

One With You – an excerpt from Chapter 1

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St. Martin's Griffin

New York was the city that never slept; it never even got sleepy. My condo on the Upper West Side had the level of soundproofing expected in a multimillion-dollar property, but still the sounds of the city filtered in—the rhythmic thumping of tires over the well-worn streets, the protests of weary air brakes, and the nonstop honking of taxi horns.

As I stepped out of the corner café onto always-busy Broadway, the rush of the city washed over me. How had I ever lived without the cacophony of Manhattan?

How had I ever managed living without *him*?

Gideon Cross.

I cupped his jaw in my hands, felt him nuzzle into my touch. That show of vulnerability and affection cut right through me. Just hours before I'd thought he might never change, that I would have to compromise too much to share my life with him. Now, I stood in the face of his courage and doubted my own.

Had I demanded more of him than I had of myself? I was shamed by the possibility that I'd pushed him to evolve while I had remained obstinately the same.

He stood before me, so tall and strong. In jeans and a T-shirt, with a ball cap pulled low over his brow, he was unrecognizable as the global mogul the world thought it knew but still so innately compelling he affected everyone who walked by. In the corner of my eye, I noted how the people nearby glanced at him, then did a double-take.

Dressed casually or in the bespoke three-piece suits he favored, the power of Gideon's leanly muscular body was unmistakable. The way he held himself, the authority he wielded with faultless control, made it impossible for him to ever fade into the background.

New York swallowed everything that came into it, while Gideon had the city on a gilded leash.

And he was mine. Even with my ring on his finger, I still sometimes struggled to believe it.

He would never be just a man. He was ferocity sheathed in elegance, perfection veined with flaws. He was the nexus of my world, a nexus of *the* world.

Yet he'd just proven that he would bend and yield to the breaking point to be with me. Which left me with a renewed determination to prove I was worth the pain I'd forced him to face.

Around us, the shop fronts along Broadway were reopening. The flow of traffic on the street began to thicken, black cars and yellow cabs bouncing wildly over the uneven surface. Residents trickled onto the sidewalks, taking their dogs out or heading toward Central Park for an early morning run, stealing what time they could before the workday kicked in with a vengeance.

The Benz pulled up to the curb just as we reached it, Raúl a big shadowy figure at the wheel. Angus slid the Bentley into place behind it. My ride and Gideon's, going to separate homes. How was that a marriage?

Fact was, it was *our* marriage, though neither of us wanted it that way. I'd had to draw a line when Gideon hired my boss away from the advertising agency I worked for.

I understood my husband's desire for me to join Cross Industries, but trying to force my hand by taking action behind my back...? I couldn't allow it, not with a man like Gideon. We were either together—making decisions together—or we were too far apart to make our relationship work.

Tilting my head back, I looked up into his stunning face. There was remorse there, and relief. And love. So much love.

It was breathtaking how handsome he was. His eyes were the blue of the Caribbean, his hair a thick and glossy black mane that brushed his collar. An adoring hand had sculpted every plane and angle of his face into a level of flawlessness that mesmerized and made it hard to think rationally. I'd been captivated by the look of him from the moment I first saw him, and I still found my synapses frying at random moments. Gideon just dazzled me.

But it was the man inside, his relentless energy and power, his sharp intelligence and ruthlessness coupled with a heart that could be so tender...

"Thank you." My fingertips brushed over the dark slash of his brow, tingling as they always did when they touched his skin. "For calling me. For telling me about your dream. For meeting me here."

"I'd meet you anywhere." The words were a vow, spoken fervently and fiercely.

Everyone had demons. Gideon's were caged by his iron will when he was awake, but when he slept they tormented him in violent, vicious nightmares. We had so much in common, but the abuse in our childhoods was a shared trauma that both drew us together and pushed us apart. It made me fight harder. Our abusers had taken too much away from us already.

“Eva... You’re the only force on earth that can keep me away.”

“Thank you for that, too,” I murmured, my chest tight. “I know it wasn’t easy for you to give me space, but we needed it. And I know I pushed you hard...”

“Too hard.”

My mouth curved at the quick bite of ice in his words. Gideon wasn’t a man used to being denied what he wanted. “I know. And you let me, because you love me.”

“It’s more than love.” His hands banded my wrists, tightening in the way that made everything inside me surrender.

I nodded, no longer afraid to admit that we needed each other in a way some would consider unhealthy. It was who we were, what we had. And it was precious.

