



*Out of  
Her Hands*



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DiMaria



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.  
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

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Author photo courtesy of Fat Tuna Photography.

Designed by Beth Sparkman

Edited by Lorie Popp

Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc., 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920.

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®.

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Out of her hands / Megan DiMaria.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4143-1888-2 (sc)

ISBN-10: 1-4143-1888-X (sc)

1. Mothers and sons—Fiction. 2. Mate selection—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3604.14645087 2008

813'.6—dc22

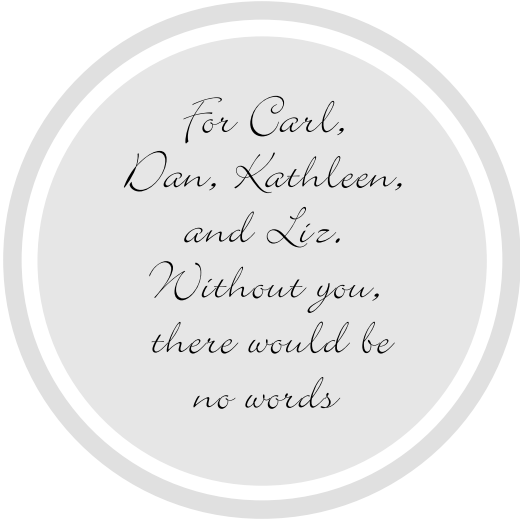
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Printed in the United States of America

14 13 12 11 10 09 08

7 6 5 4 3 2 1



*For Carl,  
Dan, Kathleen,  
and Liz.  
Without you,  
there would be  
no words*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My writing journey is even more exciting than I ever dared to dream it could be. But the best part of this journey is being able to share it with my family. Carl, Dan, Kathleen, and Liz—it wouldn't be nearly as much fun if I couldn't share this joy with you.

To my wonderfully supportive DiMaria clan: Thank you for being my East Coast marketing team. You're a huge blessing in my life.

Thank you is not enough when it comes to acknowledging the work and support I get from the amazing team at Tyndale House Publishers. Jan Stob, Lorie Popp, Mavis Sanders, and Babette Rea—you're the best!

Thanks to my literary agent extraordinaire, Beth Jusino, for being so wise, so helpful, and so much fun.

Thanks to my critique partners—Marion, Angie, and Frances—you keep me on my toes. The encouragement and support of all my American Christian Fiction Writers and Words for the Journey writing friends is precious. You know who you are. God bless you.

Jan P., what a blessing you are! You're always available to give me a pep talk and plan a good promotion (providing I don't call before 11:00 a.m.).

Thank you, Pastor Jack Serr of Castlewood Canyon Church, for taking the time to discuss the issues parents face with their young adult children. Your wisdom is greatly appreciated.

One of the wonderful experiences of this journey is the new friends I've made along the way. Thank you, Auna Jornayvaz, for your enthusiastic support. I look forward to watching your career bloom.

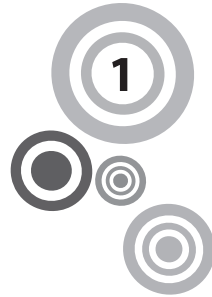
Thanks to Belle for being so Belle-ish.

Thank You, Jesus. Thank You for blessing me with life, love, and words. It's all because of You that this journey continues.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and  
love. But the greatest of these is love.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:13





Some days I imagine that the hundreds of details dancing in my brain will make my head inflate like the Mr. Magoo balloon in Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. *Didn't he explode one year?*

Can I round up enough fairies by Thursday to repair those halos and wings? And are the ice pixie dresses ready to go? *What a job.* It's always something.

I focus on inputting the correct security code into the control panel and scoot out the door of Dream Photography, my home away from home. I pull my jacket closed and double-time it toward my car in the lamp-lit parking lot. Loaded down with my purse, lunch box, and a folder full of portraits, I shift my burdens to dig my ringing phone out of the depths of my bag, fumbling to keep a strong grip on the folder, when the cell slips from my hand and skitters under my car.

*Oh, goodness, I've done it again.* Like Grandpa always said, "No sense being dumb if you don't show it."

So here I stand, amazed that the silly phone still works and annoyed that it's singing from beneath a three-thousand-pound vehicle. A glance around assures me that no one witnessed my lack of finesse. Irritation prickles my scalp. Anyone who saw this embarrassing display wouldn't believe I produced a daughter who is on an award-winning competitive cheerleading team.

A late October breeze dives beneath my hem while I squat beside

the soiled sedan, yards of fabric from my favorite green broomstick skirt billowing out like a ship's sail on the high seas. The muffled tones of the "Hallelujah" chorus taunt me as I grasp toward the cell phone that sits inches beyond my reach. I lean over as far as propriety allows, stretching toward my goal. *If only* . . .

*I know.* I'll swat at the phone with my ice scraper. I retrieve what my son, Nick, calls the mother of all ice scrapers from my car. At nearly four feet long, this thing will surely do the trick.

I squat again and get a visual on the now-silent phone. Leaves scud past me as I hear footsteps approaching.

