

Chapter One

"You are perfect. In every way. Not one flaw." Richmond Carlisle pressed the softest of kisses to her forehead, her soft cheeks, her snub nose, her shell-like ears. "I will never let you doubt my love for even one second, my little sweetheart. I've finally learned that I can let it show and grow."

Andee Benjamin made no move to wipe away the tears that slipped down her face as she watched and listened—a secret presence in the room—while her father hugged the object of his affection to himself and whispered sweetly in her ear. Instead, she looked into the startlingly blue eyes that met hers over his shoulder and felt her heart ache with love.

Richmond turned then, and smiled gently at her.

"I used to hold you like this, and whisper silly things in your ear, and hum songs no one ever heard before. But you grew up and I didn't know how to show you that you were my world. Can you forgive me? Can you let me try to do a better job—with you and Carlee? There's more than enough love to go around, Andee. I realize that more and more, each day."

He reached for her with his free arm, still cradling his six-week-old granddaughter on his shoulder.

"So it's you I have to thank for making me sing off-key," she said as she grinned in the comfort of his embrace, reaching up to cover his slender hand with her own as it held her daughter firmly in place.

"I'm afraid so. I did my best to train you every night for the first year of your life. Then you learned to walk and you were suddenly such a busy little thing, you were too exhausted to hear my songs at bedtime anymore."

She sighed and melted into his hug. "I seem to be back in that same state now, Daddy." She could not see the smile that lit his face when she addressed him so, but she felt his arm tighten about her.

Little more than a year ago, such a stance would have seemed impossible to either of them, but times had changed. Andee had changed.

"I had no idea how much time and energy one tiny little person would need from me. I'm pretty ready to fall asleep standing up by the time I get her settled for the night—or the first couple of hours of her night."

"Not a good sleeper?" Richmond asked.

"Oh, she gets enough nap time in to be healthy, but she does it all in bits and pieces, and mostly when someone is holding her. I bet she's snoozing now, but the minute you lay her down, she'll pop up like a jack-in-the-box," Andee said wearily.

"And her mommy will be right there to soothe her back into sleepyland," said a baritone voice from the living room doorway of the simple log cabin in the Smoky Mountain foothills.

It was a mild statement of fact, but both Carlee's mother and her visiting grandfather caught a slight edge to the delivery.

Richmond frowned slightly at his son-in-law, a man his equal in age but a bit taller and broader through the shoulders and chest than the slender real estate tycoon who was cuddling the two most precious things in his life.

"Andee's the best possible mother, but she's exhausted. We've got to convince our girl she can let someone else help carry the load sometimes," Nick Benjamin said. "She's just now using that arm she broke right before Carlee was born, plus getting over all the bumps and bruises from the fall she took running out in the storm that night. She started out her mommy role in a fragile state—one I'll never forgive myself for letting happen—and she needs to be babied as much as our little Carlee, but she won't admit it, will you, sweetie?"

Andee sighed and stepped away from her father's embrace. "You know I can't just go passing her around whenever I want to. I'm just now getting a good milk supply going, and no one else can do that for her."

She raised both hands as though to take her daughter away from her peaceful perch on her grandfather's shoulder, but he twisted away slightly and whispered with a smile. "She's happy for the moment, and I'm in grandfather heaven. Why don't you go curl up and catch a nap yourself? Surely Nick and I can manage. After all, you fed her not fifteen minutes ago, so her little tummy's full. Go on, now, honey. Get some rest while you can."

Nick gave him a grateful smile and came quietly across the room to sweep his petite wife up in his arms and head for their bedroom, despite her half-hearted protests.

"Don't argue with your father and me," he whispered as he carried her up the stairs. "Even mommies can get spanked if they don't mind."

Andee gasped and twisted in his arms to glance toward her father, mortified that he might have heard the threat that had somehow reignited places deep inside her she had been unaware of for the past few weeks. He appeared to be still completely engrossed in baby Carlee, however, and was not even looking in their direction.

"I can't imagine my father ever treating me like that," she said in wonder as Nick pushed open their bedroom door with his foot and deposited her as carefully as a tray of precious china on their bed.

"And Carlee will probably say the same thing about me some day," he agreed as he spread a sheepskin throw over his wife's newly slender body, which had curled into a fetal position as soon as she felt the warmth and comfort of the bed. "But the truth is, we're both fools for beautiful little girls. And we've got a pair of them right here in this house. And," he said, tapping her nose and bending to kiss her tenderly, "they both need naps. Even if it's only fifteen minutes. So close your eyes and relax. Nothing terrible will happen to Carlee if you rest. But something will definitely happen to you, if you don't. And your tender little bottom won't enjoy it at all."

She started to object, thinking it was just possible she *would* enjoy a bit of such attention, but a yawn got the better of her midway, and Nick was out the door, closing it firmly behind him, before she could recall all she had meant to say. She closed her eyes instead and was asleep before her husband made it to the bottom of the stairs.