



## Chocolate Beach

By **Julie Carobini**

Excerpt provided courtesy of [www.JulieCarobini.com](http://www.JulieCarobini.com)

### Prologue

Douglas knew what he was getting into when he married me. At least I think he did. Morning after foggy morning, he'd order the same two shots of Colombian roast coffee, room for cream, no sugar. He'd smile and thank me, always putting his change and then-some into the obnoxious tip jar on the counter, the one with the dancing dollar sign on one side and a *Free Tibet* sticker on the other.

He never flinched when I called his order.

"Dougie-poo, you're up!"

Nada. Zilch. Not a smidgen of faze on his face. No matter what I said or did, Douglas remained consistently unflustered. You might even say that Douglas was routinely predictable. Here was a meticulously well-dressed man who, red sky or blue, stepped through those squeaky-clean glass doors at precisely 6:35 a.m. every morning.

*Every morning!*

If it weren't for my tiresome need for sustenance, not to mention my secret delight over being known as a "barista" and the generous tips from the likes of one Douglas M. Stone, I would likely have been staring at the back of my eyelids at that hour.

My best friend at the coffeehouse, Gaby, likened those mornings to a zany unfolding play, like *Tony n' Tina's Wedding*. Only we were on the West Coast, far across the country from Broadway. We had two choices in those days. Either we were actors in some farce playing head games with the suits ordering a dime's worth of coffee for \$2.50, or just poor college students who'd rather be on the beach. We chose the former. Kind of like having our own reality series, *Extreme Farce*.

Something about dreamy, much-older Douglas, though, made me want to push the proverbial envelope right to the edge of the counter.

"Doug-man, your iced caramel mocha double-whip is up!" I'd shout across the shop. Or "Your toffee-nut cream with a shot of vanilla syrup has legs on it!"

One particular morning, one seemingly like the others, will forever stick out in my mind like biscotti in a short cappuccino.

The rain was coming down in big California-king-sized sheets. As was my customary attire both then and now, I wore jeans, a cami, and flip-flops. Who cared that it was a little wet outside? I lived at the beach, where tees and tanks were the norm four seasons out of every year. Not so Douglas. He dressed with an air of precision, like he studied the weather report the night before and laid out just the right suit to match the color of the sky. So you can imagine my surprise when Douglas, quite out of character, had forgotten his umbrella on that gray day.

There he stood, his cinnamon-colored hair saturated by the sky's release, his London Fog overcoat several shades of granite darker from the drenching. *Muy simpático*, as Gaby would say.

My eyebrows did a little dance. "The usual, Dougie?"

He hesitated, as if considering whether to finally report me to someone higher up on the food chain, someone who could and would actually command me to stop taking liberties with his very proper given name. Instead, he winked, nodded, and turned to scan the headlines in the *Ventura County Star*.

"Dougers, your double espresso macchiato is up!"

I'd barely set the cup of plain coffee on the counter when I felt a large warm hand enveloping my own. Electricity shot through my fingers. I felt as if I should pull away but couldn't. His touch seared me and rendered my nineteen-year-old self speechless.

In my head, I heard Randy Travis crooning, "I'm gonna love you, forever and ever, forever and ever, Amen." (Three exclamation points on that final amen!)

Some people don't believe in love at first sight. Who knows? I do know that at the instant Douglas's strong hand held my own, I was hopelessly, wildly, madly in love. For the first morning in all those mornings, I had run out of pithy comments and cutesy names. My devil-may-care attitude, the one I'd so glibly unleashed on poor Douglas each morning, had vaporized with the first brush of his fingertips. In that instant, I barely had breath to breathe.

We married fourteen years ago, and I've been breathless ever since.

As for Douglas? I'm not so sure....

## Chapter One

It's ten past five, and the house smells of twice-nuked Stouffer's lasagna. Some serious bubbling is going on inside that microwave, and I have to wonder, *Just how much noodle elasticity is too much?* Antsy, I dial up Douglas's office and it takes him three rings to answer.

"Douglas Stone."

"Where are you?"

"Brianna?"

Who else would be calling his back line at dinnertime? "You missed our date."

I hear him flip the pages of his calendar. "It's my Bunko night," I remind him. "And Nathan's doing a night run with the team on the beach. We were going to have dinner together." *Finally.*

"Oh. Yes. Sorry, Bri."

I sigh, overexaggerating. Most of my friends and family call me Bri, but not Douglas. Not usually, anyway. Not unless he's trying to soften me up. Douglas is a seventeen-year trial attorney with a neverending case list, and I'm on to him.

"It's okay." I peek at the time. "I've got to get going anyway."

He groans into the phone. "I guess I just lost track of the time."

Douglas usually cuts out early at least a couple nights a week. He's always said he didn't want to be one of those wrinkled old-boy attorneys, married to his work. Lately, though, his sexy presence around here has been downright scarce.

