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Jennifer Weiner

The Summer Place

A NOVEL

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Jennifer
Weiner

The
Summer
Place

A NOVEL

ATRIA BOOKS

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*For Bill Syken
In memory of Frances Frumin Weiner*

“Are you sure
That we are awake?
It seems to me
That yet we sleep, we dream”

—William Shakespeare,
A Midsummer Night's Dream

Prologue

For forty years, the house had stood on the edge of the dune, overlooking the waters of Cape Cod Bay. Over time, the dune had eroded, shearing away in gentle showers of sand. Beach plums and bayberry shrubs clung to its sides like the splayed fingers of a clutching hand. Down below, the water in the bay had crept higher each season, paring off slivers of the beach. The dirt path that once led to the house's front door had been widened and covered in crushed oyster shells. Her grounds had been landscaped, lavender and hydrangeas and bright-blooming roses added to the pin oaks and crabapple trees. A pool had been dug out of the gentle slope of the meadow, a guesthouse and garage added on; then more decks, a hot tub, and an outdoor shower with a crescent moon cut into the arch of its door so bathers could look out at the sea.

Through all the changes—the coats of paint, the loose boards nailed down for the second and third times, the hinges oiled, and the windows replaced—the house had waited, patient and steadfast. The molecules of her walls vibrated with the echoes of every conversation ever held in her rooms; the ceilings and the floors and the dirt below held the resonances of all she had seen. She knew things: good and bad. She'd seen sorrow and happiness, tragedy and joy, and plenty of the mundane, the cheerful low hum generated by families at the beach in the summertime.

Thousands of meals had been cooked and eaten in her kitchen; hundreds of hamburgers and hot dogs grilled and served at the picnic table on the top deck. She had witnessed the preparation of fresh clams and lobster, local corn on the cob and sun-warmed tomatoes sweet as sugar and right off the vine. Couples, young and old, had danced on her floors and embraced in her bedrooms. She'd

seen tender kisses and heard blissful sighs and whispered declarations of love. Babies had been conceived beneath her roof, and those same babies had grown up and come back to her, with babies of their own. She'd watched a mother bathe her newborn daughter and, many years later, had seen that daughter set her own baby in a crib, then walk toward her mother and embrace her, whispering, *Thank you. I had no idea how hard this was going to be.* The house had welcomed them all; she'd borne witness to their histories and had held them close in her embrace.

In all those years, through all that time, she had only ever been able to watch. All the pain, all the mistakes—*no, not that party; no, no more to drink tonight; no, not him; no, not her; no, don't open that door, don't answer the phone, do not let that man back in your bed*—she had never been able to assert her own will or even make herself known. For years, she'd tried, but she'd never managed to do more than cause a few odd ripples in the hot tub or make the same screen door fall off onto the deck (“that damn door,” the families muttered, as they lifted it back on its tracks).

The house never gave up. She kept working at it, patiently, assiduously, trying to find ways to let her people know that she heard them, that she saw them, that she wanted to help. They might take her for granted; they might leave her empty all through the winter, letting mice chew through her insulation to make nests inside her walls, but she cared for them, and always would.

And now, another summer was approaching, the days getting longer, the air getting warmer, and her mission had never felt more urgent. Changes were coming. She had so many things to tell her people, and she was running out of time to figure out how.

Part One



Ruby Getting Married

Sarah

On a Friday night just after sunset, Sarah Weinberg Danhauser lit a match, bent her head, and said the blessing over the Shabbat candles in the dining room of her brownstone in Park Slope. Dinner was on the table: roast chicken, glazed with honey; homemade stuffing with mushrooms and walnuts, fresh-baked challah, and a salad with fennel and blood oranges, sprinkled with pomegranate seeds so expensive that Sarah had guiltily shoved the container, with its damning price tag, deep down into the recycling bin, lest her husband see.

