

Have you ever loved someone you knew you shouldn't love? Maybe someone much older than you or someone from an entirely different life? Someone with whom a relationship would never work? Someone forbidden? If you have, then you know that it royally sucks.

So, what do you do when that's the kind of love you get?

Runaway?

Take it one step at a time?

Say "to hell" with social conventions and float away on the fluffy wings of love?

I've never been able to get it right, but I'm a hopeless romantic. I've been in love several times before, but somehow, I always end up falling in love with men who are too immature or just plain mean. If the world knew, they'd judge me. They might even throw me in a psych ward or something. But it's not like I can choose who I fall in love with. It's love...it just happens. You get with the program, or you get lost.

Me? I usually choose the "get lost" option. Well, the whole truth is that I'm often too shy to admit my affections and that means I lose out on the chance. Maybe it's because I'm afraid of the shit I'd get from other people. Perhaps it's because of my history with love and men especially older men. I don't know.

Anyway, I'm no stranger to forbidden love. I know what it's like to yearn for someone I can't have. To feel a pang of hunger I can't satisfy. To desire someone so much that it feels as if my very soul has been scorched.

Maybe that's my luck. Just like it's my luck to be stuck existing on minimum wage.

Welcome to my life. My name is Gemma Johnston, and I work as a pool girl for a living; maintaining other people's wealthy lifestyle.

It's not the best job in the world, but it pays the bills and puts food on the table—well if you call cold slices of pizza and about-to-expire milk food. But it's the grind. It's life.

I'm twenty-two years old, but I've been told that I matured quite quickly and maybe that makes me seem much older than I am. That's why for the past five years, I've been on my own, fending for myself.

My life isn't perfect. It's certainly not big-screen perfect. I live in a dingy one-room apartment in the town of Henderson, just south of Las Vegas. And although my apartment isn't large enough for even one person to live comfortably, I can't afford to pay the rent on my own, so my best friend, Taylor, stays with me and foots half the bill.

Well, at least that's supposed to be the arrangement, but sometimes I can't even afford to pay my half of the bill, so Taylor pays it all. In return, I help her around her office and take odd-jobs whenever I have time. Although, I rarely have the time since I work all day—from sunup to sundown.

Still, it doesn't matter how hard life gets—and trust me; it's hard. It doesn't matter how tough my job is. It doesn't matter how much work I owe Taylor because she's always covering for me. These things won't take away the smile on my face.

Do you want to know why?

Because I'm a dreamer.

That's right. I have big dreams. Big plans.

You see, when I was little—right before my dad left and my mom had to work herself ragged just to feed us—I dreamt of becoming a dancer, like a lot of young girls do. We never had the money for formal lessons, but on my way home from school, I'd peek in the front window of the local dance studio and try to memorize the moves so I could practice them at home. I've held onto that dream—even through my dad's abandonment and my mom's death. Sometimes, when Taylor is asleep, and when I don't collapse into bed right when I get home, I still practice the few moves I know to keep myself in shape and for the sheer enjoyment of it.

My dreams are what keeps me going. I dream that someday I'm going to make it big. Get rich. Eat real food. Build a closet larger than this dingy apartment for all my expensive clothes.

Maybe I'll even be able to fall in love with a guy my own age instead of men who are way too old for me or treat me like shit. That's sort of a taboo, anyhow, and just the sort of thing tabloids love to speculate about. I don't want that kind of mark trailing me.

Anyway, I am determined to make my dream a reality, even if my current position at J&J Pools Maintenance Co.—for the owners, Jeffrey & James—is a dead-end job.

Call me naïve if you want. I'm sure most people would. But we'll have to see.

“Why do you keep staring in the mirror like that?” Taylor snaps from her position on the bed behind me.

I am a little startled by her cold, crisp voice. I forgot that she's right there. Anytime she's focused on some document on her laptop. It's almost as if she disappears. She gets so quiet that it's easy to forget there's another human being in the room.

Now, however, she's looking at me, her foxy, thick-rimmed glasses perched on the bridge of her nose. Her long, blonde hair is tied in a neat bun on top of her head, though strands of hair fall around the edge of her face. Taylor is beautiful in her own way, long legs and tall but a lot slimmer on top than me if you know what I mean.

