

CHAPTER ONE

Tuesday Night

THE KITCHEN HELD THE DAY longer than the rest of the house. Heat lingered there—off the stove, off the pavement outside, off the air itself—so he'd cracked the window above the sink to let it breathe. The screen rattled faintly when a car passed, then went still again.

Early September still got away with that behavior. Summer didn't leave all at once; it thinned out slowly, like it was waiting to see if anyone noticed.

He worked without checking a clock. The timing lived in his hands by now. The burgers hissed as his hand turned them and nudged the pan to the cooler side of the burner, sliding the tray of fries into the oven with a practiced glance at the rack height. Enough time to crisp. Not long enough to dry out. Grease snapped when the spatula slid beneath, then settled under his hand into a steady sizzle.

Tuesday nights had settled into a rhythm again, now that the school year had started. Drop-off after work. Dinner. A little time to talk. Then back out the door

early enough that they complete their evening rituals at her house without feeling rushed.

He'd built his life carefully. Weeks had consistent form now. That hadn't always been true in his twenties.

The calendar had shape again. Summer always felt slightly unmoored—late nights, loose plans, things drifting. September brought edges back.

He picked up his phone without thinking while the pan hissed softly. He wasn't looking for anything in particular. The feed moved as it always did, one memory nudging into the next beneath the slow movement of his thumb. A photo from the end of summer—someone had caught them mid-step on a boardwalk, wind tugging at their clothes, his son mid-laugh and head thrown back. Another from a hike years ago, all of them squinting into the light, faces flushed and unguarded, the wind blowing hair across her face. He paused just long enough for his thumb to hover, registering the place, the angle, the fact that he'd forgotten the moment had been captured at all.

The scrolling continued.

Back-to-school pictures surfaced next. Years layered over each other. Different heights. Different smiles. The driveway still held the same thin crack near the mailbox. The sidewalk hadn't changed either. The kids always seemed older once they were frozen in a frame, as if movement softened the change and stillness revealed it.

The light from the phone cooled the counter beneath his hand. A smile appeared in the corner of his mouth without intention as his thumb moved on.

The kitchen timer chimed softly. He reached over and silenced it, then checked the clock on the microwave. Still early. Plenty of time. They were good about that—on time, especially once routines were back in place. He appreciated it more than he let on.

Punctuality meant effort. It meant someone had thought ahead.

He set the phone down and turned the burner lower, letting the food rest. The house felt settled, the way it only did when he knew what was coming next. No rushing. No guessing. Just the quiet hum of a plan unfolding the way it was supposed to.

Outside, the air had that late-summer heaviness to it, warm but thinning. Cicadas pulsed unevenly, louder when the street went quiet. He could hear someone a few houses down laughing, a car passing too fast at the corner. Normal sounds. Ordinary life moving along without asking for attention.

Wiping his hands on a towel, he took a quick look around—nothing out of place, nothing forgotten. He'd already gone through the house twice today, once before work and once after. It was easier when everything had already been done.

From the driveway came the soft, unmistakable sound of a car door closing. Glancing toward the front of the house, he felt the small, automatic lift of anticipation that came with it. He reached for the towel again, drying his hands more out of habit than need.

Right on time.