

One



1968

Joseph walked across the small wooden stage of St. Matthew's parish hall. Tonight, the first Saturday in June, all else would be forgotten—the war in Vietnam, the hustle and bustle of politicking in and around Salinas. All that mattered was the dance, a fundraiser long planned by the tight-knit group.

"Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of Saint Matthew's," Joseph Collins spoke into the microphone, stretching his arms to include the smiling ladies entering the stage, "we extend a warm welcome to you, our wonderful parishioners. These women have transformed our hall into a Hawaiian luau: Mary Ellen Bartlett, Bridget Vecchio, and my wife, Carolina Collins." He pronounced his wife's name in Spanish, "Cah-roh-lee-nah," softly rolling the *r*. "Father McCarthy," Joseph nodded to the parish priest, "will say the blessing." Everyone bowed their heads.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. We humbly ask your blessing, Lord, for your brothers and sisters gathered here tonight." The elderly,

slightly built Jesuit priest lowered his voice as he said, "We pray for the safety of our servicemen in Vietnam." He waited a few seconds before continuing with, "For the sake of our school, this fundraiser was deemed essential, and we thank all of our parishioners for the success we have here tonight."

"We have a surprise and the start of a new tradition," Mary Ellen announced. "The young woman who designed and created the scenery these past four years is hereby named queen for this special night. Carolina Sanchez Collins, please accept this crown and scepter as a token for all the work you have done for the parish."

Her mouth a perfect O, a small gasp escaping, and eyes wide, Carolina bent down to have the rhinestone-studded tiara pinned on her dark auburn hair.

"This is such a surprise! Thank you all for this honor," she said in her soft voice.

The orchestra played bars from the Beatles' *Yesterday*. Carolina nodded modestly as the crowd applauded.

"This will be the beginning of a tradition," Mary Ellen continued. "Who will be our queen as we look to the future? Carolina, will you and Joseph start the first dance?"

Joseph and Carolina stepped off the stage. "Joseph, did you know about this?" Carolina asked as she and Joseph glided smoothly to the dance music.

"No, hon, I didn't. I'm as surprised as you are," Joseph replied.

A lone, handsome man, standing in a shadow in a far corner, held up his punch glass in salute to the couple. Carolina was struck by his dark good looks.

He seemed to know Joseph, who nodded briefly at him.

"You don't look happy with the surprise. What's wrong, hon?" Joseph said, leading his wife around the dance floor.

"This crown reminds me of junior year in high school almost ten years ago. Most of us are certainly past prom age. They all had good intentions, but I feel a bit embarrassed."

"Oh—the year you were crowned most beautiful. And you are gorgeous, now more than ever," he whispered as he kissed her cheek.

"Carolina, the decorations look gorgeous! You, Mary Ellen, and Bridget have outdone yourselves again," Nancy Johnson's voice boomed as she twirled by with her teenaged son. Nancy's husband was deployed. She'd come home to Salinas with her youngest son to stay with her parents.

"Thank you, Nancy. I'm so glad it's turning out well. And I'm glad you joined us, Mikey," Carolina said, smiling at one of the handful of teenagers who didn't mind being at a dance with their parents.

"Let's get some punch, Caro," Joseph mumbled, steering her to the brightly decorated corner where his mother and sister chatted as they filled punch cups. Vince, Joseph's brother-in-law, nodded to Joseph and Carolina as he played saxophone in the orchestra made up of parishioners.

"Congratulations, Carolina. You make a lovely queen," Joseph's mother, Sofia, said as she embraced her daughter-in-law.

Tina, Joseph's sister, chimed in, "And they were so

right. All of this was your doing from the beginning. I'm so happy for you, Caro," she said, hugging her tightly. "Now, everyone will be eager to see who will get the honor next year. It's a great idea, whoever came up with it!"

"You younger women have made such a difference for our little church dances," Sophia Collins stated in her charming Italian accent.

"We need to get over to the supper line, Mom," Tina said.

"You two go ahead. I'll cover here. It's quiet for now," Carolina commented. "Mabel is set to help here when it gets busy."

Joseph nodded at Caro from where he'd joined a group of men. She lowered her large, dark brown eyes, hiding a moment of sadness despite her joy in anticipation of the evening ahead. She absentmindedly tugged at her skirt, feeling it ride smoothly on her slender hips. Her dark auburn hair hung to her shoulders in thick waves. She discreetly removed the tiara and set it on a table nearby.