“Taylor, don't you want more from your life? You're still in your pajamas girl.” I say to her. I know she works late nights waitressing, but every morning she's on her computer for hours.

“Of course, I do. I know you've been working a lot lately, so I'll bring you up to speed. Eddy and I are done. He's an obsessive, compulsive asshole! Why do guys our age only want sex? I seriously don't think their brains are developed yet. So I decided no more men for a while. Instead, I'm going to make myself smart! So last week I enrolled in that online class I told you about awhile back,” she perks up as she says it so I know she's excited about it.

“Accounting? Are you kidding me?” I say surprised because I can't believe she'd do something so boring. Taylor's got a killer bod' and she doesn't even realize it.

“Well, I've got to earn a living and being an accountant, I can work during the day. These nights are killing me.”

I roll my eyes at Taylor and focus back on my reflection. She's always been the smart one, doesn't she realize that either? And me, I've been told that I'm beautiful, and I've always thought that would be handy

when I became a dancer, but right now, I feel far away from that dream. It's not like beauty alone is going to put food on my table. I'm average height, though I'm a little on the tall side. My hair is dark brown. My skin is smooth and without blemish. It's because I take good care of it, albeit with cheap beauty products.

I have a taut form, and there's not a pound of fat on my body. It's all muscle and meat. I didn't get this way because I go to the gym—I don't even have the money for a membership. I got this way because of the demanding nature of my job.

Not that I ever get to show it off. Most of the time I'm in these old coveralls. Day in, day out. The only one who sees me in regular clothing regularly is Taylor. Sometimes, on a rare day off or when the workday was pretty light, I throw on something casual and stroll around the block to stretch my legs. I get a lot of stares from men, but I ignore them.

That's not to say that I don't like the appreciative looks. I do.

"It's not going to get any prettier, Gemma," Taylor snarks, startling me again.

I'd already forgotten that Taylor was there.

With a smile, I turn and strike a pose for her, "So, you do admit that it's pretty?"

She lets out a sarcastic laugh. "If your idea of pretty is a washed-out, hand-me-down, stained-as-hell, shitty coveralls, then yes. It's very pretty."

My smile quickly turns to a frown. "Hey, I like my job."

"I'm not attacking your job, Gemma," Taylor says with the utmost seriousness. "Just that unflattering outfit they make you wear. I mean, can't they change it? You can't even tell what color it was supposed to be. Even the logo is almost gone."

This brings my attention to the right breast of my coverall. There's a patch there with the logo sewn on in white. Well, it used to be white. Now, the color has bled, and so much dirt and grime have been washed out so many times that you can barely tell there's a logo there. I think it was something like a stream of water with a plier and screwdriver across it like an X. I don't really remember. All that's legible now is part of the name: &J Pool Mainte

"You might not be attacking my job directly, but you sure as hell are doing it indirectly," I replied icily, ignoring her last question. The heat must be getting to me.

I do love my job. I'm happy with the work. The fact that I want to move on to greater heights eventually doesn't mean I don't like my job. I do wish it paid better, though.

"Why do you keep working for those people, Gemma?" asks Taylor. "I've told you, I can probably get you a job waitressing at the hotel. They'll clean you up. A girl as beautiful as you shouldn't have to bake in the sun all day doing manual labor."

I don't reply. This is one conversation I've had with Taylor more times than I care to remember. It always ends with a fight and us not speaking for a day or two.

Usually, when Taylor dangles a job in front of me, I call her out for having to play sex doll for all those wealthy clients the Vegas strip attracts to the hotel she works in. Then Taylor takes offense and retaliates with a few biting words and BOOM! We're fighting.

But because today I'm especially not in the mood for this discussion, I decide to change the dynamic.

"You know what, Taylor?" I sigh.

"What?" Taylor growls, expecting a nasty remark.

I smile and meet Taylor's eyes in the mirror. "What I want most is to leave Henderson. There are no opportunities here for the kind of life I want. Hell, there are no opportunities here at all. Las Vegas is too expensive for me. There's just no chance for the American Dream here. I want that chance."

