

# One



CHILDREN'S CHEERS AND giggling vitalized the normally quiet Tuttle dining room. It was the fifteenth – Danni's birthday. The balloons were filled. Streamers were hung. Preschoolers played. New friends were made. And in the backyard, an exuberant game of tag was being waged.

Five-year-old Danni got up on her tiptoes – sporting the new, powder blue dress her mother had insisted she wear. She stretched for the manual camera which was always just out of reach. On the top of the dresser, its boxy shape beckoned to be explored. More tantalizing than the promise of any gift-wrapped toy, what happened *inside* the metal, silver and black contraption intrigued her. Black and white portraits and color snapshots – often of *them* or from her

father's sudden travels abroad — had been hidden from almost everyone's view. Only a few had been framed. The rest were quickly destroyed.

“Don't, Danni. You'll break it,” Marnie shooed her away. The former homecoming queen's premature worry lines and wrinkles, poorly hidden under overpriced moisturizer and makeup, only made Danni's mother appear much older than her thirty-one years. Suspicions of multiple extramarital affairs had depleted her. And ideas more somber than those had consumed her waking hours.

“Now, you just turn the ring until everything you see looks clear.” In the habit of ignoring his wife's cautioning, Daniel held the camera to the eye of his elder child. Danni's small hands gripped it hungrily. If nothing else came from his marriage, Daniel knew he had a child who was like him — almost as good as a son, he thought, but not quite.

He was already following in his father's footsteps. The late nights, the disappearances, the lies, the denials. Even though he wanted to protect his children from hardship, deep down, he feared that he couldn't. He wasn't willing to stay faithful. And he was afraid to admit his transgressions. Every time he looked into his little girls' eyes, he saw tiny reminders of the conduct he'd hated. He saw their trust and adoration. But, he knew he was repaying it with kindness that only softened betrayal.

By the age of eleven, Daniel had almost grown numb to the sounds of his mother's crying. But, the sight of her cascading tears always drove him to fury. He blamed *her* for staying in a dead-end relationship. He both hated and loved his father and saw him as a tragic, misunderstood figure. The similarities in their behavior hadn't escaped Daniel's notice. And as he considered the effects of what he planned to do next, the unwitting child nuzzled between his arms abruptly fidgeted.

Danni's new garment's tags were once again chafing her neck. The spreading rash on her nape testified while her father sympathetically steadied his heavy Pentax K1000. Tomboyish, Danni wasn't a dress girl. But, she was very interested in trying to make her mother happy.

Shifting the camera an inch, Danni framed a much more affable subject. Marnie's younger sister was much beloved, but equally exhausted. More emotionally stable at a mere twenty-eight, Jackie hid well-earned resentment beneath layers of often called-upon familial duty. Jackie was more like a mother to Marnie's children than an aunt. But, her uncertainty of what might happen without her active supervision would never allow her to say no — no matter what time, day or night. When the phone rang, safeguarding her nieces from trauma became Jackie's number one priority. But, mostly she wanted Danni and Grace to know and love

their mother. She wanted them to know her soul and not the shell – the woman Marnie *used* to be who was still clawing for freedom.

Moving on, Danni focused on three-year-old Grace. Tattling, the cherub-faced toddler cried out wanting equal time with their father. Jealously objecting to her high chair’s oppressive restrictions, she tried to climb out, but was quickly returned to her seat.

“Then, you push the button,” Daniel instructed. Framing her traitorous sibling out of the photo, Danni complied, releasing the shutter.

Candy-coated, grateful lips greeted Daniel’s cheek, kissing him, as he reset his camera on the dresser and turned to face his firstborn. Thrilled by their shared affection and secret, Danni ran back into the dining room – scarcely bothered by the guests she’d seen in passing, but hardly knew. She wrapped her arms around her mother’s leg.

“All right, you guys. I need you to be good,” Marnie requested. “In a minute, it’ll be cake time for the birthday girl!” The children cheered.

Inching closer, neighborhood kids eagerly snatched paper plates and plastic utensils from the table. Watching her festive display being reduced to disarray, Marnie forced a strained smile, agitated. “One at a time,” she gently guided.