Eli, said husband, sat at the head of the table, his eyes on his plate. Their sons, Dexter, who was eight, and Miles, almost seven, were on the left side of the table with Eli's brother Ari between them. Ari, twice-divorced and currently single, his jeans and ratty T-shirt contrasting with the khakis and collared shirts Sarah insisted her sons wear on Shabbat, had become a Friday-night regular at the Danhausers' table. Ari was not Sarah's favorite person, with his glinting good looks and sly smile and the way he'd "borrow" significant sums of money from his brother once or twice a year, but Eli had asked, and Sarah's mother-in-law had gotten involved ("I know he's a grown man and he should be able to feed himself, but he acts like Flamin' Hot Cheetos are a food group, and I'm worried he's going to get rickets"), and so, reluctantly, Sarah had extended the invitation.

On the other side of the table sat Ruby, Sarah's stepdaughter, and Ruby's pandemic boyfriend, Gabe. Sarah supposed she should just call Gabe a boyfriend, minus the qualifier, but the way his romance with Ruby had been fast-forwarded thanks to COVID meant that, in her mind, Gabe would always have an asterisk next to his name. Gabe and Ruby had been together for just six weeks in March of 2020 when NYU shut down and sent everyone home. Ruby

had come back to her bedroom in Brooklyn and, after lengthy discussions, Sarah and Eli had agreed to allow Gabe, who was from California, to cohabit with her. The two had been inseparable that pandemic year, all the way through their virtual graduation, snuggling on the couch bingeing Netflix or taking long, rambling walks through the city, holding hands and wearing matching face masks, or starting a container victory garden on the brownstone's roof deck that eventually yielded a bumper crop of lettuce and kale, a handful of wan carrots, and a single seedy watermelon ("Next year will be better," Ruby promised, after posting a series of photos of the melon on her Instagram).

Ruby and Gabe had stayed together through the summer, into the winter, and, after the New Year, when the pandemic had finally loosened its grip, they'd gotten vaccinated, gotten jobs—Ruby as assistant stage manager in an independent theater company in Jackson Heights; Gabe as a proofreader—taken several of their favorite plants, and moved out of Brooklyn and into a tiny studio in Queens, where they'd been living for just over a month.

Sarah finished the blessing over the wine and the bread. The platters of food had made their first trip around the table (Ari, Sarah noticed, helped himself to the largest chunk of white meat). She'd just finished reminding Dexter to put his napkin on his lap when Ruby, beaming blissfully, took her boyfriend by the hand. "Gabe and I have some news," she said.

Sarah felt a freezing sensation spread from her heart to her belly. She shot a quick, desperate look down the table, in Eli's direction, hoping for a nod, a shared glance, any kind of gesture or expression that would say *I understand how you feel and I agree* or—even better—*I will shut down this foolishness, don't you worry*. But Eli was looking at his plate, completely oblivious as he chewed. Big surprise.

Sarah made herself smile. "What's that, honey?" she asked, even though the icy feeling in her chest told her that she already knew.

"Gabe and I are getting married!" Ruby said. Her expression was exultant; her pale cheeks were flushed. Beside her, Gabe wore his usual good-natured, affable look. His dark hair was a little unruly; his deep-set eyes seemed sleepy; and his posture was relaxed, almost lazy, as Ruby put her arm around his shoulder, drawing him close. Sarah liked Gabe, but she'd always felt like he was a boy and

not a young man, a mature adult, ready to take a wife and, presumably, start a family. Not that Gabe wasn't a good guy. He was. He was well-mannered and considerate, supremely easygoing. He never got angry. He almost always looked pleased. Or maybe he just looked stoned. Sarah had never been able to tell, and these days, with pot being legal, she couldn't complain about the smell that had sometimes seeped down the stairs from the attic when Ruby and Gabe had been in residence. *It's no different from having a beer*, Eli had told her, and Sarah agreed intellectually, but somehow it still felt different, illicit and wrong.

"Way to go!" said Ari, extending his hand across the table so Gabe could high-five him. "Up top!" he said to Ruby, who grinned and slapped his palm.