For a moment, Taylor looks at me. Then, her eyes soften. She stands, comes over to me, and wraps me in a hug. "And what dream is that, hun? To find a nice man, settle down and have a couple of kids? You're too young for that Gemma. You need to live a little first girlfriend. Get yourself a man. Have some wild, crazy sex and get it out of your system."

I shut my eyes momentarily, relaxing against her. Her sweet, flowery scent washes over me. It's comforting.

"I know, you're right. I don't know what it is, but I've been so horny lately. Maybe it's the heat. I don't know. I don't have time for a relationship. I can barely pay the rent as it is. A boyfriend would just take up my time. It's just that I feel stifled here." I say. "If I had extra time and money I'd have my dance lessons first before the guy. Plus, I'm not getting any younger."

Taylor turns me around and gives some reassurance, "If there's anything I know to be true about you, Gemma, it's that you're a fighter. It's why I have no doubt that you can make your dreams come true. It's why I know you'll find what you need no matter where you are. One day you'll find your dream."

"Neither one of us are."

She remains close, placing a hand on my shoulder. I stare at her in the mirror, surprised. This is the first time she's saying this to me. It brings me to the verge of tears.

Taylor notices this and says, "Please don't cry, Gemma." She pauses. "Hey, I hate to bring it up, but you've got to get going or you'll be late for work."

My eyes jerk up to the old clock hanging on the wall. I have to be at work by eight, and it's already 7:50. Shit, shit, shit!

In a panic, I gather my things and dash to the door, calling goodbye to Taylor as I go.

By this time, my usual ride to work is already gone. I hurry to the main road. I'm so frazzled that I take the first step into the road to cross without noticing a big black Range Rover barreling toward me until it's too late. The vehicle screeches to a halt just a foot from me. I'm frozen in shock, staring open-mouthed.

The man behind the wheel steps out of the vehicle. He's tall and gorgeous, with dark hair shot through with silver. A woman with sunglasses remains in the car. Although he's dressed simply in a white button-down shirt,

jeans, and sneakers, I can tell that he's in great shape. I can't see his eyes through his Maui Jim's sunglasses, but my body tells me I'm immediately drawn to him.

He, however, looks furious, his mouth twisted into a scowl. I think he's probably about to yell at me for being so stupid, but when he gets a good look at my face, he stops short.

For a few seconds, there's a tense silence between us as he studies me from behind his sunglasses.

"What's your name, kid?" he asks finally.

"Gemma."

"Watch where you're going next time....Gemma," he says.

He returns to his vehicle and zooms off, leaving me confused and very intrigued. I wonder about the mysterious stranger all the way to work.

Walking to my backyard where I can sit and watch the golfers on the green while I sit next to my pool, the summer sun warms my bare back, I flip through the bundle of mail I just retrieved from my mailbox. It's mostly junk mail. The few pieces that aren't junk are even worse.

Bills are coming due soon.

"Fucking bankers," I growl, dumping the junk mail in the trash.

There are foreclosures on two of my houses on the West Coast. Repossession notices of two of my exotic cars. Well, at least they left me the Range Rover, I think.

"Can't even wait for me to go a year without a job before they come to feast on my corpse," I grumble.

I sigh, leafing through the legalese of the foreclosures on my two properties in California. They say they're so sorry they have to foreclose on the house. Yeah, right. They're still going to do it. I bet they even get a little satisfaction out of it when it's someone who used to be wealthy. Is being a little sick and twisted a job requirement? Probably.

This is this third time this month that I'm getting mail like this. And it's only been five months since I lost my job. You'd expect these guys to have a little bit of courtesy. Maybe give me some time to secure another position. But no. They push the panic button.

But can you blame them? A voice says in my head.

I sigh. I'm not exactly employable as it is. Aside from the fact that I'm forty-two, which isn't a great age to be looking for new employment, I'm an entertainer. And by entertainer, I mean porn star or ex-porn star. And forty-two in the porn industry? Basically, it says I'm a senior citizen.