“We’ll drive to Dr. Petersen’s together.” He said the words with unmistakable command, but his gaze searched mine as if he’d asked a question.

“You’re so bossy,” I teased, wanting us to leave each other feeling good. Hopeful. Our weekly therapy appointment with Dr. Lyle Petersen was only hours away, and it couldn’t have been more opportunely scheduled. We’d turned a corner. We could use a little help in figuring what our next steps should be from here.

His hands circled my waist. “You love it.”

I reached for the hem of his shirt, fisting the soft jersey. “I love *you*.”

“*Eva*.” His arms came tight and sure around me, his shuddered breath hot on my neck. Manhattan surrounded us but couldn’t intrude. When we were together, there was nothing else.

A low sound of hunger left me, everything inside me that yearned and craved him shivering with delight that he was once again pressed against me. I breathed him in with deep inhalations, my fingers kneading into the rigid muscles of his back. The rush that slid through me was heady. I was addicted to him—heart, soul, and body—and I’d gone days without my fix, leaving me shaky and off-balance, unable to function properly.

He engulfed me, his body so much bigger and harder than mine. I felt safe in his embrace, cherished and protected. Nothing could touch me or hurt me when he was holding me. I wanted him to feel that same sense of security with me. I needed him to know that he could drop his guard, take a breath, and I could protect us both.

I had to be stronger. Smarter. Scarier. We had enemies, and Gideon was dealing with them on his own. It was innate to him to be protective; it was one of his traits I deeply admired. But I had to start showing people that I could be as formidable an adversary as my husband.

More important, I had to prove it to Gideon.

Leaning into him, I absorbed his warmth. His love. “I’ll see you at five, ace.”

“Not a minute later,” he ordered gruffly.

I laughed despite myself, infatuated with every rough-edged facet of him. “Or what?”

Pulling back, he gave me a look that made my toes curl. “Or I come get you.”

I should have tiptoed into my stepfather’s penthouse with my breath held, since the time—a little after six AM—meant getting caught sneaking back in was likely. Instead, I strode in with purpose, my thoughts occupied with the changes I needed to make.

I had time for a shower—barely—but I decided not to take one. It had been so long since Gideon had touched me. Too long since his hands had been on me, his body inside mine. I didn’t want to wash the memory of his touch away. That alone would give me the strength to do what had to be done.

An end table lamp clicked on. “Eva.”

I jumped. “Jesus.”

Pivoting, I found my mother sitting on one of the living room settees.

“You scared the crap out of me!” I accused, rubbing a hand over my racing heart.

She stood, her floor-length ivory satin robe shimmering around her toned, lightly tanned legs. I was her only child, but we looked like we could be sisters. Monica Trammell Barker Mitchell Stanton was obsessive about maintaining her looks. As a career trophy wife, her youthful beauty was her stock-in-trade.

“Before you start,” I began, “yes, we have to talk about the wedding. But I really have to get ready and pack up my stuff so I can go home tonight—”

“Are you having an affair?”

Her curt question shocked me more than the ambush. “*What?* No!”

She exhaled, tension visibly leaving her shoulders. “Thank God. Will you tell me what the hell is going on? How bad was this argument you had with Gideon?”

Bad. For a while, I worried that he’d ended us with the decisions he made. “We’re working things out, Mom. It was just a bump in the road.”

“A bump that had you avoiding him *for days*? That’s not the way to deal with your problems, Eva.”

“It’s a long story—”

She crossed her arms. “I’m not in a hurry.”

“Well, I am. I have to get ready for work.”

Hurt flashed across her face and I felt instantly remorseful.

Once, I had wanted to grow up to be just like my mother. I spent hours dressing up in her clothes, stumbling around in her heels, smearing my face with her expensive creams and cosmetics. I tried to emulate her breathy voice and sensual mannerisms, certain my mother was the most gorgeous and perfect woman in the world. And her way with men, the way they looked at her and catered to her... well, I’d wanted that magic touch of hers, too.

In the end, I’d grown up to be her spitting image aside from the style of our hair and the color of my eyes. But that was just on the outside. Who we were as women couldn’t be more different and, sadly, that was something I’d come to take pride in. I stopped turning to her for advice, except when it came to clothes and decorating.

That was going to change. Now.

I’d tried a lot of different tactics in navigating my relationship with Gideon, but I hadn’t asked for help from the one person close to me who knew what it was like to be married to prominent and powerful men.

“I need your advice, Mom.”

