

FINDING PRIDE

BOOK ONE IN THE PRIDE SERIES



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*This book is dedicated to the woman who
read the first book to me. In loving memory of
a great woman and teacher... Thank you,
MOM.*

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CHAPTER ONE

Just as the sun disappeared behind a large gray cloud, a white sedan crept slowly along the long twisted road. A wall of trees on either side of the road gave the appearance that the only way out was to forge ahead. The black pavement weaved, rounding bends up and down small rolling hills. If someone were to look at the scene from above, it would appear similar to a white rat running through a large maze, no doubt on its way to find the cheese.

Several minutes had passed since an open field was visible to the driver. Every now and then a quick glance of a farmhouse or a barn would appear. But, for now the only view was the gray of the sky, the green of the trees, and the black top of the road.

The car was traveling toward freedom, freedom that had come at the worst price, death.

Megan Kimble had just lost the last of her family. Now at a time when she was finally free to live, she had no one to share it with.

For a moment the sun peeked out of the clouds,

its landed on a small crowd gathered around a casket. Mist and fog hung in the afternoon air. It made the hill overlooking the small town of Pride, Oregon, appear cut off from all other civilization, an island floating in a sea of fog. Not a sound came from the gathered mourners. Each person stood with head down, looking at the dark wet wood of the casket.

In front of the crowd stood Megan, a lone young woman who was dressed in a dark skirt and a large black rain coat. Her head was bent down, her tears silently slipping down her face. Her long blonde hair was neatly tied back with a clip. The right sleeve of her coat hung empty. Her arm tucked close to her body, encased in a white cast from her upper arm to just above her wrist.

Looking up, she started gazing around the old cemetery, not really noticing the people, but instead the old and crumbled headstones. Her eyes stopped on a tall figure that appeared to hover above the mist. Blinking a few times to clear the moisture from her eyes, she realized it was a large headstone in the shape of an

angel. The angel's arms were stretched up to the heavens, as if reaching for a helping hand to ascend above.

Her thoughts drifted to Matt and she looked back down at the casket. Matt had always called her his little angel. Looking at the simple dark wood through teary eyes, she remembered her brother's face as it looked fifteen years ago. That was when she had awakened in the hospital, her little body covered in terrible bright red marks of abuse. Her memory of the violence by her father's hands gone, along with both their parents' lives.

Matt had been the first face she remembered seeing in the cold sterile room. She remembered his face had been streaked with tears, his eyes red as he cooed to her, "Little Meg, everything will be okay. I'll take care of you now. Don't worry little Angel."

Her thoughts snapped back to the cemetery as they began to lower the casket into the wet ground. What, really, had she ever done to deserve such a great brother? What really had she ever given back to him? He'd given up

everything for her and yet she couldn't think of one thing she'd given him but lies.

She felt hopelessness and uselessness sinking into her mind. Knowing it was Derek's influence, for her dark thoughts, she tensed. Straightening her spine now, she tried to dismiss the thoughts of her ex-husband. He didn't matter anymore, she told herself. He was out of her life now.

At that moment, as she stood in the old cemetery surrounded by a hundred strangers, she felt truly and wholly alone. Matt had been her family, well, the only family that had really mattered. She had an aunt somewhere, but she hadn't seen or heard from the woman in over fifteen years.

Looking up she saw the priest walking towards her; she quickly wiped the tears from her face. The priest looked short and stout dressed in his long black robes. He wore a wide-brimmed hat which covered his curly silver hair. His face was kind and she could see his eyes were red from tears. He had been very generous in the words he'd spoken over

her brother.

She wasn't Catholic, neither was her brother. At this point, she wasn't going to object. It had been a nice service, and so many people had turned out. She didn't know who had organized the service, but she was sure the Father had a large hand in it.

"Hello dear, I'm Father Michael. We spoke on the phone a few days ago." He said taking her left hand in his warm one. "Matt was such a nice young man, I'll miss him dearly." He cleared his throat.

"Thank you. I'm sorry I wasn't able to get here sooner. I would have helped plan his service."