"Can we be in the wedding?" asked Dexter. Dexter looked like his father, tall and lanky, with curly dark-blond hair, pale, freckly skin that flushed easily, and elbows that always seemed to find the nearest pitcher or water glass.

"We can be best men!" said Miles. Miles was more compactly built than his brother, with Sarah's heart-shaped face and fine brown hair. If Dexter was an exuberant golden retriever, Miles was a small, neat cat, his movements careful and precise as he maneuvered his silverware and dabbed at his lips with his napkin.

"We've got an even better job for you guys," said Ruby. "We're going to get married in July, on the Cape. I already asked Safta, and she says it's fine. She knows it's my favorite time of year there."

"So soon!" Sarah blurted, then gulped at her wine. Ruby had always been a determined girl. She hated to be thwarted; despised hearing *No*, or *Let's think it over*, or worst of all, *Slow down*. Even a whiff of a hint that her stepmother opposed this match, or thought that Ruby, at twenty-two, was too young to marry anyone, would have Gabe and Ruby at City Hall by the end of the week with a marriage license in hand. And what was worse, Sarah thought, was that Ruby had told Sarah's mother before she'd told Sarah herself. She felt a clenching toward the back of her throat, a feeling that had become all too familiar during the pandemic, as she choked back what she wanted to say.

Sarah had met Ruby fourteen years ago, when Ruby was just eight years old, a skinny, pigtailed girl walking down the hall of the Manhattan Music School, where Sarah was the executive director. She'd noticed Ruby right away. Or,

rather, she'd noticed Ruby's father, tall, bespectacled, and a little awkward, one of a handful of men in the sea of women; towering over most of the moms and nannies who sat, waiting on the benches outside the kids' classrooms as their children shook maracas or thumped at drums. "Miss Sarah, do you have a boyfriend or a girlfriend or a husband or a wife?" Ruby had asked one day after class, staring up at Sarah very seriously.

Sarah had been charmed. "Not at the moment," she'd said, and Eli had put his hand on Ruby's shoulder, gently steering her toward the other kids, saying, "I've got it from here."

Eli had taken Sarah to dinner that Saturday night, and to a Philip Glass concert at the Brooklyn Academy of Music the following week. Eli was more than ten years her senior, divorced, with full custody of a child, employed as a periodontist. Back when Sarah had made lists of what she wanted in a husband, any one of those facts would have been an automatic disqualifier. She'd thought she had wanted a man her age, unencumbered by either children or ex-wives; a painter or a writer or a musician, not a man who did root canals and gum grafts for a living; definitely not a man who'd failed at marriage and already had the responsibility of a child.

But Eli won her over. He wasn't a musician himself ("Six months of recorder," he'd said cheerfully, when she'd asked), but when they started dating he began reading reviews and following classical music blogs. He took her to hear chamber music concerts and piano recitals, where he listened attentively and was unstinting in his admiration for the musicians. "Someone has to be the audience, right?" he'd said. "We can't all be soloists." She'd smiled, a little sadly, because once, being a soloist had been her plan. There was a version of her life where the closest a man like Eli could have come to her would be as a member of the audience, where he'd paid for a ticket to hear her play. But Sarah had abandoned that dream long ago.

Sarah loved the way Eli had pursued her with a single-minded intensity; the way he noticed what she liked, the way he always thought about her comfort. If they went out and the weather turned cold, he'd wrap her up in his jacket and insist that she wear it home. If he noticed her enjoying a certain wine at dinner, he'd have a bottle sent to her house the next night. He bought her clothes

without asking for, or guessing at, her sizes (later she learned that he'd discreetly asked her best friend); he gave her a pair of beautiful gold and amethyst earrings to mark their first month of what he unironically called "going steady." The first time he took her to bed, she'd been delighted, and a little surprised, at how much she liked it. In the real world, Eli was respectful, almost deferential, a feminist who had no problem working with women or treating them as equal. With his clothes off, he was different—self-assured, a little bossy, in a way that Sarah was surprised to find thrilled her.