You don't get all those bullshit skills you can put on a resume from working in porn. I certainly can't put on there that I can manage a threesome or that I can fuck for hours without tiring or that I can make a woman cum in seconds if I want. I guess I could always twist the truth. Excellent managerial skills. Good under pressure. Meets deadlines with ease. Ha!

That still leaves the issue with my age. Forty-two. No one wants to employ a man with zero practical experience and a twenty-two-year gap in his work history. I don't even want to think about how that interview would go.

Still, it's not as if I'm a decrepit old man. My hair and beard are turning salt and pepper, sure, but my hair is impeccably styled, I still have lots of it, and my beard is perfectly trimmed.

Looking down at my defined pecs and taut abs, my muscles bulge with the same intensity as they did when I was but twenty and taking the porn industry by storm.

Not that that did me any good once they decided they wanted me out. I grit my teeth at the memory. My director, Mark, had given me the news. And I—embarrassingly—had tried to plead with him to change his mind. I couldn't stand to lose such a high-paying job. I certainly didn't want to lose my very comfortable lifestyle.

"You're just too old, Cullen," Mark said. "You've been doing this for how many years, now?"

“Twenty-two,” I replied.

“Don’t you ever get tired of it?” he asked. “Don’t you want to do something more meaningful?”

I hate the way he spoke to me. It made me feel like I wasted half my life while I lined his pockets and those of the production company with millions and millions of dollars.

At the peak of my career, everyone wanted to see Cullen Roberts. They wanted to see him unleash “the animal.” That was the nickname they gave me. “The Animal,” a reference to the savage, primal way I screwed on camera. Now, nobody wants to see me. I’m just a has-been. Old. Declining. Greying on all parts of my body.

“I’m still perfectly capable, Mark!” I exclaimed that night. “I mean, none of the younger guys can match my speed. My skill. Fuck this shit, Mark. You know I’m right.”

“Maybe,” Mark said, “but most of the girls here are young. Too young for a forty-two-year-old man. It’s a fucking taboo, Cullen. You know we don’t cater to that crowd. We can’t keep pairing you with young girls.” He paused, sucking in a deep breath. “We’ve begun to get negative reviews. People don’t care anymore how quickly you make them cum. They’re asking if you’re not old enough to be their father.”

That was the phrase that struck me. Old enough to be their father. It was the kind of biting slap that leaves an imprint of five fingers spread across the cheek, burning red.

For a long time, I’d been under the illusion that I could remain a porn star forever. I was making so much money I didn’t bother with life skills or getting a college education or any of that critical shit. Porn had chewed me up and was about to spit me out into an unforgiving world.

Realizing this, I made one last, desperate attempt to save my job. “Then pair me with someone closer to my age, man. Don’t leave me hanging.”

Mark sighed. “Cullen Roberts, no one wants to watch porn full of saggy breasts and cellulite. Youth and virility are what we sell. You may still look good and perform like you can go ten rounds with four different girls, but a female counterpart wouldn’t appeal to our target audience. I’m sorry, Cullen, but we have to let you go.”

I never thought I would hear those words. And as I stood on the sidewalk outside the company building in downtown Los Angeles on that cold night, still in shock, I thought back on how I’d led my life so far. I knew I had to take radical steps or I would end up in misery.

One of those steps was to move back to my hometown of Henderson, Nevada. Thank God I had enough sense to buy a house here. It’s the only one the banks haven’t foreclosed on only because I paid for everything in cash.

Henderson is not an ideal place to be if you want to hit it big. It certainly isn’t where I hoped I’d spend the rest of my life. There’s a reason why I never visited, aside from the fact that my parents are dead and my siblings, who don’t even live in town anymore, want nothing to do with me.

I never visited because nothing happens here. Yet, it’s Henderson that serves as a safe haven for me. With the banks coming after everything I own to pay off my debts and knowing I may never find work again, this is the only property that remains - this and the Range Rover in the garage—and the half a million I have hidden in an offshore account, and another two-hundred fifty thousand in cash.

Right now, I'm in survival mode, but I don't plan on remaining in it forever.