The Father interrupted. "Don't mention it. We all pitched in to help out, that's the nice thing about small towns. If you're looking for someone to thank, there is no need around here. People in Pride don't usually take too much to strangers, but Matt just fit in. He became part of the family, you might say. I know he wasn't Catholic, but he did enjoy a good sermon. He also enjoyed coming to our social events; they

always put a big smile on his face. He was very well liked around here.”

It didn't sound like he was talking about her brother. Matt had always been somewhat of a loner. He had never really taken to crowds, but then again she'd grown away from him after he'd moved out west.

As he continued talking to her about her brother and the town, she started looking around at the crowd of people in the muddy cemetery. It appeared that the whole town of Pride had braved the wet weather for her brother's funeral. There were families, older couples, men who were weather worn from years on fishing boats, faces young and old, none of which Megan had ever seen before. She was used to being in crowds, having lived in a large city most of her life, but now it felt like all eyes were on her.

Taking another look around, she could see that in fact almost no one was looking directly at her. As her eyes scanned around, something caught her gaze. A pair of the lightest silver-blue eyes she'd ever seen looked back at her

through the crowd. Maybe it was because the man stood a head taller than everyone else around him, or maybe it was the fact that he was the only one who was actually staring directly at her. But for a moment, she forgot everything including blinking.

The man had dark brown wavy hair which was a little long and reached over his coat collar. What she could see of him under his leather coat, he appeared to be thin. His face could have easily been etched in marble and put on display. His jaw was strong with the smallest of clefts in his chin. His lips were full and his nose was straight, but it was his eyes that caught her attention again. He was staring at her like he wanted to say something to her from across the crowded cemetery.

Father Michael stepped in between them and broke her trance; blinking, she tried to re-focus on the short priest. He was attempting to encourage her to stop by the church for services.

“Megan, I feel like you are already part of the flock, I’m sure we’ll be seeing you next week.

If there is anything we can do for you, just let us know,” the Father said while patting her left hand. “You will let us know if you need help moving in, what with your hurt arm and all.”

She looked down at her right arm encased in its large white cast. She had it tucked closely under her rain coat, which was left unzipped. The pain was a dull throb now, but that didn’t make the terrible memories go away.

“The Jordans are your nearest neighbors, they were very good friends of Matt’s. The two boys are young and strong, I’m sure they’ll be glad to come down and help you move in your things.” There was a match-making look in the man’s eyes that had her trying to take a step backwards; however her hand was still encased in his larger one. “And I’m sure their sister is looking forward to getting them out of her hair for a few hours.” He said with a slight wink.

“Thank you Father. I’ll try to stop by the church for services. I don’t have much to move in, just a few bags, but thank you anyway for offering.” It was the truth; Megan had sold

what little furniture she had left. In fact she'd been living out of suitcases for the past few weeks.

"Well now, if you change your mind, just let me know." The Father said patting her hand one more time.

Just then a stout woman walked up, she had on a very bright blue dress with large white flowers. Over it she had a slick black rain coat that covered only half of the dress and the woman. She reminded Megan of a peacock all dressed up with its feathers ruffled out.

"Well now, Father Michael, you just let go of that girl's hand so I can shake it. It's a great pleasure to finally meet you Megan." The woman said while shaking her hand with a firm warm grip. "I'm Patty O'Neil; I run the local grocery store. I've heard lots about you from your dearly departed brother, God bless him." The woman quickly crossed herself and continued. "I'm sure proud to finally meet you. O'Neil's Grocery, that's my store, it is just down on Main Street, can't miss it." She said. "The store has been in my family for

generations. Well, if there is anything we can do..." she said trailing off as the next person approached.

And so it went, the entire town shaking her left hand and offering their help in any matter possible.

Todd Jordan silently watched Matt's younger sister. He'd recognized her instantly from the picture Matt had kept on his desk. She was a lot thinner now and very pale. She looked lost, her broken arm held closely against her tiny body made her look even more so. And what a body it was. He'd scanned her from head to toe when she arrived at the cemetery. The rain coat she wore reached halfway down her slender body, and her heels looked very sensible as they sat halfway sunk in the mud.

He remembered Matt telling him that she was recently divorced, but couldn't remember any details. All he knew was that his friend hadn't been happy about the circumstances.