Best of all was his devotion to Ruby. A man who loved his daughter, Sarah had thought, a man who was a good father, would be a good husband, too. She'd been right, for the most part. Eli had been a wonderful husband, even if Ruby had been a handful early on. Ruby had liked Sarah just fine when she was Miss Sarah at music school, had resented Sarah terribly when things went from being theoretical to actual, and when Sarah went from being a fun companion who showed up on the weekends and took Ruby to get mani-pedis or tea to a full-time, live-in partner to Ruby's father, who made sure that Ruby did her homework, cleared her dishes, and finished her chores.

It hadn't been easy, but Sarah had persevered, ignoring the resentment and nastiness, enduring the tantrums and the tears. She'd made allowances after Eli told her that Ruby's mother, Annette, had walked out before Ruby's first birthday, and she had done her best to not take it personally when Ruby made rude remarks or hid her house keys or left unflattering drawings of Sarah (her chin extra-pointy, her mouth gaping open, presumably mid-yell) lying around where Sarah was sure to find them. She learned not to flinch when Ruby made a point of correcting anyone who got it wrong: *Sarah's not my real mother*. It had taken Sarah years of patience, years of ignoring slights large and small, years of extending her hand and having it slapped away, to finally arrive at the moment, right around her thirteenth birthday, when Ruby had started to soften and began to let her in.

It hadn't hurt, Sarah thought, that Annette had no discernible interest in parenting. Annette was an artist with no actual career and no permanent address. She had always focused on herself and her current passions, whatever they were at the moment: learning to throw pottery or to apply henna designs,

performing slam poetry in Seattle, or building costumes for an avant-garde theater company in Brazil. (Annette loved to tell the less theater-literate that the proper terminology was not sewing or creating costumes but building them.) Annette's creative pursuits came first; her romantic partners came second. Her only child might not have even made the list.

And now Ruby was getting married! Maybe if Sarah had been Ruby's birth mother, she'd have been comfortable telling Ruby no, she was too young to be promising her entire life to someone; that her brain was not done baking; that she still had the whole world to see and explore. Her father and her biological mother could have said those things, and Ruby might even have listened; but Sarah, as a stepmother, had to keep quiet, knowing that if she spoke up she'd only send Ruby running faster in the wrong direction.

"We don't want a big wedding," Ruby was saying, with Gabe's hand still clasped in hers. "Just family and our closest friends. There's not a lot of planning that we need to do. So there's really no reason to wait." Daintily, Ruby speared a drumstick from the platter and set it on her plate.

"What about your dress?" Sarah managed. "And flowers? You'll need a caterer... and invitations can take weeks. Months!" Maybe she could convince Ruby that there were actual, practical reasons why this plan would never work. When Sarah herself had gotten married, she and her mother had spent six months planning the big day. There'd been a rehearsal dinner at her parents' house in Truro, then the ceremony on a bluff overlooking the ocean, and, finally, the reception at a vineyard, underneath a tent, on a gorgeous night in early September, when the air was still soft and full of the smell of summer rose hips, the bay still warm enough for skinny-dipping. Late at night, after their rehearsal dinner, she and Eli had gone down to the beach, taken off their clothes, and run into the water. *I thought it was bad luck to see the bride the night before the wedding*, he'd said. *So close your eyes*, she'd whispered back, wrapping her legs around his waist and her arms around his shoulders.

"We're going to do email invitations," said Ruby, waving one hand in an airy dismissal of Sarah's concerns.

"What?" Sarah squawked, wrenched out of her memory of skinny-dipping and rudely returned to the tragedy currently in progress.

“Better for the environment,” said Gabe, making his first contribution to the conversation.

“Siobhan said she’d make me a dress as a wedding gift.” Siobhan, Sarah knew, was an NYU classmate who’d majored in costume design. “And Safta said she’d help me with the rest of it.”

