

SATURDAY NIGHT

AT THE

Lakeside

SUPPER
CLUB

— A NOVEL —



J. Ryan
STRADAL

New York Times bestselling author of
KITCHENS OF THE GREAT MIDWEST

ALSO BY J. RYAN STRADAL

Kitchens of the Great Midwest
The Lager Queen of Minnesota

Saturday Night

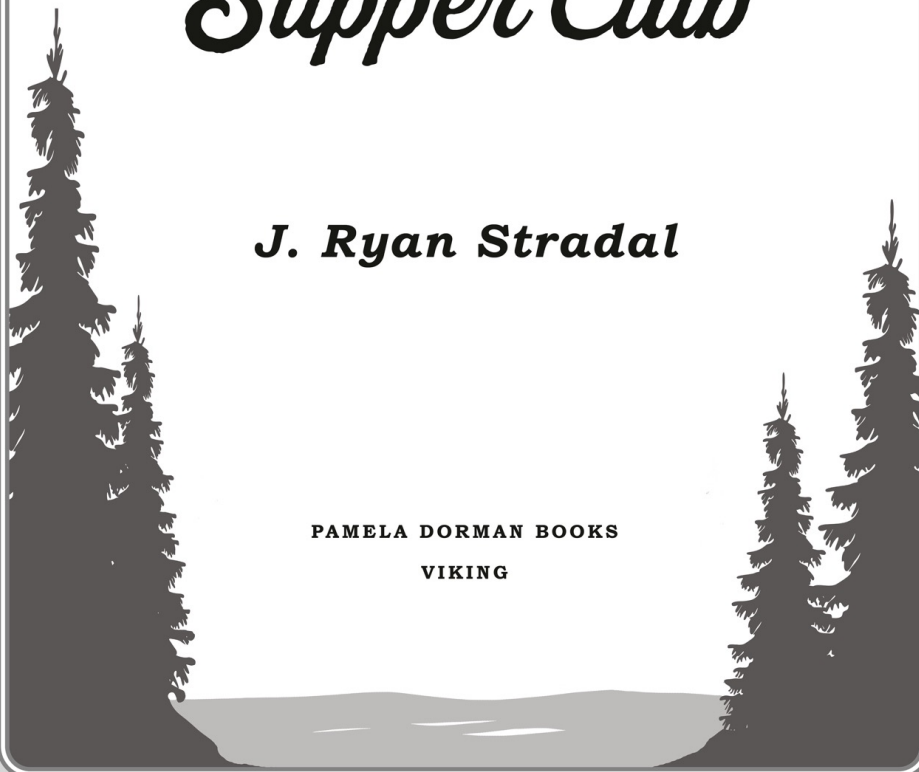
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Lakeside Supper Club

J. Ryan Stradal

PAMELA DORMAN BOOKS

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*For Auden,
if he so chooses*

One



Mariel, 1996

Mariel Prager believed in heaven, because she'd been there once, so far. She'd like to report that it looks an awful lot like Minnesota. The next best place to heaven, in her experience, was a type of restaurant found in the upper Midwest called a supper club. When she walked into a good one, she felt both welcome and somewhere out of time. The decor would be old-fashioned, the drinks would be strong, and the dining experience would evoke beloved memories, all for a pretty decent price.

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SINCE SHE WAS A KID, Mariel had spent countless days at Floyd and Betty's Lakeside Supper Club on scenic Bear Jaw Lake, Minnesota. The place wasn't particularly scenic itself, just a one-story brown wooden building with bright red front doors and tall windows on the side facing the lake. The sign outside read FINE DINING AT A FINE VALUE SINCE 1919, and because everyone trusts neon, fulfilling that promise was the duty of the owner, which, for the past two weeks, had been Mariel. On her watch, a proper supper club meal began with a free relish tray and basket of bread, followed by a round of brandy old-fashioneds, and then a lavish amount of hearty cuisine, with fish on Fridays, prime rib on Saturdays, and grasshoppers for dessert.

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BEFORE HE DIED, Mariel's grandpa Floyd had told her that she was ready to take over sole ownership, but this morning, she wished that someone else—*anyone* else—were in charge instead. After locking the front door of her house, Mariel wanted to hurl her body into the lake and float away.

For a long time, she'd simply managed the Lakeside's bar. It was a job she'd kept since becoming the owner, because it was the greatest watering hole in the north. It was loud and smoky, her hands were never dry, she never sat down, and she loved it. Every summer weekend, the horseshoe-shaped bar and its wood-paneled lounge were packed with people fresh from fishing boats and softball games and cars that had driven up from the Cities. It was a place where people chose to be on the most memorable nights of their lives, and it was a pleasure to be at the center of it all.

After what happened last night, though, she wasn't up for any of it, but that didn't matter. If she wasn't standing behind the bar when it opened at 5:00 p.m., people would talk.