His thoughts were interrupted when Father Michael approached him.

“Well now young Todd.” The Father always called him “young” even though he was now in his mid thirties. “It’s a shame, yes sir. Her heart is broken. It would be your duty, as Matt’s best friend, to make sure you and your family help her settle in. Such a lovely thing too. To think she’ll be living in that old drafty house all by herself.”

Matt’s house wasn’t drafty. If anything, it was in better shape than his own. He could tell the good Father was up to some match-making scheme.

“And to think, the poor girl will be moving in all by herself, and in the state she’s in too. She could hardly shake my hand.” Here it came; he thought as his gaze once again swept over to where the object of their conversation stood. She was now being surrounded by half the town.

“You need to do the right thing by Matt and make sure his little sister gets settled in safely. God has some answers for her, coming half way across the world to bury her poor brother.” Father Michael shook his head. “I want you

to promise me, that you and your family will stop by the house often, you hear me?" he said with a sad look on his face.

Todd's gaze swept back to the Father's. He knew the humorous look that the older man had on his face. That's the look he and a friend had gotten for sneaking in the cemetery with the Blake girls to try to scare them on Halloween night, years ago. The father had tried to scold them, the entire time he was laughing at them.

"Yes, Father." He murmured. Father Michael nodded his head then turned away to greet another group of people.

Todd looked back over at Megan and saw that she was even paler than before. Reaching over he grabbed his sister's arm as she was walking past him and nodded in Megan's direction.

"Someone needs to go save her." He said under his breath.

"Just what do you suggest I do?" Lacey said with a stern look, placing both hands on her small hips.

"I don't know. You're the one that's good at breaking things...up." He added after his sister's eyes heated. Then he grabbed her shoulders and pointed her in Megan's direction.

He saw Lacey's shoulders slump a little after taking in the sight of Megan, being swamped by the whole of Pride.

"Humph." Lacey grunted and started marching towards the growing crowd. His sister was small, but she packed the biggest punch in town.

"I didn't know Matt all that well, but he was a nice young man. He always had nice things to say about my bar, never once starting a brawl. Broke a couple up though." The bar owner said with a crooked grin. Megan hadn't quite caught his name when he'd barged to the front of the line and grabbed her hand in a death grip. "Always such a nice m-m-m." He started to stutter.

Concerned, she quickly looked up from the man's hand which was tightly gripping her own. Standing right beside the bar owner was a pixie. Megan didn't believe in fairy tales,

but there was no other way to describe the woman. She had a strong urge to walk around the petite creature, and see if wings were tucked under her dark purple raincoat. She was perfect, from the tip of her pixie cut black hair to the toes of her green galoshes. Galoshes, Megan noted, which didn't have one speck of dirt on them. She was shorter than Megan and was slight of build with rounder curves. Her skin was fair and her eyes were a crystal gray blue. She had a cute nose that turned up slightly at the end and full lips that were a light shade of pink. She also had the most commanding look on her face.

The bar owner literally backed away without even finishing his sentence and quickly walked away without so much as a glance back. Within seconds, everyone who'd gathered around her had wandered off, all without a single word from the pixie.

"How-?" Her voice squeaked, so she cleared her throat and started again, "How did you do that?"

"Well, it takes years of practice." The pixie said

with a smile. "I'm Lacey Jordan;" her voice was smoky and laced with sexuality, "I was very good friends with your brother. I'm sorry he's gone."

The simple words touched something inside her. She could tell there was truth behind them. Lacey lightly grabbed Megan's good arm and started leading her towards the row of parked cars.

"I'm also your neighbor. Let's get you out of the weather and home where you belong. We've made some meat pie for dinner. I'm sure by the time we get there, the whole town will be right behind us. I'll just go get my brothers and we'll take you home."

"Oh, please I don't want to be a bother, I'll be just fine." Megan felt compelled to follow the small woman who still had a light grip on her arm and an air of command that surrounded her.

"Nonsense! It's no bother at all. Plus, if you turn down dinner," she said with a slight smile "my brother Iian might get his feelings hurt. It's not everyday he makes the family's fa-

mous dish.” She continued towards the row of cars. “Come on then, let’s get you out of this rain.”