Again, Sarah mentally cursed her mother. Again, she wondered why Ruby hadn’t told her first, or at least at the same time. She looked down the table, at her husband, wordlessly begging him for help. Eli’s face was expressionless. He still had his eyes on his plate and his fork in his hand. As Sarah watched, he shoved another wad of stuffing into his mouth and started chewing.

“Can we be ring bearers?” asked Miles.

“Are dogs invited?” asked Dexter. “I bet we could tie the ring around Lord Farquaad’s neck!”

At the sound of his name, Lord Farquaad, the family’s corgi, who’d been sleeping on his bed in the corner of the dining room, lifted his head and peered around. Once he’d determined that no food was on offer, he gave a chuffing sigh, settled his snout back on his paws, and closed his eyes, looking vaguely disgusted at having been woken up for nothing.

“You guys can be ushers. How about that?” Ruby offered. The boys had cheered and Sarah relaxed the tiniest bit. When Sarah had gotten pregnant, she’d worried that the new arrival would further alienate Ruby, but Dexter’s arrival had been the event that finally turned them all into a family. Prickly, angry Ruby had loved the baby unreservedly. The first day in the hospital, she’d begged to hold him. As her dad watched, murmuring instructions, Ruby had seated herself carefully in the armchair and tucked the blanket-wrapped bundle against her chest. “Hello, Dexter,” she’d said. “I’m your big sister. And when you’re old enough, you can come stay with me, and I’ll let you do anything... you... want.” Eli had looked a little alarmed at that assertion, but Sarah’s eyes had filled with tears. *Maybe this will be all right*, she’d thought. She’d greeted Miles with just as much enthusiasm, and all through college no matter what else she had going on, she’d spent a week or two each summer with her half-brothers at Sarah’s mom’s place on the Cape, shepherding them through meals and nap times, driving

them to swim lessons and Audubon camp, hunting for clams or hermit crabs on the beach, or going for a bike ride and an ice-cream cone.

“What’s an usher do?” asked Miles.

“You get to be in charge of where everyone sits. You help people find their seats, and you ask if they’re with the bride or the groom. It’s a very important job,” Gabe said, with one of his easy smiles. Ruby beamed at him, and Gabe reached over to give her ponytail an affectionate tweak. Ruby’s cheeks were pink; her usually sharp expression was almost dreamy. Her eyes sparkled behind her glasses as she leaned her head on Gabe’s shoulder.

“Have you told your mother?” Sarah asked quietly.

Ruby’s expression darkened. “We’ve talked,” she said.

Which meant what, exactly? Sarah shot her husband a frantic look, which Eli, still chewing, either didn’t see or chose to ignore. What had Annette said when Ruby called her with the news? Why hadn’t Sarah’s own mom called to warn her? And what was she supposed to do now? Congratulate those two children? Propose a toast?

Before she could decide, Dexter asked Gabe, “Did you give her a ring?”

Ruby flipped her hand over, curling her fingers into her palm. “We’re going to pick one out together.” Ruby leaned over and kissed Gabe’s cheek. Sarah swallowed hard. She knew Ruby so well. She knew how Ruby dreamed of being a Broadway director, how Ruby would tell everyone her favorite show was *Angels in America*, but how she secretly loved *Phantom of the Opera*, how she hated celery and loved capers, and was so ticklish that she had to cut the tags off any item of clothing that touched her skin. She knew that Ruby hated being short and was secretly vain about her curls and that she’d been delighted when an eye exam revealed that she was nearsighted, because she thought heavy, Clark Kent–style glasses would make people take her seriously.

Unlike Ruby, with her singular focus—Ruby, who’d known, since she’d seen her first Broadway show, that she wanted to grow up and work in theater—Gabe hadn’t settled on a career. While Ruby had earned a BFA in production and design at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts, Gabe had drifted through the general studies program, graduating with a degree in liberal arts and, as far as Sarah could discern, no idea of what he might use it for. He’d fallen into proofreading,

and seemed to like it well enough, but when Eli had asked about his future, Gabe had just shrugged.