Her thoughts shut out the music as she leaned against the corner wall, eyes closed, trying to block out negative thoughts. Not tonight, she thought. I want to enjoy this special evening that I've worked on so long. She shut out the turmoil of the last few months and smiled to herself. He loves me—he has a different way of showing it, she declared to herself as she thought about how she and Joseph had been married almost six years but had not made love in weeks. Carolina was afraid to think the worst—that he found someone else.

They met at the USO club in El Paso during her

senior year in high school. He'd asked her to dance and they'd been together ever since. She was a virgin on their wedding night. Her two older sisters, Anita and Marta, had put the fear of God into the two younger ones, Lisa and Carolina. The Sanchez girls did not break with tradition.

Joseph rarely drank, though he would occasionally meet a friend for a beer after work. He devoted many evenings to his recently widowed mother, Sofia. He managed the hardware store his father had founded. Carolina was aware the community considered Joseph an ideal husband and son. An Army medical discharge kept Joseph from further military service.

Sofia had taken to Carolina at once, welcoming the nineteen-year-old into the family. Carolina's quiet, down-to-earth, sweet nature made it easy for Joseph's small family to make Carolina feel at home so far away from her own. Joseph Senior and Sofia had made the trip to El Paso for the wedding and had been charmed by the warmth of the large Sanchez clan present in Grandmother Ana's spacious home and renowned gardens.

The patriarch Don Miguel Antonio Sanchez made sure the festivities in honor of his youngest daughter, by his account "the fairest of them all," were memorable. The extended family doted upon Carolina, and she took it all in stride. Miguel's devotion to his family was legendary in the neighborhood. When he courted Carolina, Joseph noted the closeness of the family and the girls' hero-worship of their father. Joe Senior saw that as well in the few days they were present for the wedding preparations and for the big

day itself.

Because he was a tall man with a ruddy complexion and light brown hair, Miguel's demeanor gave him an aristocratic air. That was what Joe had thought the moment he met Miguel: that he was a Spanish aristocrat—a polite gentleman who made you feel at home at once. The Spanish idiom *Mi casa es su casa* (my home is your home) fit this man and his family perfectly. Carolina's mother, Esther, was the gracious hostess, making sure everything was in order.

Applause from the audience broke Carolina out of her reverie, bringing her back to the present and reality.

"Caro, the evening is turning out so well! I'll have some punch," Mary Ellen said, as she caught a glimpse of sadness in the beautiful young woman's eyes.

It was still dark out early Sunday morning as Carolina roused from heavy sleep with Joseph's body pressing against her. He smiled as her eyes fluttered open and he kissed her neck. Like the old days, she thought, as she surrendered to his caresses and responded to his quick, passionate lovemaking. She snuggled into him, feeling the warmth of his body still so close to hers, hopeful that her fears were unfounded. They soon fell asleep again.

Sunday was spent, as usual, at Sofia's, along with Tina and Vince and their toddler, Laurie. There was still daylight as Carolina and Joseph walked home, tired from a long, fun-filled Sunday, appetites satisfied by Sofia's delicious spaghetti. With Joseph's arm affectionately around her shoulder, Carolina fell into pace with him and placed her arm around his waist. She looked up at

him, her hair bathed in the pale moonlight coming up behind her.

"There's your moon, Caro. This is the way I always think of you, with your profile against the moon, just like it was when we'd sit on your parents' porch."

Relishing their closeness, willing it to remain forever, she sighed. "Yes, I remember those first nights right after we met, when I told you how I love the paisley moon. See the patterns on the moon? Just like a paisley print."

He laughed softly at her words and squeezed her closer to him.

"The ladies' group of St. Matthews is proud to announce we have more than doubled last year's profits from the dance. We'll be able to donate to all our students—" Mary Ellen was startled as a woman's cries in the hall caused her to stop her speech abruptly.

The church secretary, Betty, rushed into the comfortable living room of the rectory used for their meetings, tears streaming down her face, shaking her hands as if in protest to what she had to say. The small group was stunned by the interruption.

"I just heard—I don't know where to begin—it's awful, just awful," Betty shrieked and stammered. "He's dead. It was just confirmed on the radio."

The women stared silently, trying to make sense of what Betty was saying.

"Who?" Mary Ellen asked as she went up to Betty and put her arms around her, trying to calm her. "Who, dear, who is dead?"

"Bobby Kennedy—I just heard it on the radio," Betty

said, sitting in one of the easy chairs. "Someone shot him in Los Angeles. He was walking through a hotel kitchen. A man shot him and he's dead." She placed her hands to her face and sobbed.

