

One With You – an excerpt from Chapter 1

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St. Martin's Griffin

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.