PROLOGUE

It’s always about the light. Any photographer will tell you that. It was a beautiful December late afternoon in the desert town of Santa Fe, New Mexico, a place renowned for its unique light. The rocky landscape, faintly dusted with snow, would have been brightly lit in dramatic burnt orange and rose rays refracted from an afternoon sun sinking in the sky toward sunset. It is that magical light that illuminates the beauty in anything it reaches. It is the photographer’s best friend and secret weapon.

The little girl was excited as her father snapped away, taking image after image of her with his spiffy, high-tech camera. The father watched his daughter with delight and shared her joy. The wonders of light had enthralled him since his youth. They had already brought him great wealth and success. He was all of thirty-four.

But the year was 1943, and the “high-tech” camera was a Rolleiflex box model filled with Kodak roll film. His daughter was disappointed when she learned that it would be weeks before she would be able to see the pictures her father had taken. “Why can’t I see these pictures right now? I don’t want to wait.”

In those days, the film would have to be unloaded from the camera, taken to a pharmacy, and shipped off to a laboratory to be developed into negatives. That process would involve a series of baths in various chemicals, all done in the dark at controlled temperatures. Once dry, each negative would then have a precise amount of light projected through it, the image being focused onto photographic paper held at just the right distance so that the image was sharp. That paper, or positive, would next be developed to bring out the image, washed, and then processed further to stabilize the print. Finally, after drying, it could be shipped back for the little girl to see, long after the enchantment of the moment had faded away.

When confronted with an upset child asking silly questions seemingly impossible to answer, most fathers would respond with a comforting, if exasperated, “Because,” or “That’s just the way it is,” or even “I don’t know.” But not this father. As a colleague acknowledged many years
later, this man “never had an ordinary reaction to anything.” Instead of dismissively laughing off his daughter’s frustration, he shared it, he embraced it, and on the spot, at that moment, he committed himself intellectually to solving his daughter’s dilemma. He would figure out a way to create a photographic system—a revolutionary camera and film combination—that would allow images to be viewed immediately after being taken. He would invent “one-step photography.”