



# Lambert's Pride

By Rachel Hauck and Lynn A. Coleman

## Chapter One

Elizabeth Lambert rushed through the kitchen door and hustled up the backstairs to her room, taking them two at a time.

"Dinner's on the table, Beth," her Grandma said when she scurried passed.

"No time," Elizabeth called over her shoulder. "Sinclair's wants me to come in as soon as I can."

In her room, she shoved the door partially closed and slipped from the slacks and blouse she wore to Lambert's Furniture into her Sinclair's uniform.

From the bottom of the stairs, Grandma admonished her, "You can't work seventy hours a week without taking time to eat a healthy meal."

"I'll get a burger on the way," Elizabeth replied in a clear, loud voice.

With quick, short strokes, she ran a comb through her hair and pulled it back with a red ribbon. A subtle knock caused her to turn toward the door. "Enter," she said.

Grandma pushed the door open and stood in the doorway, her hands on her ample hips. "A fast food burger is not a healthy meal."

Elizabeth laughed and started to hang up the clothes she'd worn to the office. "I'm used to it."

Grandma settled on the edge of the bed. "Why don't you take a break from all this work? There's no need-"

"You know I didn't want to come to White Birch in the first place," Elizabeth interrupted, tossing her low-heeled pumps onto the closet floor in exchange for a pair of white sneakers. "But if Dad insists I take a break from school and learn the value of money and good hard work, then work is what I'm going to do."

She plopped onto the floor and stuffed her feet into her white leather sneakers. "Besides, I've been living at this pace since my freshman year at college. Grabbing a burger on the run is nothing new."

"Doesn't mean I have to like it."

Elizabeth looked at her grandmother's wise, gentle face. "I appreciated your concern, but right now, eating a well-balanced meal is the least of my concerns."

Grandma stood and smiled. "You better run along or you'll be late."

Elizabeth hopped up, grabbed her backpack and car keys. In a soft tone, she admitted, "I know I don't seem grateful, Grandma, but I do appreciate all you and Grandpa have done for me."

"We know life in White Birch is a far cry from the life you can live in Boston, but we love having you here."

Elizabeth reached over and kissed her Grandma on the cheek. "Well, if I have to be some place other than Boston, being with you and Grandpa is a pretty cool alternative."

Grandma beamed. "Well, hurry or you won't even have time for a quick burger." She made a shuffling motion with her arms and feet.

Elizabeth chuckled and darted down the stairs with a quick glance at the large hall clock. She would barely make it on time if she didn't stop for a burger. Her father's classic '73 Volkswagen Super Beetle sat on the edge of the driveway; its candy apple red paint glistened in the evening light. Tossing her backpack into the passenger seat, Elizabeth slipped in behind the wheel.

The restored car, a graduation present from her parents, came with a condition. Spend a season working with the family business in White Birch, New Hampshire. When she balked at the idea, they sweetened the deal, offering to pay all of her graduate school tuition if she agreed to their proposal.

Shifting into fourth gear, Elizabeth zipped through the center of White Birch. The quaint New England town looked to her as though it'd grown from a Norman Rockwell painting.

Remembering the discussion with her parents set her on edge. After all, at twenty-three she had the right to make her own decisions about life. But in the whole vast scheme of things, she decided a summer in the quaint town was a small price to pay for an all-expense paid ride to grad school, plus the title to the classic red car. She'd wanted to go to grad school for about as long as she wanted to inherit her father's vintage car.

To her surprise, Elizabeth enjoyed the few weeks she'd spent living with her grandparents, though their devotion to the Lord exposed her unrequited faith. The senior Lamberts sought God at every turn, over every issue. Even the decision to let Elizabeth live with them came after several days of prayer.

How could anyone depend on God so much? Elizabeth preferred to chart her own course in life, depending on reason instead the ethereal world of prayer. All at once, a loud bang resonated in her ears and the little car swerved hard to the right. Elizabeth gripped the steering wheel, and with one foot on the break and the other on the clutch, she slowed the car and forced it onto the berm.

Trembling, she got out of the car and examined the outside. "Great," she mumbled, the flat right tire testified of her problems. She knelt to inspect the damage. Shredded tire littered the road and ground.

I'm going to be late. She sighed, making her way to the front of the car. She popped the rounded hood and peered inside. Figures. No spare. She let the hood close with a bang.