Megan looked up at the skies, and at that moment it started raining lightly. Her mouth fell open, a big fat drop landed on her bottom lip so she quickly closed it.

Lacey still lightly held her arm and started pulling her towards the cars parked near the side of a small white church. All of a sudden she realized she was exhausted and chilled to the bone. She hadn’t eaten anything before her flight into Portland and felt her stomach growl at the thought of food. She wasn’t sure what meat pie was, but if it had meat in it, she was sure it would be tolerable.

“Oh! I’m sorry. I forgot to mention that I have a rental car over there.” She pointed slightly with her injured arm to a small white sedan that she’d hastily rented at the airport not four hours earlier.

“Give me the keys; my brother will drive it over to the house for you.” Lacey said waving

towards a man who had her same color of rich black hair.

He'd been standing towards the back of the buildings in the shadows, so far back, that Megan hadn't even known he was there.

As he stepped out, she noticed that his hair was longer than his sister's. The man strolled over, appearing to be in no hurry. He looked like he rather enjoyed the nasty weather and his surroundings. To say that he was tall would be an understatement, he must have been six and half feet. It only took him a couple of strides to reach where they stood.

She had to crane her neck to look up into his face, and noticed that he had the same light eyes as his sister. His chin was strong with a tiny cleft, and his lips held a lazy smile that made him look rather harmless. Lacey handed him the keys to the rental car then waved her hands in a sequence of patterns in front of her.

Lacey turned back to her. "Megan, this is my brother Iian. He's hearing impaired and uses sign language to communicate, but he can also read lips really well." She said while continu-

ing to sign. Then turning her face away from his she said, "He likes to eavesdrop, so be careful what you say while facing him."

Smiling, she turned back to her brother in time to see the quick flash of humor in his eyes as he signed something to her in haste. She gestured something back to him and hit him on the shoulder in a sisterly way.

"Come on Megan, my brother will take care of your car." They again started to walk towards the cars. At this point the rain was starting to come down harder.

Groups of people without umbrellas were quickly darting towards their vehicles. Others with umbrellas were slowly making their way.

When she sank into the passenger seat of Lacey's sedan, chills ran up and down her spine. Lacey got behind the wheel and started the engine; the heater was on full blast starting to warm the inside of the car. She could have just fallen asleep right there in the warming car.

They started to pull away from the the small

church and the now empty cemetery. The windshield wipers were clearing the rain from her view with a soft squeak, but she still felt like she wasn't able to see much beyond the path that the head lights were cutting through the fog.

Just then, she realized she'd gotten into a strangers car. What did she know about this small woman? She sat up a little straighter and looked over at Lacey who had her eyes on the road.

"You don't need to worry," Lacey said. "I'm not going to kidnap you." She turned her head and smiled. "We'll just get you to your brother's house before everyone else gets there. I hope you don't mind, but we invited a few close friends over for pot luck. It's what he would have wanted, something small. Your brother was very well liked around town."

By the time they pulled into the driveway the sky was dark; the sun hadn't come back out before setting. She'd rested her head against the window with the soft hum of the engine and the gentle beat of the wipers.

“Here we are now,” Lacey parked the car so the head lights hit the house full force. “Matt spent most of the first year remodeling. I think you’ll like what he’s done with it.”

Looking through the wet car window, she saw that the place was a large white two-story house. Long green shutters sat on either side of large picture windows that lined the whole front of the house. The front door was bright red with a large brass knocker. There were stain glass windows which sat on either side of the door. They seemed to glow brightly in the night.

Following Lacey’s lead she opened her door and together they raced for the front porch through the light rain. Standing on the brightly lit large covered porch, she watched Lacey open the front door with a key from her own key chain.

Just as they crossed the threshold, Megan’s rental car pulled up in the driveway and parked next to Lacey’s sedan.

Watching from the doorway, she saw Iian step out of the car, along with the silver-blue eyed

man she had seen in the cemetery. Both men looked up to the front door and nodded to her, then stepped behind the rental car and started pulling out her overnight bags from the trunk.

“They’ll get those. Come on inside out of the cold.” Lacey said. Then she walked towards the back of the house leaving Megan standing alone in her brother’s doorway.