I've always lived a very luxurious lifestyle. I lived in the most beautiful homes, stayed in the nicest hotels, bought the most expensive cars. I never flew anything but first class, and I wouldn't be caught dead eating anywhere but the best restaurants. I spent money recklessly and often aimlessly. I never invested, only because I didn't see a need for it. I was the man, after all. The Animal. The world loved me. Well, at least the part of the world that loved their porn stars.

I never thought the day would come that I would have to re-evaluate the way I live. But now that day's come, and I've decided: I don't plan on giving up my lifestyle without a fight.

And since porn and stripping are the only skills I ever learned, it's going to have to be something to do with porn and stripping. I may never stand in front of a camera again, but what's stopping me from being the one who owns the camera?

At first, I thought I'd start a production company, but then I was told that I'd need more backers than time allowed. So, I've settled for something less ambitious. It's just that I'm currently having a difficult time making it work.

I head inside and over to the kitchen, throwing the rest of the mail in the trash. I lean against the counter, staring at the cabinets. I feel my stomach grumble. I'm hungry, but I don't know what to cook. In fact, I don't even know how to cook. That's not high on the list of talents needed for porn.

Usually, I'd have people to make my food. I'd have people to clean the house and make sure my clothes are laundered. Now, all I have is myself. And it sucks.

"How the fuck do people do this all the time?" I think aloud.

That's where the major project I'm working on comes in. Hopefully, this project will help me sustain my luxurious lifestyle perpetually. But so far, things aren't going as well as I'd like.

If I think too hard about it; the fact that my money is gradually dwindling and that I have no hope for a good job and that my plan is not a guaranteed success, I begin to panic.

What if it all fails? What if my House of Stars dream doesn't pan out?

I shake my head, fighting off the sudden fear. I can't think like that. I'll make it work.

And if I don't...

I push away from the counter and head upstairs to my study. I'm ashamed to say I'm still feeling a little panicky, so I first go to the balcony to take a few gulps of fresh air. The desert's arid breeze whips against my body, invigorating me. I glance down at the pristine backyard, the immaculate landscaping. I've had it kept up even though I've spent minimal time here. I frown as my gaze lands on the pool. It definitely hasn't been well-maintained. Who knows if it's even functional?

I make a mental note to have the pool looked at soon as I return to my study.

I sit in the plush desk chair, grab my phone, and dial my friend and business partner, Rick Wilson.

Fear has a way of motivating me. Fear of losing my wealth entirely. Fear of failing. Fear of wasting my life.

On the fourth ring, Rick picks up.

“Yep,” he says.

“I want us to move up the meeting,” I state, getting right to the point.

“Why?” Rick asks, a note of panic in his voice. “Something wrong?”

Yes. There’s a lot of things that are wrong, but I’m not going to bore you with those details.

“I just want us to move a bit faster,” I tell him.

“Okay,” Rick says. “When?”

“This evening,” I answer. “The usual joint.”

“Okay,” Rick replies. “I’ll tell the rest.”

“Good,” I reply and end the call, dropping the phone onto the desk.

I sigh as I think of the long drive to the usual joint for the meeting, which reminds me of the girl I’d almost run over earlier. Gemma. Her face is all hazy to me now—because the whole experience happened in a flash. But I remember she’d been young and her face sweet, although she’d looked like she had the weight of the world on her shoulders. And what the fuck had she been wearing? Some kind of maintenance uniform?

That reminds me, and I pick the phone up again, do a quick internet search, and dial the number for the first pool company I find. A man answers, going through the usual “Hellos” and “How may I help you?” in a forced cheery voice.

“My pool needs to be checked,” I say.

“What seems to be the problem with it?” asks the man.

“I just moved back to town, and I haven’t used it in a while,” I explain, “and I need it checked so I can start using it again.”

“Okay, if you could just give me your address and phone number,” he replies.

I give him the information, and he reads it back to me so I can confirm.

“Right. We’ll have someone over as soon as possible,” the man concludes. “Thank you, sir.”

And with that, he hangs up. That’s usually my move.

Once again, my thoughts trail back to the incident that morning, to that girl I almost ran over. There was just something mysterious and pure about her I can’t seem to get out of my head.