to a search online. I think I’ll walk over and check it out. Do you have a better idea?”

“Not about a fifty-year-old case.” He held up the yellowing front page of a copy of the *Atlantic City Press*. “Poor LBJ. It looks as if Kennedy’s ghost was haunting Convention Hall. Johnson had to deliver his acceptance speech after a huge ovation for Bobby Kennedy’s intro to a movie about JFK. This article also talks about the unveiling of the Kennedy bust on the Boardwalk just before the convention started.”

“Betty and Johnny attended the dedication—there’s a picture with that written on the back.” I found the snapshot and passed it across the table. “Andy, I’d like to help Johnny. But I have to know why such a highly educated guy talks the way he does. Using double negatives and words like *broad* and *dame*? And didn’t people stop ‘digging’ everything sometime in the last century?”

“Johnny’s father was a huge Sinatra fan, and I guess he got Johnny into the Rat Pack thing. He tries to affect that same hip kind of speech—you know, a playful, kind of wise-guy banter. You may recall that he actually uttered the phrase, ‘Ring-a-ding-ding.’”

“He must not have been exactly the epitome of cool in the ‘50s.”

“True, idolizing the Rat Pack wasn’t so cool then for kids Johnny’s age, but he learned at his father’s knee.”

“His birthday is so ironic.”

“In what way?”

“He was born on February 9, 1964.”

“So?”

“That was the day the British invasion began.”

“The British invaded America in 1964?”

“Don’t be coy. The night Johnny was born the Beatles appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.”

“You weren’t even born yet, so where did you pick up that bit of trivia?”

“I was a history major.”

“But you never studied.”

He was right about that. Most of my knowledge was not the result of book learning. “My parents and grandparents were big on reminiscing, but my newfound encyclopedic knowledge of the social history of previous eras is the result of my slideshow project.”

I’d recently scanned photographs of my ancestors, added captions, and set the results to period music. Andy’s ears had found the barbershop quartet renditions of “On the Boardwalk in Atlantic City” playing over photos of my great-grandparents in 1920s swim garb particularly painful.

As he groaned at the memory, I continued. “I know my parents’ and grandparents’ world as well as I know my own, if not better—which brings me to the irony of Johnny’s birthday. From what you told me, he always aspired to be a crooner. Those singers held on during the Elvis years and, then, on the very day Johnny arrived, the American pop music scene changed forever and the crooners got left behind. I wonder what time he was born ... Ed Sullivan might even have been on the air!”

“Come on, that world didn’t *disappear*. Even I know who Frank Sinatra is.”

“Yes, and in 1986, when Johnny got out of college, how popular was that crooner scene?”

## Missing You in Atlantic City

“Okay, you win.” Andy held up his hands in surrender. “You’ve been winning a lot lately. You might want to think about losing a few, so as not to damage my fragile ego.”

“Sure.” I focused on organizing the Boyle files. “I’ll think about it.”

Photo by Denise Marconi Leitch



## JANE KELLY

is a Philadelphia native who started vacationing at the Jersey Shore at the age of five months. She has returned every year since. A graduate of Chestnut Hill College, she has a MS in Information Studies from Drexel University and a MPhil in Popular Literature from Trinity College, University of Dublin. After working in New York, Washington DC, Chicago, and Boston, she currently lives in the Philadelphia area. She is the author of *Killing Time in Ocean City*, *Cape Mayhem*, and *Wrong Beach Island*.