Even though her brother had lived here for several years, she’d never visited Oregon before today.

There had been many reasons not to visit her brother. Looking down at the large cast on her arm, she realized that this was the reason she’d put off this last visit. The broken arm had just been one more thing she had hidden from her brother and she wished now that she hadn’t postponed this last trip.

Quickly turning into the house she tried to avoid thinking about her brother and her regrets.

Lacey was coming back down the hallway from the back, rubbing her hands together for

warmth.

Just then both men walked onto the front porch and shook their heads like dogs to get the rain from their hair. They wiped their feet before crossing into the entryway.

Megan noted that their faces were identical, yet she could see subtle differences. Their height and weight for one. Iian was slightly taller, with a broader build than his brother's slim frame. And although the brothers shared the same gorgeous eyes, it was the depth of the one brother's that captured her attention again.

"Megan, this is my older brother Todd." Lacey said.

Todd nodded his hello and just looked at her, causing warmth to spread throughout her system.

"It's chilly in here! Can you please start a fire in the living room before the guests arrive?" Lacey asked him.

Again, he just nodded his reply, turned and went into the dark room to the right without

saying a word.

“Iian,” Lacey said and signed along. “Please take those up to Matt’s room and start a fire up there.”

Lacey walked around the place turning on lights. Iian was jogging up the large curved staircase in the entryway. He had her suitcase in one arm like it weighed nothing, and had thrown her overnight bag over his shoulder. It had taken her all of her strength to drag those two bags through the airport just this morning. His hair was still dripping wet and he was humming to himself. Humming?

As everyone bustled around, starting fires, and turning on lights, Megan just stood in the main entryway. She felt useless all over again. Here she was standing in her brother’s home, her new home, letting strangers take care of her.

Hadn’t she promised herself that she would take care of herself from now on? But she was so tired she didn’t think that letting these people help her out for one night would hurt.

Lacey came back into the entry way, "Come on, let's get you out of that wet coat." Lacey reached for the rain jacket just as Megan flinched away. Slowly Lacey's hands returned to her side.

"I'm sorry," Megan said, looking down at her hands, not wanting to look Lacey in the eyes. "I'm just a bit jumpy and tired I suppose." She tried to smile.

"No need to apologize. You must be overwhelmed, I'm sure a bit hungry by now, too. At any rate. People will start arriving any minute, and I'm sure there will be lots of food." Just as Lacey finished those words, the doorbell rang.

"Go and have a seat by the fire and let me take care of this." She pointed Megan in the direction of the two French doors that Todd had disappeared through.

Slowly walking towards them, she listened as Lacey greeted a group of people. Not really wanting to deal with anyone yet, she slipped inside the softly lit room.

Todd was bent over a pile of wood in the fireplace, blowing on flames that had started on crumpled paper. She saw that he'd removed his leather jacket and had a white dress shirt that stretched taut over his arms. Arms, she noted, which were very muscular. Powerful, was the word that came to mind. She was nervous around powerful, so instead of walking over to the warmth of the fire, she turned back towards the doorway and watched Lacey greet people.

She was about to walk out and find the kitchen, when she felt hands lightly placed on her shoulders. It was more reflexes than anything that had her jumping and spinning around, her hand raised in defense.

"Easy," Todd murmured. "Here now, let me take your coat, you're soaking wet." He said, holding his hands out as one would to a wounded animal.

Blushing, she said, "I'm sorry, you just startled me." She hung her head and turned around so he wouldn't see her face turn red. Her heart was racing and her hands started shaking. It

still affected her, being touched.

Gently he helped her out of the jacket. He made sure to be extra careful around her right arm. Then he walked over and hung it next to his own coat on a large oak rack. Looking over, he realized Lacey had watched the whole display from the doorway. Turning to his sister, he said. "She can eat by the fire. She's frozen."

Lacey agreed. "There's a TV tray over in the corner. Go on, I'll bring a plate of food once it's heated."

Todd saw that Father Michael was in the process of walking into the house and quickly ushered Megan back into the other room under watchful eyes.