Mary Ellen placed a hand on Betty's shoulder and faced the ladies all gathered in a cluster around each other, tears in their eyes.

"This is terrible," a stunned Mary Ellen said, shaking her head.

Father walked in. They all looked at him, eyes wide in disbelief, not knowing what to make of the news.

"It's true," he said. "I just heard it myself. These are terrible times we are living in, but we have to be strong and keep our faith. I'll be making announcements at Mass this evening. We should be discussing the success of the dance and how much was raised, but this meeting will have to wait. For now, go on home to your families."

Carolina walked home, thinking of the unfortunate news and distracted from her personal uneasiness, but she pondered what had happened that morning with Joseph as she had been leaving for the meeting.

"If you get finished early with the meeting, meet me for lunch at Mom's," Joseph had said. His demeanor had seemed usual, Carolina thought. But a wry smile on his face puzzled her when she answered, "I doubt we'll be done much before one o'clock, so I don't think I'll be able to make it. Two other committees will be reporting later in the morning on their projects, and we all usually take longer than we'd planned. We'll have lunch with Father in the rectory."

She walked home slowly, a sick feeling in the pit

of her stomach growing stronger. What if I'm right? she thought. What if he is seeing someone? What will I do?

She gazed at her flowers and the shrubbery she lovingly tended. The rich, dark, moist soil was easy to till. She spent hours at the nursery picking out plants, choosing those she'd always longed for. There were hydrangeas in full bloom. Clusters of snapdragons in lovely colors proudly stood against the warm beige of the house. Roses splashed a profusion of color: pale pinks, yellows, deep reds, and her favorite, a rare watermelon hue.

She stopped and stared at Joseph's car parked all the way to the back of the driveway. The small single-stall garage with an added carport was hidden from the street. Joseph rarely came home during the day. She walked slowly to the back door, gripped the knob, and took a deep breath, pressing her lips together. She felt the knob turn easily in her hand. Her heart was pounding so hard and fast she could hear it. She swallowed hard. What if I have to separate from Joseph and even divorce? she wondered. Her thoughts were jumbled. What will I tell my family and my friends here? What will I do? She swallowed, and a bitter taste of bile told her she needed to relax before she could go on. She stood quietly just inside the kitchen, gently pressing the door behind her.

Voices inside the house startled Carolina. She gripped the knob harder and closed the door behind her. Instinctively, she sensed her placid life would soon change forever. After entering the small, neat kitchen, she took the few steps that placed her in the hall, and

she stood facing the hall mirror, which gave her a partial view of the door to the bedroom. How many times had she and Joseph communicated with each other by looking into this mirror while she prepared breakfast and he finished getting ready for work? They'd laughed at the odd placement of the mirror by the former tenants, but had never taken it down.

Now there was another couple reflected in the mirror. She could see Joseph with his back toward her. He was bending down, handing something to someone out of view. His lover, she thought. It must be. Carolina wondered if she would recognize the woman. Was it someone she knew? A neighbor? She felt lightheaded and leaned against the wall to steady herself. Joseph laughed softly. Maybe it's nothing serious, she thought. Maybe it's just a fling and we can be happy together again. Maybe . . . She could feel the blood pounding in her ears.

A low male voice, not Joseph's, startled her. "You are as wonderful as ever, my Joseph. I can't get enough of you. You know how I've longed for you."

The two male figures were in clear view now. The other man, standing behind Joseph, reached around, buttoning Joseph's shirt, caressing his chest. She saw Joseph's arms stroking the other man's arms. The two laughed in their deep baritones. She could see the man behind Joseph as he kissed Joseph's neck, and Joseph turned around to face the man, returning the man's embrace and kiss. It was the stranger, the handsome man from the dance Saturday night.

Open-mouthed, eyes staring at a scene from another life, certainly not hers, Carolina gasped as

the warmth of their embrace heightened. The two men turned toward her reflection at the sound. They did not separate at once. Joseph gently pushed the man's arms down, and then coolly asked, "Wasn't your meeting supposed to last past one o'clock?"

"It was." Carolina's voice was surprisingly calm. "But, because of what happened . . . we all came home . . ." she said, her voice trailing, with the word *home* barely audible. Her calmness surprised her. She was taking short, shallow breaths, and the slow, rising anger steadied her.

"I . . . I guess you're wondering what's going on, Caro. We . . . This is my friend . . . Tom and we . . ."

"You really don't have to explain yourself, Joseph. No. No, I don't wonder—not anymore." The pallor on her face was slowly dissipating.