"I'll just put dinner in the oven on warm, then." I glance at the oven, hoping I remember the trick to programming it. "The team's doing an off-season run all the way to Surfer's Point. Nathan'll probably watch the waves awhile before getting a ride home from Troy's mom. I guess you two'll just be bachelors tonight."

"That's fine."

"So ..."

"Yes?"

"So I'll be picking up Gaby on the way. I'll probably be kinda late. You know how much she likes to talk."

"Take your time. Enjoy yourself."

I expect him to say that, and his usual line has a calming effect. "Love you," I say.

"I love you too."

Gaby's met her dream guy for the gazillionth time, and she's ready to dish. If I don't hurry, it'll have to wait until we're seated together during Bunko, and the tasty morsels will be served up in bits, like those nickel-sized quiche appetizers that always leave you so hungry. I want the whole meal, every yummy course, served up during a long conversation with my best friend. But it's Bunko night and I'm running late and she's been so gushy over this new guy that she'll probably spill it to everyone, so I'll have to just be one of the gals tonight. *Drats.*

It's not like I haven't been there before with Gaby. Oh no. Finding her a decent, handsome, God-loving man has been one of my missions in life, and I'm wearing out. I'm hoping that this one—even though I had absolutely nothing to do with their matchup—is Mr. So Right. *The Mr. So Right.*

I'm fairly blinded by the glow emitting from my friend's face when I pull up alongside the curb. Gaby climbs in, and her pretty French manicure causes me to curl my less-than-attractive fingers into a ball. I wonder if I can drive like this.

"Hey, Bri-Bri!" Gaby leans over and gives me a hug. Her perfume makes me sneeze, even though it's wild lavender, one of my favorites. I want to tell her that a little goes a long, long way, but instead I just sniff and hug her back.

"You are positively radiant, my friend," I tell her between sniffles. "In 'like'?"

Gaby tips her head toward the heavens, smiling. "What can I say?" She giggles like a teenager, and I love her for that. Gabrielle Maria Flores and I have been friends *forever*. Well, at least since our coffee-pouring days.

While some friendships cut back when one of them gets married, ours has flourished like the morning glory planted by the side of our garage. It keeps on sprouting and spreading ... after Nathan's birth, through college, even in the midst of our dual careers—hers as a florist, mine as a coastal tour-bus host.

"So," says Gaby, turning her attention to me, "how's the 'beach-babe with a mic'?"

I always tell her that tour-bus hosting isn't as glamorous as it seems, but will she listen? Sure, there's the fabulous seafood and the glimmering ocean and the travelers paying rapt attention to my every joke. *So I've heard them nine hundred times—they haven't!* On the downside are all the elderly men with comb-overs who sit at the back of the bus and insist that I talk louder. *Hey, I want to say, get a hearing aid or move on up!* Instead, I strain my voice and smile, praying that a dolphin will appear from the abyss to distract them, thereby giving my larynx a break.

My secret wish? That Gaby would give up the flowers and get a Class B license. She could be my driver, and we could really put on a show.

I study my ever-glowing friend. Always the artist, she's wearing her favorite cottony, gypsy-style blouse along with a long, tiered skirt. The kind of outfit that, if hung on my shorter frame, would dust the ground with each step. "I'm fabulous," I tell her, "but it's *your* mystery man I want to know about. What's his name again?"

"Franklin!"

I push away the mental image of that nasally turtle my son used to watch on public television. "Alrighty," I say. "Tell me everything."

"Well—Oh ... my!" Gaby's rummaging around in my glove compartment now. She pulls out a CD, holding it up in the air as if I'm her daughter and she's found a naughty magazine in my dresser drawer. "This is contraband, missy!"

I snatch the Dixie Chicks CD from her hand and toss it back in the glove box. "That's a pre-controversy album, I'll have you know. Now, getting back to Fred?"

"It's Franklin!"

"Okay, then, getting back to Franklin."

"Oh! He is so cute. A little short, but I don't mind that. Besides, he's educated and smart. He's an architect for Swaffer and Swaffer. You know them; they're in the Victorian house over near California Street. Anyway, he's been an architect for about five years—well, not exactly an architect. He's had his degree in architecture for eight years, but he hasn't had a chance to take all the tests to become official. I think he's considered a draftsman, but you should see all the beautiful drawings he's made!"

"When do I meet him?"

"Oh, you will. It's a little tricky since he usually takes care of his mother on the weekend. She lives with him...."

I keep my eyes on the road in front of me. *Did anyone else see that red flag fall from the sky?*

"... he's so sweet. He takes his mother shopping at the farmer's market and then to Costco...."

We're in front of Suzy's house now, our host for the night's Bunko game, and I think I'm sweating. Gaby is one of the most intelligent women I know. She's warmly endearing and a forever friend. But like Cher in the movie *Moonstruck*, I want to slap both of her cheeks and command her to "Snap out of it!"