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MARIEL'S QUIET, PEACEFUL COMMUTE to work had always been her favorite part of the day. From door to door, it took exactly fifty-four seconds—the time it takes to make a perfect old-fashioned—to walk at an ordinary pace down her driveway, across a county road, up the gravel shoulder, and into the paved parking lot. It had her two favorite smells, the sharp, earthy tang of pine trees on one end, and the stubborn mix of stale cigarette smoke and fry grease on the other, smells she'd always associated with belonging and pleasure. If she spotted an animal en route, she'd give it a name, like that day, when she saw a squirrel she named Pronto. Most important, if she could make it from home to the supper club without any interruption, it'd be a good day, guaranteed. The day before, her husband, Ned, stopped her in the driveway to kiss her before he left for the weekend, and it had been the worst day in a long time.

That morning, Mariel almost made it. She was a few steps into the Lakeside's parking lot when someone ruined her day.

"Mariel!" a woman's voice bellowed from a white station wagon. It was Hazel, the oldest of her regulars from the bar.

Mariel sighed, and turned to face her. "How ya doing, Hazel?"

"Better than I deserve," Hazel replied. "So, where'd you go last night? You just up and vanished on us."

"I was feeling sick, so I went home early." That's all Hazel needed to know.

"Oh, jeez. Food poisoning?"

Mariel just decided to nod.

Hazel responded with a brief, exaggerated grimace. "Well, you look all right today. By the way, nice T-shirt."

Mariel had to look down to remember what she was wearing. It was a Bruce Springsteen concert shirt from sixteen years ago. Maybe the last time she'd been to a concert.

"Thanks. Well, I should get to work."

"One more thing. Your mother called me. She needs a ride home from church, and wants to know if you can do it."

Mariel hadn't seen her mother for more than a decade, until two weeks before at Floyd's burial and wake. They'd made eye contact, briefly, but still hadn't spoken to each other.

"Why didn't she just call me?" Mariel asked.

"She said she tried three times, and it rang and rang."

Mariel had been to see her doctor that morning, so it's possible her mother's claim was true, but when she'd been at home, no one had called.

"Why can't whatever friend she's staying with just drive her?" The last Mariel heard, her mother had been hopping around the guest rooms of various childhood friends since Floyd's funeral. The fact that Florence hadn't gone back home to Winona by now was unsettling. Something was up.

"She specifically wanted you." Hazel looked pleased, which was a bad sign. "I've known your mom for sixty years. It's time, Mariel. At our age,

none of us knows how much time we have.”

Mariel hated it when older people played that card, especially on behalf of other older people. In her experience, it was true of everyone, at every age.

“I’ll think about it.”

Was she really going to do this today? She noticed a yellow-bellied sapsucker in the tree above, its red-capped head darting around, no doubt planning even further destruction of her trees in its godless little mind. Then she noticed another, one branch above. Maybe they were gathering their forces, and would soon descend in a cute fog of pestilence, and wipe out the forests, the buildings, the people, everything. Then it would be a lot quieter around here, and she could finally have a relaxing Saturday.

“Don’t think too long,” Hazel laughed. “Can’t keep Florence Stenerud waiting.”

Despite not living anywhere near Bear Jaw for fifty years, Mariel’s mother was still widely known, somehow loved, and often feared there. It was well known that anyone who disappointed Florence in the slightest, anyone who inconvenienced her or failed to meet her expectations, would have a swarm of baseless rumors unleashed after them in retaliation. Consequently, Mariel was certain that not collecting her mother in a timely fashion from the Our Savior’s Lutheran Church pancake breakfast would mean half the town would soon hear that Mariel had been badly injured in a car accident, or was trapped beneath a fallen tree, or had caught a rare, incurable illness, or was getting a divorce, or some heady cocktail of the above.

Mariel checked her watch. It was ten o’clock. “How long do I have, Hazel?”

“The pancake breakfast goes until eleven, but she’d like to be picked up by ten thirty.”

“Okay, I’ll do it,” Mariel said, surprising even herself.

When thinking of how she’d eventually speak with her mother, Mariel had long imagined a tear-streaked deathbed reconciliation, followed by a

few decades of regret, and that sounded fine. But maybe it was time, as Hazel said. Mariel was bound for a bad day anyway.

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THE ACTUAL TOWN OF Bear Jaw was seven miles from Bear Jaw Lake, in a move the region's invasive Europeans clearly did to confuse future tourists, of which there were now many. At this hour, at least most tourists and lake people were at their cabins, so traffic into town wouldn't be unbearable. Besides a green Borglund Services septic truck up ahead of her, the only other person Mariel had seen going her way was a fiftyish woman with bright silver-streaked hair on a silver bicycle.

Mariel's car radio was playing an interesting song about a guy who wanted to be killed because he was a loser. She flipped through the stations until she landed on a song by Mariah Carey, which was fine, or at least better.