My words hung in the air, then I watched them sink in. My mother’s eyes widened with surprise. A moment later she was sinking back onto the sofa as if her knees had failed her. Her shock was a hard blow, telling me how completely I’d shut her out.

I was hurting inside when I took a seat on the couch opposite her. I’d learned to be careful about what I shared with my mom, doing my best to withhold information that might start discussions that drove me crazy.

It hadn’t always been that way. My stepbrother Nathan had taken my warm, easy relationship with my mother away from me, just as he’d taken my innocence. After my mom learned of the abuse, she had changed, becoming overprotective to the point of stalking and smothering me. She was supremely confident about everything in her life, except for me. With me, she was anxious and intrusive, sometimes bordering on hysterical. Over the years, I’d forced myself to skirt around the truth far too often, keeping secrets from everyone I loved just to keep the peace.

“I don’t know how to be the kind of wife Gideon needs,” I confessed.

Her shoulders went back, her entire posture shifting to one of outrage. “Is *he* having an affair?”

“No!” A reluctant laugh escaped me. “No one is having an affair. We wouldn’t do that to each other. We couldn’t. Stop worrying about that.”

I had to wonder if my mother’s recent infidelity with my father was the true root of her concern. Did it weigh on her mind? Did she question what she had with Stanton? I didn’t know how to feel about that. I loved my dad so much, but I also believed that my stepfather was perfect for my mom in just the way she needed a husband to be.

“Eva—”

“Gideon and I eloped a few weeks ago.” God, it felt good to put that out there.

She blinked at me. Once, twice. “What?”

“I haven’t told Dad yet,” I went on. “But I’m going to call him today.”

Her eyes glistened with welling tears. “*Why?* God, Eva... how did we grow so far apart?”

“Don’t cry.” I got up and went to her, taking a seat beside her. I reached for her hands, but she pulled me into a fierce hug instead.

I breathed in the familiar scent of her and felt the kind of peace only found in a mother’s arms. For a few moments, anyway. “It wasn’t planned, Mom. We went away for the weekend, and Gideon asked me if I would, and he made the arrangements... It was spontaneous. Spur of the moment.”

She pulled back, revealing a tear streaked face and fire in her eyes. “He married you without a prenup?”

I laughed, I had to. Of course my mother would zero in on the financial details. Money had long been the driving force of her life. “There’s a prenup.”

“Eva Lauren! Did you have it looked at? Or was that spontaneous, too?”

“I read every word.”

“You’re not an attorney! God, Eva... I raised you to be smarter than this!”

“A six-year old could’ve understood the terms,” I shot back, irritated by the real problem in my marriage: Gideon and I had way too many people meddling in our relationship, distracting us so that we didn’t have time to tackle the things that really needed work. “Don’t worry about the prenup.”

“You should’ve asked Richard to read it. I don’t see why you wouldn’t have. It’s so irresponsible. I just don’t—”

“I saw it, Monica.”

We both turned at the sound of my stepfather’s voice. Stanton entered the room ready for the day, looking sharp in a navy suit and yellow tie. I imagined Gideon would be much like my stepfather at the same age: physically fit, distinguished, as much an alpha male as ever.

“You did?” I asked, surprised.

“Cross sent it to me a few weeks ago.” Stanton crossed over to my mother, taking her hand in his. “I couldn’t have argued for better terms.”

“There are always better terms, Richard!” my mom said sharply.

“There are rewards for milestones such as anniversaries and the birth of children, and nothing in the way of penalties for Eva, aside from marital counseling. A dissolution would have a more than equitable distribution of assets. I was tempted to ask if Cross had his in-house counsel review it. I imagine they argued strenuously against it.”

She settled for a moment, taking that in. Then she pushed to her feet, bristling. “But you knew they were eloping? You knew, and you didn’t say anything?”

“Of course, I didn’t know.” He pulled her into his arms, crooning softly like he would with a child. “I assumed he was looking ahead. You know these things usually take a few months of negotiating. Although, in this case, there was nothing more I could’ve asked for.”

I stood. I had to hurry if I was going to get to work on time. Today of all days, I didn’t want to be late.

“Where are you going?” My mother straightened away from Stanton. “We’re not done with this discussion. You can’t just drop a bomb like that and leave!”

Turning to face her, I walked backwards. “I’ve seriously got to get ready. Why don’t we get together for lunch and talk more then?”

“You can’t be—”

I cut her off. “Corinne Giroux.”

My mother’s eyes widened, then narrowed. One name. I didn’t have to say anything else.

Gideon’s ex was a problem that needed no further explanation.