Megan turned and followed him back into the living room, where the fire was going, quickly heating the whole room. Walking over she reached her hand out towards the heat. She hadn't realized how freezing she was until the warmth hit her, causing her hand to tingle.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize how cold I was until now," she said nervously to the room.

She knew he was still back there, but hadn't wanted to turn and look at him just yet. Closing her eyes she let out the breath she felt she'd been holding since he'd touched her. She was nervous around him. When he touched her, however feather light it had been; it did something to her system. It had been like a power surge rushing through her body. Then again, she'd been avoiding getting close to anyone for so long she knew she was out of practice.

Taking a deep breath she turned to the quiet room.

"You have his eyes." He said as he stood just inside the doors. His hands were buried deep in his pockets as he watched her.

Megan was about to say something, anything, but just then Iian came into the room. He took one look at his brother and then at her, and signed something quickly to Todd. She wasn't sure what he said, but Todd gave his brother a frustrated look, turned and walked out without saying a word to either of them.

Iian walked over and taking her left hand up

to his lips said, "Megan, I am very sorry about Matt."

Gasping, she realized she wasn't aware he could speak.

He smiled slightly. "I can speak, I lost my hearing in an accident when I was eighteen. I just don't like to very often. My brother and sister say I have the most annoying voice." He said this with a slight smile.

She could hear the little blunders he made with his voice, as if he was out of practice. But, he had a rich deep voice, much like his brother's.

Slowly speaking back to him and making sure to keep her face directed at his, she said. "You have a very nice voice, rich and warm. Thank you for taking care of my luggage and starting a fire upstairs."

He smiled while still holding her hand in his warm one. "You're chilled. Come over and sit down." He pulled her towards a dark colored couch near the fireplace.

"Lacey is still greeting people and I'm sure

you'll have a large plate of food in front of you in no time. I'll just sit with you and keep you company until then."

Back in the kitchen, Todd was helping his sister with the food, but his mind was back in the living room. He'd guessed by the look in her eyes that someone had hurt her. But, the instant she jumped at his light touch, he knew that someone had, and recently. The look on her face was heart breaking and he didn't care to see it on Matt's little sister. He was glad she'd turned away when she had, so she couldn't see the murderous look that had come into his eyes.

His sister had seen, she always saw everything, she had just shook her head at him and discreetly signed not scare her.

He'd watched Megan when she'd gone to the fire. She had started to relax and had rolled her shoulders, showing him a hint of her long white neck. In that moment, he'd felt a flash of desire so strong he had winced. Of course that was when Iian had come in. Seeing his face; quickly signed for him not to scare her. Was

he that scary of a person that both his siblings had to warn him about it in one day?

His brother and sister had a way of seeing things for what they were, it always annoyed him. He couldn't even muster up enough strength to tell his brother off. He knew he wouldn't get anywhere with Lacey, but he could hold his own with Iian.

Hearing people roam about the house, he could just imagine Iian and Megan in the other room talking. His brother had a way of making women feel very comfortable and at ease. Maybe he had enough strength to tell his brother off after all.

Just as he was walking towards the kitchen door to go and do just that, Lacey interrupted with a simple.

“Don't.”

Turning on her, he was about to spend his energy there instead. But, she just smiled at him.

Quickly, he let out the breath he'd taken to start arguing with, in a loud puff.

“How is it, that you can defuse any situation with that smile?” he said walking over and taking his sister into a hug. “You drive me nuts.”

“Give her time Todd. She’s going to need to trust us. She’s had it hard. I think we just need to give her some time.” She said into his chest with a sniffle. Taking a deep breath and a step back, she grabbed a large plate of food and handed it to him.

“Now, go take her this. And be nice!” she said as she pushed him out the door.

Every bone in his body said that his sister was right, but his blood was boiling so hot he wanted action. Matt was like a brother to him, not only his best friend, but blood. What hurt Matt, hurt him. He missed his friend, he felt sad, angry and lost about his death. He knew Matt would’ve wanted them to take care of Megan. Todd was going to make sure that Megan was taken care of. Period.

Knowing that his little brother and sister felt the same way, he knew that Megan was family now. But, he couldn’t deny the quick pull he’d

had when he looked into those sea green eyes
of hers.