A tall shadow falls across the asphalt. "Excuse me?"

I pause in my efforts and look up to see a thirtysomething businessman peering down. Is that pity in his eyes? "Yes?"

He leans toward me. "Can I help you, ma'am?"

I smile and push my hair behind my ear, pasting on a competent expression to displace any suggestion that I'm a total dimwit. I raise my monster ice scraper. "I've got it under control. Thanks."

Mr. Helpful cocks his head.

I chuckle and explain. "I dropped my cell phone."

"Oh, sorry." He stays planted to the pavement.

*Keep moving, fella. There's nothing to watch here.* "Uh, thanks again."

"Night, then."

"Good night." I smile and nod, waiting for him to walk away before I resume my awkward pose and retrieve my phone.

But he addresses me once more. "Too bad you couldn't have just moved that car."

"Uh, yeah." I'm grateful the cool breeze has already colored my face so he can't see the telltale blush travel to my hairline. He heads toward his car, and I gently push my phone out from under the Taurus. I pick it up, brushing debris from the silent device, pretending to test out the phone, waiting for him to drive away.

After all, I can't have him see me get into the offending vehicle.

*Move the car.* Too bad that simple suggestion never crossed my mind. *Sheesh.*

I pull onto the freeway and head east to Pine Grove, putting the car on cruise control. Ever since that last speeding ticket, I don't take any chances. Jerry's just about the most patient husband in the state of Colorado, but one more blip to our insurance premium may put him over the edge.

I plug in my hands-free device and access my voice mail. It was a call from my friend Deb Hinesley. "Hi, Linda. I'm sorry I missed you. Listen, I was wondering if you and Jerry are free for dinner Saturday night. Keith and I were hoping you'd join us to try out the new sushi restaurant in Denver. It's very hip. Reservations required. Call me."

Sushi? My scientist husband turned college professor is pretty cautious and is more of a meat-and-potatoes guy, but maybe I can convince him to try something new.

Deb has been my best friend since college. But it takes every ounce of self-control and Christian love to face her husband, Keith, and pretend I don't know his dirty little secret. And to think I used to be jealous of their so-called romantic marriage.

Not too long ago I thought Jerry could use a boost in the romance department, but I've since discovered—or shall I say *rediscovered*—just what a gem I have. Now, I'm not saying he hits the mark all the time, but at least he tries.

I'm feeling warm and tingly toward my husband as I arrive home. I know both my children are out tonight—Emma at cheer-leading practice and Nick with his college buddies. Today's one of Jer's short days at the community college where he teaches science.

I'd love for my honey to greet me at the door, but the only one who seems to care is our Jack Russell terrier. I scratch the top of her head. "Hi, Belle. How's my girl?"

The kitchen is in darkness, and there are no delicious aromas assuring me that dinner is being prepared.

*Ooh, maybe Jerry's cooking up a special surprise—upstairs.*

Belle dances around me while I hang my jacket in the closet. I go to the pantry and toss her a treat. “Jer?”

I hear his muffled response come from our bedroom.

My heart beats a little bit faster as I hurry up the stairs. What could this surprise be? Strawberries dipped in chocolate? A candlelit massage? The door's ajar, so I gingerly push it open.

I can't believe my eyes. Every surface of the room is covered with plastic drop cloths. Jerry's standing on a ladder, white speckles staining his face and hair, painting our bedroom ceiling. He couldn't look more pleased with himself. “What do you think?”

My heart rate remains accelerated. I know how this man's mind works, and this is his way of being romantic. Okay, maybe I would have preferred champagne and roses, but . . .

He descends the ladder, walks over, and gives me a quick kiss.

I'd love to throw my arms around him, but I'm not willing to ruin the wool blazer I'm wearing. “What made you do this?”

He angles his head and gives me that smile I've loved forever. “Don't you think I listen to you?”

“Huh?”

“I heard you and Emma talking about painting your bedrooms.” I follow him to the bathroom, where he washes. “My class dismissed early today, and I went to The Home Depot to buy some paint. I saw that article you clipped from the paper.”

I love this man. “You mean the room-makeover article based on the colors in this season's Hollywood movies?”

He dries his hands and strips off his paint-splattered sweatshirt. “That very one. Except I didn't know if you wanted blue or apricot for the walls.”

I can't remember the last time I felt this attracted to him. I hustle to the walk-in closet and change into my sweatpants. When I step into the room, half the drop cloths have been cleared away.

The sound of his cheerful whistle echoes from the first floor. A

mouthwatering smell greets me at the top of the stairs and escorts me down to the kitchen.

Jerry's sitting at the table. He gestures toward a large cheese pizza from our favorite joint. "Dinner's served."

Could there be a more perfect ending to a stressful day? I try not to think about the folder of portraits that needs to be arranged before eight thirty tomorrow morning and concentrate on the simple meal and the man sitting before me. I adore my kids, but there's something wonderful about a quiet dinner for two. Even if it's delivery pizza.

Jerry says a blessing and passes me a napkin.