In a daze, Carolina sat on the sofa, brushing Joseph's hand away as he reached for her. She picked up a cushion and held it to her breast, pressing it against her as she took slow, deep breaths. A thousand thoughts went through her mind. Everything fell into place. His increasing lack of interest in her the past few months was starting to make complete sense.

Joseph sat on the sofa, near Carolina, and buried his face in his hands, shaking his head side to side. He balled his hands into fists and made an effort to speak, trying to regain his composure. "Honey, you need to understand that . . ."

Tom stood in the hall, in the space Carolina had occupied moments earlier, hands on his hips, waiting for his lover to say something. Joseph looked at him for a long time, then shook his head slowly and motioned

for Tom to step outside. Tom shrugged impatiently and pressed his fingers to his lips as if to blow Joseph a kiss, a hint of a smile breaking through on Joseph's grim face.

The moment she heard the door close, Carolina turned and faced Joseph. She was clutching the cushion tighter. In a low, deliberate voice she hissed, "How could you, Joseph? You've been living a lie with me all this time." Tears were rolling down her cheeks. She wiped them away angrily.

"Honey . . . Caro . . . please listen to me. I . . . I couldn't help myself. I've tried to stay away from . . . Tom. I do love you, I always have, and you're so beautiful and sweet and good to be with. Honey, please believe me. I didn't want you to find out. I wanted to keep this from you."

Joseph sat looking down at the floor, his hands pressed together. She looked at him and saw his tears. She gazed at him a long time and thought, I don't really know this man, my husband, a man I thought I loved and wanted to be married to forever.

Finally, in quiet, controlled anger, she spoke. "How could I have been so blind? How dare you do this to me, to us, to your family? Do they know, Joseph? Do your mother and Tina and Vince know?"

Joseph shook his head, which was bent down, his shoulders sagging. Somehow he did not appear as handsome as he had that morning. He seemed a total stranger to her. Carolina looked around the living room. How important everything had seemed to her before. She took in the furniture they'd shopped for and remembered deciding together on where to place the items they so

carefully purchased. She thought of the plans they had spoken of just days ago, the Sunday after the big dance. How happy she had been! She shuddered as she recalled their last moment of love—it had not been as special as she had hoped, but at the time she felt connected to him and hopeful.

“Honey, we can work this out. I can promise you it won’t happen again. I’ll tell Tom he has to stay away. He doesn’t live in town anymore. We can work things out.”

“Joseph, don’t insult me. Our marriage—if you can call it a marriage—is over.”

“No, honey. Let’s not do anything rash. I can promise you I’ll stop it for good. It wasn’t meant to be anything special. Caro, you must listen to me and give me a chance. I love you. I truly love you and want our marriage to continue and for us to have a good life together. We can be happy, like we were the first years. Remember how happy we were when we—”

“Joseph, stop,” she said loudly, pushing his hand away from her arm. “You can’t expect me to stay with you. Not now, not after what I saw today. I can never love you as I did. I wonder if I really loved you since I didn’t know the truth about you.”

“But, Caro . . . You know how happy we are here and how everyone thinks the world of you. My mom and Tina won’t understand why you’d leave. Give yourself some time. You’ll forgive me, I know you will.”

Carolina threw down the cushion she was holding onto tightly and stood up. “Are you insane, Joseph? You think I can forgive what I saw today? I honestly think I could forgive you with another woman, but this

... this ... other man?" Her voice was shrill.

She took deep breaths before she continued. "You want to stay married? Why, Joseph? For me to be your cover? I see why you were so thrilled I was a virgin when we married. I can't imagine it's normal to have as little sex as we —. You knew I'd never say anything or ask anyone about the subject. I'm the good wife who stays home, keeps a perfect house and sews, and is active in our church. How long were you going to carry on with your secret life? No, Joseph, at this moment I'm not sure what I'll do, but I will not stay in this marriage."

"Don't upset yourself so much. I had no intention of hurting you, ever. I am so sorry. Please forgive me. Whatever else you do, forgive me," Joseph said with his arms reaching out to her, his hands almost touching her hands. Reaching out, she held his hands but did not give in to his embrace. She held his eyes with hers, looking deeply into the hazel she had found so beguiling. He waited for her to speak.

"I will forgive you, Joseph," she said huskily, her voice composed, each word spoken slowly, deliberately, as she lightly held his hands, "but for now, you have to go. I will let you know how and when I will leave Salinas." She released his hands slowly, knowing this would be the last time they touched. She clenched her hands, willing herself to keep from crying, though it would be more out of sadness for the end of their marriage. Her love for him had changed forever.