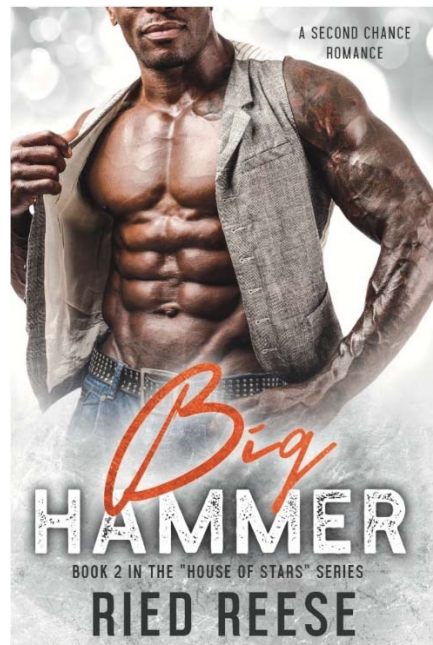


# BIG HAMMER

A SECOND CHANCE ROMANCE



RIED REESE



## CHAPTER ONE: TAYLOR



**B**ottles of expensive nail polish clatter into the sink. Clumsiness isn't characteristic for me. Ordinarily, knocking breakable things over would probably draw out a cynical *'fuck'* loud enough for my best friend and roommate Gemma to ask, "What's wrong?"

But not this morning. Today, I actually find myself grinning through tired eyes as I pick them up and put them in a cardboard box nearby.

I turn and catch my 5'7" image in the dingy, full-length mirror, striking a couple poses for my own, private amusement. Soon, I'll be using my slim body, curvy hips, and natural coordination to enthrall anyone who watches me. Finally, I'm getting a chance to dance on a real stage in Vegas.

How will I wear my hair? I lift my blonde mane with one hand, arching my back and sticking out my ass in a provocative pose as I try to imagine what style would suit me. If I'm going to finally be living my dream, everything has to be perfect.

A loud knock reverberates through the tiny bathroom, interrupting my daydream. "You okay in there?" Gemma calls through the thin door.

“Uh...I need coffee,” I call out, “I hardly slept at all.” I let my hair fall back around my shoulders.

“We’ve got things to do, places to go, people to meet.”

I roll my eyes, pushing my glasses back up my nose. Somehow, the gray frames always make my eyes look bluer in contrast. I admire myself another few seconds, then bang through the bathroom door into our shared studio apartment.

Gemma crosses her legs where she’s been sitting on the messy apartment floor. “Look, I get you’re tired, but I need some help with this because Rick isn’t going to wait around for us.”

“Hey, sorry,” I say kneeling on the floor in front of her. “It’s just all the excitement, ya know? Ending a job, starting a new one, moving to a better apartment; it’s a bit much all at once.”

“You didn’t have to work last night, you know,” Gemma says for the... fifth time? Sixth time? She managed to make me lose count, which is impressive because I’m good with numbers.

“Of course I did. It was my last day there,” I reply crisply.

Gemma rolls her eyes and throws a handful of panties at me. “Just wait until rehearsal tomorrow afternoon. I hear the new choreographer is tough! A few hours with her, then you’ll *really* know what tired means.”

My job as a hotel receptionist ended yesterday, and I know Gemma is annoyed that I didn’t help pack most of the apartment. “Drop it, Gemma.”

She does, but only because she was too busy yawning to snap back. “I guess we’re both tired.”

“Ask your porn star boyfriend to wake you up.” I make the words matter-of-fact instead of suggestive, half hoping to provoke Gemma.

“Ex-porn star,” Gemma corrects me, but she doesn’t seem bothered by my comment.

I turn away from my box to get a closer look at her. She’s turning a package of pencils over in her hands, and I’m pretty sure that big, goofy smile on her face isn’t for the brightly-colored

writing utensils. The light softens her eyes, letting me almost see the memories parading behind them.

I'm not telepathic, but I don't need to be to know she's thinking about Cullen Roberts. Nothing and no one else can put that romantic light in her eyes and that glow in her skin. Lately, Gemma has been floating in the clouds through her own little world.

I know how she feels. I'm right up there with her, thanks to her.

See, for the first time, I've been given a break. A break that turned my dreams into daydreams that are about to drift into reality.

Back in high school, I worked hard toward my long-held dream of becoming a showgirl. Hell, I'm *still* at odds with Daddy Dearest because I couldn't see past the fluid and sultry movements of pole dancers, even as a young teen. It's just... what I wanted to do.

