

Dining with Joy

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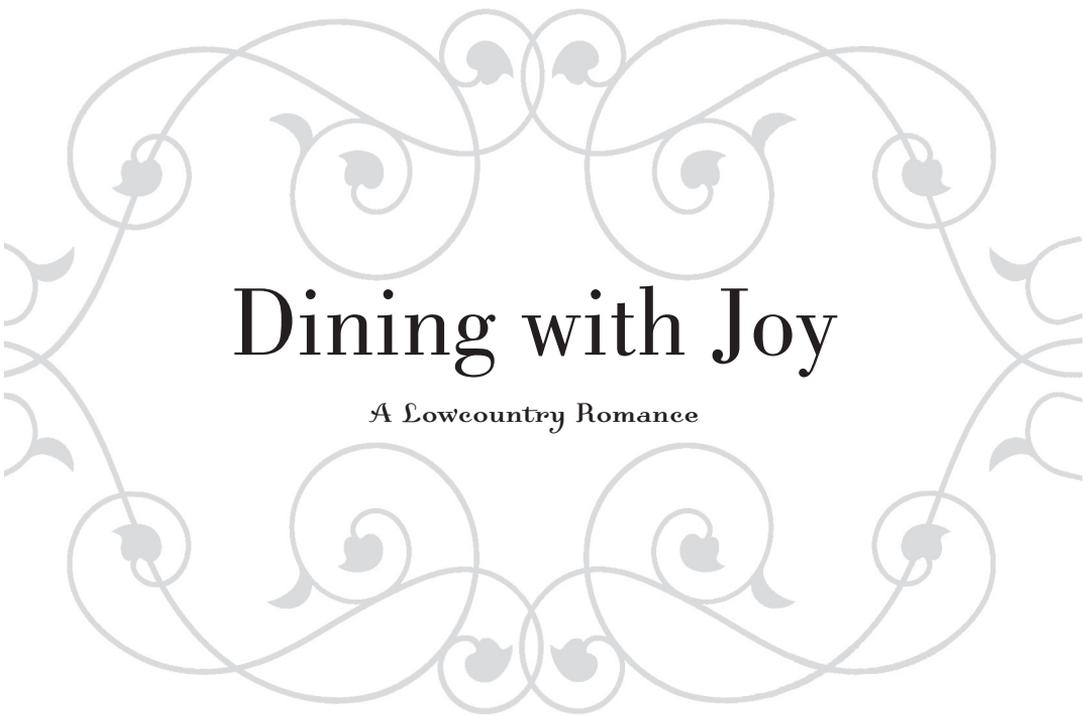
Diva Nashvegas

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The Sweet By and By





Dining with Joy

A Lowcountry Romance

Rachel Hauck



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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For my mom

A decorative graphic consisting of a light gray line that starts from the left, loops upwards and to the right, then loops back down and to the left, ending in a small circular flourish. The word "One" is positioned to the right of the swirl.

One

Driving the Sea Island Parkway with her windows down, the nose of her Dodge Ram cutting through the swaths of shadow and light cast through the limbs of shading live oaks, Joy surfed her hand through the textured, saline lowcountry breeze.

Yesterday she'd been at peace, finally home from three months on the road, guesting on radio and morning talk shows, hosting food fairs, judging cooking competitions, riding in convertibles as a parade marshal, waving at the crowds standing on the curb, acting the part. Always acting the part.

Joy Ballard, host of *Dining with Joy*.

But when she returned home to Beaufort from the spring promotional tour, she ached to sink back into being plain ol' Joy Ballard: lowcountry girl, softball player, aunt, daughter, friend.

This morning she'd planned to sleep until the noon sun spilled through her window with a golden heat. Then she'd tug on a pair of baggy shorts and a tank top, wrap her hair in a ponytail, mosey outside with a lawn chair, and sit under the ancient live oak with her feet pressed into thick blades of green grass, wiggling her toes down to the red South Carolina dirt.

After a few hours in the shade, Joy would move to the backyard dock, catch rays from the afternoon sun while dangling her legs over the side, breaking Factory Creek's velvet surface with her red-stained toes.

What she hadn't considered was a predawn call from her executive producer, Duncan Tate.

"I'm driving down from Atlanta. I'll see you around four."

"Duncan, it's my first Monday home."

"We need to talk."

"If this is about Omaha—"

"See you at the studio."

"No, McDonald's."

"Joy—"

"I need a Big Mac."

And that's how she found herself driving the parkway toward the Boundary Street McDonald's. Served old Duncan right. Disturb her vacation with business. She'd disturb his diet with McDonald's.

Her cell chimed from where she'd propped it in the cup holder, displaying Mama's smiling face—tanned and lined—on the phone's rectangle screen.

"Joy, I know you won't forget the girls' softball game this afternoon."

"Duncan called, said we needed to talk. I'm on my way to meet him. I'll try to get there."

"Doesn't he know it's your vacation?"

"I think this is about Omaha." Over the drawbridge, Joy peered right toward the Atlantic, catching a glint of sun off the mast of a drifting schooner.

"Serves him right. He should've watched your back."

"Maybe he didn't know."

"As your producer, it's his job to know. It's his show, Joy. You'd think the man would know the fine details."

"All right, thank you, Mama. I'll see you at the game." Mama wasn't a big fan of Duncan Tate since he finagled the show away from Joy's father.

"Four o'clock. They only play five innings, so don't think you got gobs of time."

"I know how many innings they play, Mama."

"Bring Duncan, let him see you have a life outside his show."

"Mama, *his* show affords us some of the nicer things. In case you

forgot, my income made up the difference last year when Ballard Paint & Body ran into trouble.” Joy braked for the traffic light, switching to red just as she exited the bridge. Her irritation over Duncan’s surprise visit eased up as she gripped the steering wheel of her own truck, inhaled the scent off the Beaufort River, and gazed over the familiar landmarks of home.

“Yes, and I’m grateful, but it don’t give him no right to own your time off.”

“I’ll tell Duncan to talk fast. See you in a bit.”

Joy ended the call, set her phone back in the cup holder, and tapped the gas when the light turned green.

Mama. The woman had definite ideas. Like the notion Duncan stole *Dining with Charles* from Daddy. But during Joy’s brief stint as an associate producer on the show, watching Daddy from the studio shadows, she suspected Daddy didn’t care much for the business and production side of television. The man merely wanted to share his cooking creations with America, or his segment of it. How and when, why and where didn’t matter much to him.

Then he died. Joy resituated in her seat, hands tight around the wheel, taking the bend of Carteret to Boundary, the aroma of sun-baked pine and steaming palmetto leaves saturating the air blowing through the cab. And *Dining with Charles* became *Dining with Joy*.

A sliver of light glanced off the edge of the Bible verse Joy had clipped to the truck’s dashboard. Old Miss Jeanne had passed the verse to her one Sunday after Daddy’s funeral, the week she’d agreed to take over the show.

“God’s got your back,” Miss Jeanne had said, handing her the slip of paper, her lively blue eyes sparkling from their high perch above her round, crinkled cheeks.

Three years later the square ends were bent and cracked from years of sitting under the windshield, the words on the old, lined notebook paper dim and sun-faded.

“MY FOOD IS TO DO THE WILL OF HIM WHO SENT ME.” JOHN 4:34