Mariel had actually braced herself to speak with her mom at the funeral. There was just never a moment when Florence was standing alone without people around. Over the years, there were times she'd felt an urge to call, when a normal, well-adjusted person would've called a normal, well-adjusted mother. But Mariel could never bring herself to do it. Two weeks ago, Mariel had important news, news she didn't want her mother receiving from another source. She was pregnant. Or had been, until last night.

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SHE HADN'T TOLD HER husband yet. Ned was still down in the Cities, watching ball games with his college buddies through the weekend. She would wait. Ned saw Tim, Erick, and Doug only once or twice a year, and she didn't want to ruin his good time with them.

Her doctor, Theresa Eaton, had said if a miscarriage happened, it would likely occur in the first twelve weeks. Hers happened at six weeks and two

days, at work, right after the kitchen closed. She'd seen spotting earlier that day, and called Theresa, who said it was normal.

"See you in a few days," Theresa had said. "To check for the heartbeat."

But that night, as Mariel was making a Midori sour for a customer, she started feeling a sudden, stabbing pain. She ran to the bathroom, locked the stall door and sat down, her head spinning. It felt like her insides fell out. She knew before she could bring herself to look. Her entire body wanted to scream. She put her fist in her mouth, and cried as quietly as possible, to not bother anyone.

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ONCE SHE CLEANED UP, Mariel snuck out the back, without telling anybody. She'd apologize later and tell everyone she got sick, she told herself. Mariel thought of her two seasonal bar employees and hoped they wouldn't think poorly of her. As she pushed the rear door open, she'd never felt colder or lonelier.

Outside, she smelled fresh cigarette smoke. She was relieved to see it was Big Al, who'd been a chef at the Lakeside since before Mariel was born. Once, she'd wanted to be a chef herself, and Floyd and Big Al had taught her how to cook everything that kitchen served. He was probably the closest thing she had to family, apart from Ned.

"Leaving early?" Big Al asked, surprised.

"Stomach bug," she told him, intentionally looking away. If he saw her face, he'd know she was lying. Why had she told him about the pregnancy so early? She knew better. But she'd been so happy, and that was impossible to hide from him too.

"Need me to close up?"

"Yeah," she said, but couldn't keep the sadness from her voice.

"Oh no," he said, as if he knew.

She almost broke down and told him everything. Instead, she apologized, and walked home in the dark.

Maybe she wouldn't tell anyone. She'd lost a baby, but that's not the way most people would see it. They'd respond in ways that would be crushing. They'd hug her and say *It just wasn't meant to be*. They'd say *It happens all the time*. They'd say *You can try again!* They'd say that her friend Cathy's mom had nine miscarriages over twenty-five years. But they didn't know all that Mariel and Ned had been through just to have this single brief pregnancy. And Cathy's mom had seven kids. Mariel had none.

What was most devastating was that Mariel had been fine without a child. And she would've been, indefinitely, she knew it. For years, it was just Ned and her, and everything was good. Once they decided to have a baby, it was all Mariel could think about—even after learning about each of their fertility issues and how difficult it would be. After all the time and money spent, and procedures they endured, here she was. Not back to where she started, because there's no such thing. Her body would either bear a child or bear a loss. Either way, the space was made.

Unspoken, then, the loss burned through her memories, desperate for blame. She'd found one culprit. Mariel never touched the bar garnishes other than to serve them, but Friday night, two hours before the miscarriage, she felt suddenly hungry, and with her usual healthy snacks twenty feet away in her office, she lazily ate three green Maraschino cherries. For months, she'd ingested only things that were specifically good for fertility, and never touched anything artificial. Much later, she'd find out that they wouldn't have made a difference, but that didn't matter then. It was her single break from a routine. Now all the green cherries were in the trash, and would never appear in her bar again.

It was all because of those cherries, she'd told herself. It wasn't that Ned's sperm had almost no motility or that she had a vanishing number of follicles. It wasn't the extra pounds they carried or the excessive alcohol they'd once drunk or the fact that she was almost thirty-nine. She could forgive her faulty, mutinous body and move on, because she must. But until then, she'd tell no one.

Mariel was sure that if her mother ever found out that she'd miscarried, Florence would subject her to a blizzard of reasons why it was Mariel's

fault, and that was the last thing she needed. For the first time since she'd agreed to pick up her mother, Mariel wondered why she was in such a hurry.

On the radio, Mariah Carey was singing about how a baby will always be a part of her, and the love between her and the baby will never die. Mariel had heard this song a thousand times, but now it was obvious: the person who wrote this song had lost a child. And oh boy, she could hear in Mariah's voice that she wanted a baby again.

Mariel glanced down to change the station, and when she looked back up, she saw the most beautiful deer running across the road, a flawless Terry Redlin ten-point buck. The instant she pressed the brake, she heard and felt a loud thump, and saw that perfect deer flip in the air and vanish. Then everything went black.