Propping herself against the hood, Elizabeth contemplated her next move. She had a cell phone in her backpack, so she knew could call one of her cousins for help. But calling on a Lambert meant the whole family would somehow become involved in this minor incident. During her short time in White Birch, Elizabeth fast learned that nothing seemed sacred or private among the Lambert clan.

I'll handle the problem myself. She stepped around to the passenger side, fetched her backpack, locked the doors and started jogging toward Sinclair's.

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Kavan Donovan scanned a local camping area from the top of the old, run down, White Birch fire tower. A large set of binoculars covered his eyes. Aerial surveillance replaced most of the Forest Ranger's manual chores, but Kavan still climbed the tower to survey the area. Something about the ancient tower enchanted him. In fact, he'd persuaded the department to invest money in its renovation.

A light June breeze tickled the tops of trees and scattered the thin trails of smoke rising from campers' fires. The hushed wind stirred his spirit. "God, You're so good." His gaze roamed the beautiful peaks of the White Mountains.

A couple of young men hiked into his magnified view, and Kavan watched as they made their way along the mountain path.

Setting the binoculars aside, he checked the sky overhead. Clear and blue, no sign of rain. When did it rain last? Six weeks, maybe, he thought. It was a little too dry for his liking.

A flash of light nabbed his attention and with calculated motion, he reached for the binoculars.

A flare. Kavan zeroed in on the area with the binoculars. The white smoky trail led to the general location of the hikers. He grabbed his radio.

"White Birch, this is Donovan. We've got hikers in trouble on the south ridge, hundred and fifty-foot line. Clear."

The voice of Rick Weber crackled over the radio. "They climbed that high? Go ahead." He sounded dubious.

"Yes. Go ahead."

"I'll send out the chopper. Weber clear."

"Donovan clear." Kavan searched the mountainside for a glimpse of the hikers.

"Kavan," Rick called back in a voice low. "Switch to channel eight five."

Kavan clicked the dial on his radio. "What's up?" he asked.

"When you come in, be ready to rescue yourself from Travis. Rumor has it he's on the war path over the expenses you submitted."

Kavan exhaled and lowered his arm, letting the binoculars dangle from his right hand while gripping the radio in his left. With a shake his head, he said, "Thanks. I'm on my way in now."

He took one last glance around the venerable tower before starting for the steps.

Ever since he started working on the fire tower refurbishment, his boss, Travis Knight, scrutinized all his expense reports with a critical eye. Driving down the mountainside, Kavan recalled the debate he had with Travis. "You've barely started the project and already I'm getting heat from the department about the expense." "Travis, I've ordered several hundred board feet of pine and a few large cell batteries for energy." "Large cell batteries? You're wasting department money."

"I planned for the energy cells in the refurbishment budget. Otherwise, we have to run power lines to the tower."

Travis shook his head. "I won't have it look as if my office is frivolous with expenses."

"Frivolous? Pine board and batteries are not frivolous." Kavan tried to reason with him, but Travis turned a deaf ear and ordered him to hold off on any more expenses.

Kavan hated the memory of that day. Now, arriving at the office, he dreaded a second confrontation. He addressed Travis' secretary when he entered. "Hi, Kavan," Cheryl said sweetly, winking at him with mascara-laden lashes.

"Evening, Cheryl. Travis around?"

She tipped her head toward an office door. "Careful, he's in a mood."

"So I've heard." Kavan knocked lightly on the director's door.

"Come in," a deep voice bellowed.

"Evening, Travis," Kavan said, shutting the door behind him.

Travis Knight looked up, the skin under his chin jiggling like jelly. His dark eyes glared at Kavan, and he tossed some papers on the edge of the desk. "What's the meaning of this?"

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Elizabeth jogged toward Sinclair's, determined to make it on time. When the loud blip of a police siren sounded behind her, she jumped off the road with a yelp. The passenger side window of a White Birch police car slid down. The officer leaned over and peered up at her. "What are you doing?"

Elizabeth scowled at another of her Lambert cousins. "Going to work," she said, then added with a pound of her fist on the car door. "What's the big idea of scaring me half to death?"

Jeff Simmons gave his wide, cheesy grin. "Sorry, Beth, just messing with you."

"You about gave me a heart attack."

"Get in." Jeff pulled the handle and pushed the door open. Elizabeth tossed her backpack inside.

"Why are you jogging to work?" he asked, starting in the direction of the super department store.

Elizabeth hesitated to answer. She loved her cousin Jeff, but if she told him about the tire, he'd do the Lambert family thing and fix it for her. She gave him the first excuse that came to mind. "I need the exercise."