I savor the first delectable bite and hop up to retrieve the newspaper clipping hanging under the Dream Photography magnet on the refrigerator. I take my seat and push the article toward Jerry. "See that color blue? I think it will look beautiful with brown and green accents."

He nods while he chews, pulls the clipping closer, and points to the picture. "Yep. That's the color I thought you liked."

I run my fingers through his thinning hair and give him my come-hither smile. "How about I help you wash the paint from your hair?"

Jerry looks intrigued. "I should do more painting around here."

I'm about to lean in for the kiss I'm dying to steal when I hear a key in the front door.

Emma breezes in. "Pizza? Great."

This girl's timing is unbelievable. And I thought her having a driver's license would give us fewer interruptions and more privacy. For the past eighteen months, living with her has been like living with a jack-in-the-box. You never know when she's going to pop up.

She washes her hands at the kitchen sink, all the time editorializing about life at Pine Grove High. She sits next to me and helps herself to a slice. "Oh, you're not going to believe what I heard today." She pauses for effect, looking us each in the eye.

*Spit it out, girl.*

“Hillary had to leave school for an orthodontist appointment, and before her mom brought her back, they went to Starbucks. And guess who she saw?” Emma takes a bite of pizza.

Jerry looks confused. “Who’s Hillary?”

*Oy.* For an intelligent man, he can never seem to remember our kids’ friends’ names. “Hillary Seer, a girl from cheerleading.” I take a nibble of pizza. “Who did she see?”

Emma obviously enjoys her moment of power, taking a sip of cola to wash down her pizza. “Nick.”

“And . . . ?”

“He was with a girl. A very pretty girl.”

Jerry waves off her announcement. “Is that a crime? He has lots of friends he meets for coffee. For all we know, it’s just a classmate.”

Emma straightens, pushing her shoulders back. “Yeah, just a classmate . . . that he kisses?”

“Are you sure it was Nick she saw?” I can’t imagine my son kissing someone in front of other people. He’s so contained. So careful about the way he appears in public. And wouldn’t he mention someone he was interested in?

She rolls her eyes. “Hillary knows what Nick looks like. She’s been over here lots of times when Nick’s around.”

Jerry gives me his let-it-drop look. “Emma, unless you want Nick to tease you about your boyfriend, I suggest you go easy on him.”

She pouts for a moment but lets the subject slide.

I sit at the kitchen table organizing the photographs into piles.

Emma meanders in, pulls out a chair, and sits, dropping a textbook on the table. “Whatcha doing?”

I answer without looking up. “Organizing photos.”

“Why?”

“We need to have a file on each set we do for our Special Edition promotions.”

She points to a pile. “Which one’s this?”

I fan out the portraits. “Victorian Christmas.”

Emma studies the images of a replica Victorian living room complete with an exquisite Christmas tree, an ornate fireplace decorated with satin stockings suspended from a bough-laden mantel, and three young children dressed in elegant, custom-made outfits. “Cool.” She hands back the photos. “Can you help me with my English homework?”

“In a few minutes, honey. I need to finish this.”

She sighs. “I need to do math homework too. Can’t you help me now?”

“Why don’t you do your math homework until I’m finished?”

“Well, I wanted to do this first because—”

She’s interrupted by the sound of the front door opening. Nick’s heavy footsteps come down the hall. “What did you have for dinner?”

Before I can respond, Emma says, “Hillary saw you this afternoon. At Starbucks. Kissing a girl.”

I steel myself for the fireworks I fear will explode.

Nick shrugs. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I wasn’t at a Starbucks today.”

Emma frowns. “Really? Hillary said she saw you.”

He rummages through the refrigerator. “I don’t know who she saw, but it wasn’t me.”

“Are you sure? She knows what you look like.”

Nick gives her a blank stare. “Hillary’s an idiot.”

“She is not—”

I put my hand on Emma’s arm to stifle her objections, and Nick leaves the room.

She turns to me, eyes wide with indignation. “Why would he lie?”

“He’s not lying. Your friend must have been mistaken.”

Emma shakes her head. “Sometimes you can be so naive.”

We sit in silence. I hear the shower running in my room. Jerry must be washing his hair. So much for a little romance tonight.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Megan DiMaria has fond memories of the days when her mother would pile the kids into the car to take their weekly trip to the Troy, New York, public library. There under the mural of *Gulliver's Travels* and amid the stacks of books began a lifelong love of the written word.

Megan is an active member of several writers' groups and enjoys encouraging other writers in their pursuits. She volunteers her talents to her church and local nonprofit organizations and speaks to writers' and women's groups. When she's not tapping out another story on her computer, she loves to hang out with her husband and three adult children.

Megan holds a BA in communications, with a specialization in mass media from the State University of New York at Plattsburgh. She has been a radio and television reporter, a Web content editor, a contributing writer for local newspapers, and has worked for a weekly newspaper. Megan has sold magazine articles locally and nationally. In her day job, she works in the marketing department of an upscale Denver portrait studio.

*Out of Her Hands* is the sequel to *Searching for Spice*.