This concerned Sarah enormously. “Are we worried about this?” she’d asked Eli, right after the pandemic had started, before Gabe and Ruby had arrived. They hadn’t met Gabe yet, and had managed to gather only a sparse handful of facts about him—that he’d grown up in California, that he’d graduate with Ruby, with a degree in liberal arts, and that he was still trying to figure out what to do with his life.

“Why would we worry?” Eli said.

Sarah pointed at her husband. “You knew what you wanted to be when you grew up by the time you’d finished college.”

“Probably by the time I finished high school,” Eli agreed.

Sarah thought the idea of an eighteen-year-old dreaming of dental implants and root canals was a little weird. She let it go. “I knew what I wanted to be pretty early on.” *And then decided not to be it*, she thought. But even though she hadn’t become a concert pianist, she’d found a way to make music her life. She hadn’t floundered around for years, trying this, sampling that. Her own mother, as far as Sarah knew, had always loved books and writing, and had always known her career would involve those things, somehow, and her stepdaughter was the same way. “Ruby’s always known that she wanted to be in theater.”

“Since she saw *Phantom*,” Eli said, smiling fondly. Sarah had heard the story, early on, of Ruby’s first Broadway show, how enraptured she’d been, how she’d stood at the stage door and waited until every single actor had come out. “We were lucky with Ruby. Just like your parents were lucky with you.”

Sarah pressed her lips together, not wanting to dwell on how often she found herself doubting her choices and thinking about the life she hadn’t pursued.

“I don’t understand what Ruby sees in him. Doesn’t it worry you at all?”

“Not really.” Eli was in the bathroom with the door open. Sarah could see him studying his hairline in the mirror. “It’s probably the sex.”

Sarah chucked a decorative pillow toward the bathroom door. “Thank you for that. Now I’ll just sit here imagining...” She waved her hands. “... that.”

“Ruby’s twenty-one. Of course she’s having sex,” said Eli. He tilted left, then right, frowning, and handed Sarah his phone. “Will you take a picture of the top

of my head?”

“No. Down that road lies madness.” Eli’s hair was starting to thin, but whenever he asked about it, Sarah assured him that everything was fine. His bald spot, she’d decided, would be her secret. *Men are vain about their hair*, her mom had told her. *Even though it’s not as big a deal for them, they don’t like getting older any more than we do.*

Eli reclaimed his phone and gave his wife a look that was equal parts fond and exasperated. “I think Gabe sounds like a nice guy.” He plugged his phone into the charger on his bedside table, then retrieved the throw pillow, setting it on the love seat. “Not everyone has it all figured out before they graduate.”

“But Ruby does,” Sarah countered, swinging her legs off the bed, heading to the bathroom to brush her teeth and floss (life with a periodontist meant you never got to slack on your flossing). “Ruby is going full speed ahead.”

“It’s called balance,” Eli said, a touch smugly. “He complements her. You can’t have two type-As getting married. You need one person who’s all drive and determination...” With a flourish, he’d pointed at himself, in his white undershirt and his plaid pajama bottoms. “... and someone who’s laid back and happy to let their partner lead the way.” He’d pointed at her. “That,” he’d concluded, “is the key to a happy marriage.”

Sarah had shaken her head, smiling, and Eli had come to bed, wrapping his arms and legs around her like a vine around a tree. “Wife,” he’d murmured into her ear, and she’d fallen asleep, warm and content, knowing that she was loved.

How glad she would be now for Eli to tease her like that again, to whisper “wife” in her ear! How grateful she would be for a moment of connection, however brief, during a disagreement. How she wished that she and Eli could keep talking when dinner was over, so that then, gently, she could turn the conversation toward him, and what was going on, and why he’d shut down on her just as the pandemic had started and her job and the kids’ schools had gone virtual and Ruby had come home and Gabe had moved in—the moment, in other words, when she’d needed him more than ever. But before she could start, she knew Eli would make some excuse about work, a Zoom call, a deadline, something he needed to double-check that sounded both vague and urgent, and

he'd go padding down the hall, the flip-flops he swore were helping with his plantar fasciitis slapping noisily against the floor.