He laughed. "Yea, right. I saw your car on the side of the road back there."

Elizabeth looked over at her cousin and confessed. "The right front tire blew."

"Ah," he said.

They rode in silence for a minute before she said softly, "Thanks for the lift."

"Lamberts stick together."

"So I've noticed." A wry smile touched her lips.

"A little overwhelming is it?" Jeff asked, his tone understanding.

"Just a tad. Everywhere I turn there's a Lambert family member or worse, a family friend, watching me. It's like living in a fish bowl."

"No one's watching you, Beth. The folks in White Birch are just friendly and interested."

"You mean nosey," Elizabeth retorted.

"No, I don't mean nosey." Jeff glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "You like your privacy, don't you?"

Elizabeth laughed and shook her head. "Just a little."

Jeff continued. "I was the opposite when I went to college. Didn't know anyone, struggled with that alone-in-a-crowd feeling. I hated those first few months on campus. I never told anyone, but I think Grandma always knew."

A picture of big-hearted Jeff wandering campus alone caused a wave of mercy to splash Elizabeth's heart. But his situation didn't compare to hers. "I'm the opposite. Grad school can't come soon enough."

Jeff shook his head with a chuckle. "It's the next hill to conquer, is it?"

She twisted her lips to hide a wry grin. "I wouldn't put it like that... exactly. "

Jeff laughed. "I hope you get the school you want."

"There's no doubt I will," Elizabeth said, confidence rising within her.

"How you like working for Lambert's Furniture?" Jeff asked, slowing to turn into Sinclair's giant parking lot.

Elizabeth shrugged and looked out the passenger window. "It's a job."

Actually, she enjoyed working at the family business, though she would never admit it. Seeing the business from the inside, she gained a new respect for Lambert ingenuity and vision.

He stopped by the front entrance of Sinclair's. "Here you go."

Elizabeth grabbed her backpack and hopped out of the car. "Thanks, Jeff."

"Any time, Cousin. Would you like a ride home?"

"No, thanks." She hurried inside and ran past the store's café style grill. Breathless, she paused long enough to order a grilled ham and cheese. The sandwich waited for her when she came down from the employee locker room.

She ate as she walked toward the front. The evening manager, Joann Floyd, met her in the main aisle. "Take over the customer service desk."

"All right." Elizabeth swallowed the last of the sandwich.

"And can you stay and help me close? MaryAnn called in sick again." Joann fell into step with Elizabeth.

"Sure," she replied, stepping behind the counter and signing into the register. In the past few weeks, the twenty-nine year-old Joann had become more of a friend than a boss. Elizabeth hated to refuse her request, knowing the extra work would fall to the dedicated manager.

A smile of relief lit Joann's oval face. "Thank you."

Elizabeth shrugged. "What else is there to do in this dinky town?"

Joann answered without preamble. "Meet a nice man, fall in love, get married, have a few kids."

Elizabeth groaned. "You've gone crazy from too much work, Jo. When have you ever heard me talked about love, marriage and kids?" She shook with an exaggerated shudder.

Joann laughed. "Well, I've never heard you talk about it, but it's got to be more fun than grad school."

"You'd rather I stay in White Birch and forget about my plans." Elizabeth said, picking through the basket of returned items.

"Oh no, I don't want you to forget about your plans. I want you to change them."

Elizabeth chuckled at Joann's forthright confession. "Nothing doing. I'm getting my masters in Nuclear Engineering, maybe a Ph.D."

"And then what?" Joann said before heading off to check on a price for a register customer.

Elizabeth shrugged. "I don't know." I'll cross that bridge when I come to it, she muttered to herself.

For the next hour, the grad-school-bound Lambert handled refunds and sorted the return items. Occasionally, Joann walked by and whispered words about love or romance in her ear.

"There are other things in life besides romance," Elizabeth whispered in response.

"I need to return these," a smooth baritone voice rose from the other side of the counter.

Elizabeth looked up into the chocolate brown eyes of a handsome, uniformed Forest Ranger. The sparkle in his eyes caused her heartbeat to quicken. Her voice wobbled when she asked, "Do you have a receipt?"

"Right here." He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out the thin register tape. "After you do the refund, I need to purchase these items again."

Elizabeth peered over the counter and into his cart. It was loaded with all kinds of kids' crafts: poster boards, paints, colored paper, balloons, and sparkles.

With an upward glance, she asked, "Whatever for?"