I've grown up. The responsibility of paying the bills and long hours built a tangle of inescapable requirements around me, and with no path ahead that led closer to a glamorous life onstage, I had to become—well, boring. A girl like any other. A girl with a typical job, a shitty apartment, a few continuing-education credits, and no free time to speak of.

As I stare at an accounting text book and laptop just a few inches from my hand, the urge to laugh bubbles in my chest, but I just shake my head instead.

I signed up for that accounting class to end the long nights working at the hotel and add to a bank account balance that almost always hovers uncomfortably close to zero. Numbers lacked the allure of the stage, but they offered a steady income and more sleep.

I'm excited as a dog greeting a soldier returned from war—internally. That doesn't mean I can't still use my brain.

But, I'm a dancer now. I don't need numbers because I've

caught the break I've searched for all these years, and now I'll be living my dream at House of Stars, a soon-to-open, high-tech nightclub that'll empty the streets of Vegas. Gemma's boyfriend owns it and I'm headed off to dance lessons soon.

"We aren't getting anything done," I observe absentmindedly.

Gemma glances around, the euphoria fading from her eyes. "We need to. Rick and the truck are coming in..." Moments of rustling paper and increasingly annoyed sounds fill the silence as we search for Gemma's phone.

I'm the one who finds it. "Three hours. No more daydreaming from either of us. Who's going to get the coffee?"

With the aid of caffeine, we more or less manage to finish our task of packing up our apartment before the moving van arrives. A few things still sit piled on the old table and the stained carpet beneath it, but we figure they'll be tossed into the truck on top of everything else.

I bounce my accounting book in my hands, surveying the two boxes in front of me that still have some space. One is half full of some clothes I never wear. The other now contains my laptop and some outdated electronics. I set the text book on top of the laptop.

A horn screeches from the street below the apartment building. Gemma glances out the single dingy window. "It's Rick."

"About time," I mutter.

We head down the staircase. The weird smell in here always makes me wrinkle my nose, but I'm determined to focus on my bright future. I'm about to leave this place for good, and I want to have lots of good reasons to remember why I'm never coming back.

"Hey, Rick," Gemma says, reaching for the hand Rick proffers the moment she pushes open the old, rusty door to the building. "Thanks for helping us out!"

Rick releases her hand and shakes mine as well, his grip firm and confident as befits the co-owner of a club that's going to send

ripples of excitement throughout Las Vegas. "Cullen wanted to come too, but he got stuck at the club. It'll just be me to give our little star a hand."

I can't help but remind myself that I need to meet the other co-owners of House of Stars to see if they're all as built as Cullen and Rick. His simple blue T-shirt does nothing to conceal the muscles beneath, and the way his biceps ripple when he crosses his arms makes me want to nibble my bottom lip.

If he fits the pattern I've become far too familiar with over the years, his body is probably all there is to appreciate about him. Doesn't mean I can't enjoy that beautiful surface level, though.

"You ladies will ride with me after we've loaded your things in the moving van, which should be here... now," he finishes as a white van with a logo and a name indistinguishable at this distance rolls around the corner. He removes sunglasses to reveal smiling, blue-gray eyes and tucks them into the neck of his T-shirt.

Rick waves to the driver, jerks a thumb toward the door we're standing at, and motions me and Gemma.

I don't lead the way, allowing Gemma and Rick to brush past me. Those eyes. Where have I seen those blue-gray eyes before?

The driver of the moving van joins us and we begin to lug boxes and furniture out to the truck. It's hard work, but my mood grows lighter with every inch of clear space that appears on the floor.

I pause, leaning against the wall next to the window under the pretence of resting. Really, I just want to think for a moment.

Rick's face doesn't look familiar. I'm sure I don't know him from anywhere. But, somehow, I could swear I've seen those eyes before.

"Damn," Gemma says from beside me, doing what I refused to do and catching her bottom lip in her teeth as she joins me at the window.

Below, a line of sweat plasters Rick's shirt to his shoulder

blades as he lifts our dresser into the van. His muscles writhe against the damp fabric like untamed beasts.

“Kinda makes you wonder what’s underneath the shirt. And what’s inside the pants,” she adds with a mischievous grin that changes quickly to suggestive innocence. “Or that’s what I would notice if I was single. And horny. And had killer hips. And had blonde hair. And was named Taylor.”

“I get the point,” I silence her. “I’m not into him. I just...” I shake my head and turn away from the window. “Never mind.”

“Oh come on, Taylor. Men are like life in Vegas. Once you’ve had a taste, you can’t just quit.”

“If he hears you, I’ll have to find a way to pay rent by myself because I’m shoving you out the window,” I mutter sharply. “Just because you’re into older men doesn’t mean everyone else is.”