A thirty-something guy with a low-paying job living with his mother. I know that judging someone you haven't even met is not nice. Okay, judging anybody is not nice, but Gaby needs a stable Christian man. A man like my Douglas. This ... this *Franklin* sounds ... ugh, like a commitment-phobe.

"You're not jealous, are you?" asks Gaby.

"Jealous?"

"You're always so good at playing match-up." Gaby wrinkles her forehead and gives me that little pout of hers. "I just don't want you to feel bad that Franklin might be the one, and you weren't our matchmaker."

"Stop it. You know I just want you happy."

"Okay. Just don't go around thinking you're not needed or anything. I know how much you like mothering all your single pals."

I wince. "Mother you? I don't think so. Beat you in a brownie-eating contest, maybe. Mother you, no way."

Gaby charges up the hedge-lined path to Suzy's front door. I lock up my VW and trail in behind her, watching as she flings herself into the open arms of Livi and Rachel, ready to tell tales of Franklin. The rest of the group swarm around them while I hover just outside their tight circle, my eyes drawn to Suzy's French floral wall clock. Douglas should be capping his pen and closing a manila case file just about now. Soon he'll be switching off his desk lamp and heading for home.

I glance again at the group just as Suzy steps toward the kitchen, and the circle closes up faster than a tulip in the shade. Suzy's in charge of the hospitality committee at our church, and I'm a member of the team. This means that I regularly drop off meals for new moms and the infirm. Pretty crazy since I don't cook. *Thank God for bagged salad and Meridians' pizza.* But really, this gig fits me well. Who could understand the value of a meal freely given better than me?

Speaking of dinner, the boys will be leaning against the kitchen island soon, eating rubberized lasagna on paper plates. They'll probably switch on a Dodger game and yell at the screen for a while before Douglas shoos Nathan up to homework and bed. Then Douglas'll stretch out on the couch and I'll have to roust him from deep slumber when I return. *Any chance of a real conversation, I guess, will have to wait another day.*

Kate, one of the craftsiest of the bunch, cuts into my thoughts as she breaks away from the group and marches up to the fireplace. "Would you look at that garland," she says. With all the fascination over Gaby's new beau, no one, until now, had noticed Suzy's redecorated mantel, the one she changes every season. "And all those pink lights."

"Actually, they're *salmon*," Suzy calls from the kitchen.

A collective "Oh" fills the room. Only Suzy could pull off swagging the fireplace with acacia and eucalyptus. If I tried it, there'd be sap running down my wall. *And probably a raging fire in the living room.*

"Gold lamé? You used real lamé for your bows?" Kate leans up close to the garland and runs one of the branch bows between her fingers. Suzy's smile looks forced as she

enters the living room again, both hands carrying a bowl of wedding mints and a pristine golden bell. "Lamé is so hard on my machine," Kate continues. "I've been looking for an alternative. Have you tried polyester?"

Suzy sets down the bowls. "Never."

"But it's supposed to be so easy to work with. You probably couldn't even tell the difference."

Suzy's expression begs to differ, and I can't help but think, *This is so Trading Spaces*. She doesn't answer but instead turns to the group of women chatting and mulling about. "Okay, ladies. Find yourself a seat." She rings the Bunko bell for emphasis.

Three tables with four chairs each sit around the room. Suzy has placed croissants with some kind of gourmet currant butter at each table, along with crystal bowls of fancy mixed nuts and Godiva chocolates. *Very ooh-la-la*. Rachel, Kate, Livi, and I share a table during Round One.

Kate pushes a pad of paper and a golf pencil past me. "You're smart, Rachel," she says. "You keep score."

*I don't like keeping score anyway*. Besides, Rachel's cool. She's someone I think I would've avoided if I hadn't been forced to play Bunko with her. Seriously. She's nearly perfect, but I don't think she knows it, and *that* makes her utterly charming. Tonight she's wearing her white-blond hair pulled back into a tight knot. Her makeup is to die for, and she's wearing a scarf loosely at her throat.

Ah, the windswept scarf. Think Deborah Kerr! Ginger Rogers! Isadora Duncan! Um, scratch that last one. Who wants to be compared to a dancer who met a tragic end?

Once again, Kate interrupts my muse. "What're Douglas and Nathan up to tonight, Brianna?" she asks, tossing out the first roll.

"Nathan's running, and Douglas is at the office."

Kate picks up the dice, ready for her second roll. She leans sideways toward me. "Working late again? I can't imagine Tom doing that."

It's Kate's presence that always makes me pray so hard before Bunko. I knew a girl like her in high school. Heather knew something about everything and never failed to share it, her abundant knowledge going down like unsweetened medicine. Thankfully, she never shared the Gospel with me. "Can't complain, Kate," I say with a shrug. "His case load pays the mortgage every month."

