

No, it was not the happiest moment of David Hedges's life. Soren, his partner of five years, had left him, he'd gotten fat, and somewhere in the midst of that, he'd woken up one day and realized he was no longer in his twenties. Or his forties. The last person he expected to hear from was Julie Fiske.

He and Julie had a history, albeit an ancient and complicated one. They hadn't seen each other in almost thirty years, hadn't spoken in more than twenty, and David assumed that their story, like a few other things in his life—his desire to visit Petra; his vow to study piano; his sexual relevance—had ended. This didn't diminish her importance to him. His memories of her lingered, faded by the years in flattering ways. In his mind, they were still best friends. He hoped the separation had boosted her image of him as well. He knew he was best appreciated in small doses and at great distances, a fact that bothered him less than he suspected it should.

He heard of Julie Fiske infrequently through a few mutual friends and an occasional late-night computer perusal when he was feeling maudlin. *Oh, Julie.* He'd pieced together scraps and had come to the conclusion that she had a happy life—a husband (her second), a teenaged daughter, a large house on the ocean north of Boston. She taught art at a private school for kids with

learning problems, not what she'd imagined for herself in her younger incarnation, but who was he to judge? It appeared things had finally gone well for her. He was delighted. There had been years when he worried that she'd been set on a path of bad choices and bad luck by the mistake of her brief, misguided first marriage.

To him.

They'd been in touch sporadically for a while after the divorce, and then she'd met and eventually married Henry Bell, an investment adviser David had had the pleasure of never meeting. David wasn't good at making money with money, and he was suspicious of people who were, especially when they did it with other people's money, an activity he equated with plagiarism. More recently, Henry had turned restaurateur, probably a midlife bid for low-level glamour. He hoped Julie was happy with Henry while hoping she still had a special place in her heart for him.

Over the years, David had thought of trying to see her when he went east to visit family, but he'd never followed through. Having moved as far away as the continent would allow, it seemed easiest to leave three thousand miles between them. The period of life they'd shared was his ex-life, and he was resigned to leave it at that. In the wake of Soren's departure, he'd come to realize he was racking up a number of ex-lives he could look back on with varying degrees of happiness, disappointment, and disapproval. What was less clear was whether or not he had a viable life ahead of him.

And then one day during that season of his aggrieved discontent, he received a phone call from Julie Fiske that changed everything.