She shoots me a surprised, hurt look and pushes past me to reach for a box.

“Gemma, stop,” I call after her, catching her arm as guilt spears my heart. “You know I don’t mean that. Anyway, Rick isn’t into me either. He hasn’t looked at my ass once. Mine’s not as sexy as yours, but in these yoga pants?” I shift my hips and place my hands on them, showing off my figure.

Gemma sizes me up and gives me a slight, sideways nod, the smile returning to her face. “He’s got to be crazy not to go for that. Unless he’s not into pussy, you know?”

“Shhh,” I hush her sternly, although we’re both laughing. Footsteps echo on the stairs outside.

Rick walks in and surveys the room, sweat beading on his forehead. “Phew, it’s hot out there. Think we’re about done though. Good thing too, because I’m meeting my cousin in an hour.” He responds to Gemma’s curious look with an explanation. “We’ve just hired him to replace an electrical contractor who quit. We got lucky with him, especially with the renovations being so close to completion.”

Rick is right about the state of our task. There are only four

boxes and the table left now; somehow, the single room seems even smaller with nothing in it. Gemma and I each take two boxes while Rick handles the table alone. Rick and the driver deposit these last items into the van while I run back upstairs to lock the apartment and drop our keys through the office window, then Rick leads the way to his Mercedes Benz.

Gemma and I glance at each other and sit down gingerly on the fine seats.

As Rick starts the car, I look up at the bare window of our old apartment and vow to never have to live in a place like that again.

Tonight, I'll sleep in my own bedroom.

Tomorrow, I'll dance my ass off, and I'll be even better than in my daydreams.



## CHAPTER TWO: BRANDON



**D**amn. I managed to make my shoulders sore yesterday. The cold air from the fridge ghosts up the sleeve of tattoos on my arm as I maneuver the carton of eggs out from underneath a box of two-day-old Chinese leftovers, rolling my other shoulder. The door doesn't shut all the way as usual, but the kick I give it with my foot as I walk away finishes the job.

I usually stay away from the culinary establishments that abound in Vegas. I didn't get the muscles that strain against even my loose shirts by working out alone—nutrition is also somewhat of a hobby of mine.

The Chinese had been a special occasion. An old friend had recently approached my cousin with a business venture and renovations had already begun on the location, but their electrical contractor had quit on them.

That's where I—and the Chinese leftovers—come in. As Rick and his business partner had explained two days ago over dinner, the first electrical contractor had made promises and boasted an impressive list of completed contracts, then sent electricians who had no clue what to do with the specialized electronics required for the place.

I'm not particularly worried about the electronics—I might only have a handful of contracts under my work belt, but I'm confident I know what I'm doing. I learned my training in the Navy after not quite completing SEAL training. Oh, I made it through Hell Week, but I guess I'm not cut out for being under water. Maybe that's why the hot, dry climate of Las Vegas suits me.

It took awhile for my ego to grasp the concept of doing something less with my life, but I've always been good with electronics and now I'm the best I can be at it.

That's not to say I'm not a bit apprehensive about this high-tech club, my cousin Rick has hired me to renovate. Until I see the screens and other electronics Rick described to me in person, I can't know exactly how badly the first electrician botched installation and wiring. The club's grand opening isn't far away, and I already feel the pressure to finish a job I haven't assessed yet.

Lost in thought, I crack an egg a bit too vigorously and sigh as my carelessness forces me to pick out a bit of shell that slipped into the white.

As I fling the shard into the sink, I spot another bit of white standing out vividly against the black skin of my arm, clinging to one of the sails of my ship tattoo. It's impossible to paint anything without finding splotches somewhere it doesn't need to be.

Still, with the sound of sizzling eggs and feeling of physical well-being that permeates my body, I can't stay frustrated for long. It's fantastic, the way working out evaporates stress. Well, that's not true. Physical exertion doesn't get rid of the pressure, but it does make it possible to sleep in spite of it and reduces it during the day.

My shoulders groan as I scramble the eggs. I can't remember the last time I walked out of the gym and felt sore the next day. Work out enough, and you don't get sore anymore unless you push yourself harder than you should.

Since I'll probably have to push myself to meet the deadline for this job, I figure it won't hurt to start a little early.

The eggs sizzle in the pan and the normalcy of the sound makes me give my head a shake. A dash of salt and pepper, a few more practiced flips with the spatula, and I slide the breakfast I enjoy every morning onto my plate.

I have the feeling I'll be reminding myself to be positive a lot today.

Shoveling the eggs back, I place the plate and fork into a growing pile of unwashed dishes in the sink.