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WHERE WAS SHE? Mariel unclenched her hands from the steering wheel and opened her eyes. Her car was idling and on the shoulder, but she didn't remember pulling over. Was she dead? Someone else would have to pick up Florence. What an inane first thought as a dead person. Maybe this was hell. Or, less intriguingly, maybe she wasn't dead after all.

Mariel looked in the mirrors; no vehicles were coming from either direction. She didn't notice her neck was sore until she bent over while exiting her car. When she surveyed the front of her little blue Dodge, she saw the passenger-side headlight and turn signal were smashed, there were scrapes on the front of the wheel well, and part of the radiator grille was busted, but then something else seized her attention.

The handsome deer was in a ditch at the roadside, twitching, bleeding, two of its legs snapped like candy canes broken in their wrappers. It was clear he wasn't going to bolt out of there. Looking in his dark eyes, she could tell he knew that he was going to die. Someone needed to kill him and ease that awful pain. If no one else came by anytime soon, it looked like that was going to have to be Mariel.

In northern Minnesota, a lot of people had something in their vehicle capable of executing a large mammal. She and Ned were not those kinds of people. Ruffling through the trunk, she found only a plastic gallon jug of water, a quilt, jumper cables, a jerry can of gasoline, an unopened box of Thin Mints, and a bottle of antifreeze. Not even a knife.

She looked at the deer, and thought about taking the jumper cables and whipping it in the head until it died, but that seemed difficult and gross. Instead, she lifted the old red jerry can by the handle. It was mostly full, so it was heavy enough.

Mariel watched the deer's twitching face and wondered if she could bludgeon its skull with this can. For what felt like a long time, she stood there, holding the can of gasoline, apologizing to the deer, as the lovely, broken creature struggled to breathe.

Then she heard a woman's voice behind her.

"What are you going to do, light it on fire? Jesus H. Christ!"

Mariel turned, and saw a middle-aged woman hop off a silver bicycle. Mariel recognized her, she was certain, but couldn't place her name. Up close, the woman's face was wrinkled, gorgeous, and unapologetic, and the silver in her long brown hair glinted in the sun like Christmas tree garland.

The woman took a deep breath as she stared at the deer, and then looked at Mariel. "There's a fair amount of decent meat on that idiot."

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking." Mariel nodded, even though it was definitely not what she was thinking. She'd never thought of deer as idiots before, and playing the sentence again in her head made her laugh.

The woman seemed to be amused too. "Where'd you hit him?"

"I don't know. I think the legs."

The woman unzipped her light jacket, revealing a gray tank top and a tool belt, and unsheathed a black-handled guthook Buck knife. She approached the deer from behind its back and cut its throat in one quick motion.

"A quality tool saves you time and money," the woman said, as if that should be the obvious moral of this entire scene. She wiped the blade off on

the back of the dead animal, and right then, Mariel decided she wanted to be friends with this woman.

• • •

HER NAME WAS Brenda Kowalsky, and it turned out that she lived just a mile away.

“I’ll get my son to come help me field dress this thing,” she said, meaning the deer. “I’m gonna go home and call him. You stay here to tell people you got dibs.”

Mariel waited there about fifteen minutes for Brenda or her son to show up, while Florence Jean Stenerud continued waiting in the sun-dappled lobby of Our Savior’s for her ride. At best, Mariel wouldn’t get to the church until around ten forty-five, at this point. She reminded herself that either way, she wasn’t responsible for her mom’s dissatisfaction. It wasn’t like the woman was abandoned in the Gobi Desert. She was surrounded by her oldest friends, in an air-conditioned building full of strong coffee and breakfast food. Her mother could certainly stand to wait another thirty minutes in that environment.

Mariel checked to see if her car was okay to drive, and it seemed to be, so long as she wouldn’t need both headlights. She’d just killed the engine when a shiny Ram pickup truck stopped beside her. The driver was a clean-cut young man whose chiseled face she recognized. He worked at the town’s funeral home. Brenda waved from the passenger seat.

“Kyle wants to know if you want the heart.”

It took Mariel a second to wrap her head around that sentence. She hadn’t even considered that she’d get any of the venison, and she told them so. “I figure, you’re doing all the work,” she explained.

“You’re the one who hit it,” Brenda said. “By rights, the meat’s yours. My son will even butcher it for you right now, if you want to come over. You’re not in a hurry, are you?”

Seeing this loving mother and her grown, helpful son, Mariel thought of Florence.

“Nope,” Mariel said.

She followed Brenda and Kyle down a long dirt road, farther and farther from the town, the church, and her mother, toward a vast green farm she’d never seen before. Immediately, something about this place whispered to her, and she knew she wouldn’t be leaving anytime soon.