"So Nathan's coming home to an empty house tonight?" Kate's still holding the dice in her hand. "See, Tom wouldn't allow that."

*Taking the whole submission thing a little far, aren't we?* "I guess they're not called 'banker's hours' for nothing." Tom is, after all, the vice-president of San Buenaventura Savings.

Kate rattles the dice in her right hand and stares at me.

Livi leans forward and clears her throat. "The dice," she whispers.

Kate holds me with a stare as she rolls the dice.

Livi's up next, so I turn to my refined friend Rachel. "And how's your Mr. Wonderful, Rach?" One perfectly sculptured eyebrow rises. How *does* she do that?

"He's heaven." An uncharacteristic gush of emotion spills forth. "Last Saturday we toured the Getty Museum together, and later we ate dinner in Malibu. Just fabulous." She's up now and gives the dice a sophisticated little toss. "He took me to Geoffrey's Restaurant and we sat outside and listened to the waves crash while dining on wasabi caviar and lobster bruschetta. Truly wonderful."

"I'm so glad you've found your Romeo," I say as she passes the dice my way.

Rachel touches my shoulder. "No, *you* found him! Thank you so much for introducing us, Bri."

I throw out the dice and smile, trying not to look like the pelican that just scooped up a school of minnows.

It's Kate's turn again with the dice. She drops them onto the table, and one bounces down to the floor. She doesn't pick it up. Instead, she looks over at Rachel and mutters something that no one gets.

Rachel raises that same eyebrow again. "What did you say, Kate?"

"Next thing you know, Brianna will be disparaging your boyfriend's occupation," Kate says with an edge in her voice.

While the rest of the room plays on in oblivion, our table stops cold. Livi leans down and picks up the wayward die.

"Kate, I've never disparaged Tom. He's a great guy."

Her eyes do a sort of loop-the-loop. "Right. That crack about 'banker's hours'? What about that?"

"That was—"

She cuts me off. "You think that just because Tom doesn't work late into the night like some people that he's unmotivated."

I let out a deep Napoleon Dynamite-style sigh. "I never said that—did I say that?" I look around for support. "I just meant that Douglas has more cases than time. Kate, I'm glad that Tom's job doesn't take him away from you as much."

She snorts a laugh, and her shoulders bounce. "Must be tough to have such a difficult life, Brianna ... rich husband, kid in private school, a big old beach house."

*Okay—ouch.* "What's up, Kate?"

She turns to me and her face looks sad, like she feels sorry for me. *So not necessary.* "Oh, Brianna," she says. "*Everybody* knows Douglas is married to his job and that you're bored with it all. You two are exact opposites," she continues. "How can you stand that?"

Twelve women in the room and yet, except for the sizzle and sigh of Suzy's twelve-cup Mr. Coffee, all falls silent.

"*Pfsst!*" Gaby blows a raspberry, slicing into the silence. *Thank you, God, for Gaby.*

I keep my eyebrows even. "So *everybody* knows? Huh."

Livi shifts in her seat at the table. Rachel's delicate mouth forms a small O, and she looks disapprovingly at Kate.

"Well, how about that. I thought I'd been able to cover up my boredom. You know, that zombie-like glaze in my eyes, but no biggie." I laugh tightly.

"Bri's *anything* but bored, Kate," Gaby hollers from across the living room.

This is not good. Gaby's temperament matches her flair for the dramatic, and I'm mentally ducking for cover. "I *wish* she'd get a little bored so we could hang out more," she continues, her words moving faster with each breath. "Between driving that cute kid of hers around and hosting all those bus tours and playing matchmaker to some of us, she hasn't the *time* to get bored. Quit acting so loopy."

It seems Kate has recovered. She's staring at the table, as if reading from an imaginary script. "I do know you care, Gabrielle," she finally says, her face still lowered, "but married people recognize things that others just can't."

Livi's wringing her hands now, no doubt aware of how our Gaby will take such a scolding. "Gaby, I think Kate just means that she's concerned for Bri." She looks quickly at me and pats my hand. "Not that there's anything to worry about."

Gaby straightens in her chair, and I can tell by the expression in her brown-black eyes that she's got more to say. "You think that just because you've nabbed a man, that you know more than us single gals? Well, Kate, *estás loca* ..."

*Ack!* She's going to rail in Spanish.

"Ladies!" Suzy stands, her pale skin unusually pink. "We're here to converse, not attack each other. I'm appalled." She cups the Bunko bell in her hand and deliberately locks eyes with each woman. Livi stifles a hiccup. "Let's start again, shall we?"

*Oh yeah, I want to go through that again.*

Mid-eighties hairstyle aside, Suzy is right on. Despite my temptation to enter into a catfight, Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers ..." and I am in no position to argue with the Savior of the world.

So I don't. Yet something tells me this isn't over yet.