It was ironic. She and her husband had spent the pandemic year working less than fifty feet apart. Eli handled emergencies when they came up, but usually he was home doing telehealth visits and virtually teaching a class at Columbia's dental school. He had an office. Sarah did her Zooms from the vanity in their walk-in closet, where a fancier lady might have sat to do her makeup. She helped the school's two dozen teachers, including the Luddites who'd never so much as sent a text on an iPhone, figure out how to teach lessons online. She brainstormed with the development office about ways to raise money without the draw of in-person performances that doubled as fundraisers; she coordinated an online holiday choir concert. When she wasn't on camera, she worked in bed, with her back against the headboard and her laptop on a pile of pillows in front of her. The boys' school had been on a split schedule—two days a week in person, masked and distanced, the rest of the time at home, in virtual school. When they were home, each boy was in his own bedroom on the third floor, unless they were taking gym down in the living room, grunting or giggling their way through sit-ups and jumping jacks while a teacher called encouragement through the screen. Ruby and Gabe had been on the fourth floor for their classes. All that proximity, the way they lived and worked right on top of each other, meant that Sarah had never felt closer to her sons and her stepdaughter. But she'd felt increasingly distant from Eli, and every day it seemed like he was moving a little farther away.

You think you know someone, Sarah thought. She looked at her husband now, at the head of the table, cramming dinner into his mouth, clearly not tasting the food she'd spent hours cooking, not looking at her or at his daughter. *You think you know someone, then you're locked in a house together for over a year, and it turns out, you never knew him at all.*

"Well, if no one else is going to do it, I'm going to address the elephant in the room," Ari announced with a smug smile. It was so unfair, Sarah thought, that Ari was the taller, more classically good-looking brother. He didn't use reading glasses, he'd never had back trouble, and his hair wasn't thinning at all.

"What elephant?" asked Miles, looking around.

“Is there going to be an elephant at the wedding?” asked Dexter. “Arjun at my school went to a wedding with an elephant.”

Ari ignored them, waggling his eyebrows at Ruby and Gabe. “Anything else you two want to tell us? Is Uncle Ari going to need to get his shotgun?”

Gabe’s brow furrowed. Then he ducked his head with a shame-faced grin, as Ruby flushed more deeply.

“No! God, no!”

Ari held up his hands, palms out. “Okay, okay! All good! Just checking!”

“Uncle Ari,” said Dexter, looking deeply disapproving, “you don’t really have a gun, do you?”

“It’s just an expression,” Ruby said.

“Well, mazel tov!” said Sarah, lifting her wineglass. “To the happy couple!” Her celebratory declaration, even to her own ears, was far too giddy, too hearty, patently fake. She watched as Eli, with his mouth full, raised his own glass, then started to cough.

Miles and Dexter raised their plastic cups. Miles did it carefully. Dexter sloshed grape juice on the tablecloth, even though his glass was only half full. Eli managed a strangled “Mazel tov,” before starting to cough again.

“Dad?” Ruby asked, as Eli hacked, bent over his plate with his face turning red. “Dad?”

“He’s choking!” yelled Dexter, jumping up and knocking his chair to the ground. Miles got up, too. So did Lord Farquaad, who’d sensed either danger or a chance to snag some roast chicken.

“I’m fine,” Eli wheezed, waving them off.

Sarah stood and bumped the edge of the table with her hip, knocking over the wine, sending dark red liquid cascading down over the tablecloth, soaking her legs, and dripping onto the carpet, which she’d had steam-cleaned the week before. Lord Farquaad *grrred* when the decanter bounced past his head. Sarah pictured the dog snapping at her ankle; pictured herself falling, pulling down the tablecloth as she went. She imagined the lit candles rolling onto the carpet; she pictured the curtains, then her beautiful home, then the whole of her beautiful life, going up in flames, burning down to nothing.