Time to get ready. I can't be late to my first day on a new job, especially not one this big. One that I probably don't deserve compared to other candidates Rick and the other co-owners of the club must have considered. I head to my bedroom, carefully avoiding the lurking malice of wet white paint.

Only one piece of apparel doesn't change amongst electricians. Professionalism. Maybe it's the importance of this job or maybe it's because I'm working for family, but I decide to go with my self-imposed dress code today. The heat of flashy Las Vegas, has me pulling out a vest and a pair of comfortable blue jeans and studded black leather belt – no t-shirt, just the bare essentials.

In the very back of the closet, two pairs of combat fatigues sway, mocking the hopes I had for a very different life.

Getting a little pissed that these memories are still so vivid. I slide the fatigues farther into the dark corner of the closet along with unwanted memories, I walk into the bathroom to stand in front of the full-length mirror, turning sideways to admire my big ham.....hamstrings. Since leaving the military, I've made it a point to work out daily.

Fifteen minutes later, I swipe my keys, phone, and wallet off the kitchen table, jaw soft to the touch and shirt tucked into well-fitted work pants. The scratch on my watch conceals a couple of numbers on the right-hand side of the face, but it takes me only a

glance to know the time is a quarter past eight. With forty minutes to arrive by nine, I'm cutting it a little close.

Two precious minutes speed by in the time it takes me to take the six floors down to the parking garage, fold my muscular frame into my silver Dodge truck, and check the back seat for my work belt and tools.

I'm satisfied I didn't forget anything and traffic seems to be on my side today, so I arrive at five 'till nine. Pressing my foot on the brake to accommodate for the speed bump just after the turn into the parking garage, I crane my neck to check around the slight turn that the gate at the ticket machine is open.

It is, and only a few cars—some extravagant supercars—occupy the spaces nearest the open doors that lead into the building, leaving the rest of the two-level, half-underground lot empty.

As I pass through the simple double doors, I glance around. This hallway does nothing to scream expensive, high-tech nightclub; I guess that it just isn't the entrance guests will be using.

Inside, the place better meets my expectations. It was initially built as a hotel. It intended in its design to draw people into all sorts of business ventures and situations to meet, sip whatever drinks the elite prefer and talk their game. The stage in the center of what had once been a conference hall, long, soon-to-be-stocked bar, and VIP section testify to how quickly an establishment of any kind can change hands in Vegas.

I won't lose sleep over it. Every business failed means more work for contractors like me.

Most other men probably would take a moment to pause and picture the slim bodies and tantalizing movements of the dancers whose hands and legs would soon wrap around those poles on stage. I make my way around the obstruction in the path between me and Rick, whom I can see contemplating the bar.

"Rick!" I call out over the racket of some hammering emanating from the open door behind the bar.

“Brandon! Glad you could make it.” We shake hands and pat each other’s backs in a short hug. “Welcome to House of Stars.”

We were always a pair when we were younger. Our mothers were sisters, and we were born within a week of each other. Most people thought we were twins. We’re the same height, have the same creamy dark skin, and have the same gray eyes. The eyes are what get people.

“The place is coming along nicely,” I say conversationally.

“We should be on track to open in about seven weeks as planned,” Rick agrees, gazing at the stage behind me. “Depending on electronics, of course.”

I resist the urge to fidget with the yellow grips on the handles of a pair of pliers in my belt. “It’ll take me a few hours to assess what’s been done, what hasn’t been done, and what may need to be redone. Cullen said that since the job had already been started, he’d made most of the purchases recommended by the original contractor. I’m hoping I’ll be able to work with those supplies without requesting more, but again, I need to see what I’m working with.”

“Of course. You can give me, Cullen, or Dixon the rundown,” Rick tells me. “I could show you around, but the floor plans—” Rick retrieves a tan folder from the bar—“are in this folder, along with everything else I promised. You would know where to start better than I, at any rate.”

I thank Rick and start to walk away. He calls after me, “Hold up.”

I turn around with a question in my eyes, eager to get to work.

“How are things going? We haven’t had a chance to talk much since I got back to Vegas,” Rick says.

“Still just me for now, but I’m hoping to make a hire or two to boost my business within a year,” I tell him, wondering why he needs to bring this up now.

“If I hear of any more jobs, I’ll recommend you. I’m glad

you've found something you're passionate about." Rick's voice is encouraging but filled with a not-so-veiled question.

"Well, it's not the Navy, but I'm managing." I have to force a smile. Rick is one of the few people from my past still on speaking terms with me, but I have a job to worry about and let my mind get mired in the past won't help.

"Good." Rick claps me on the shoulder. "Excuse me," he adds as he looks behind me. I take my folder to the other end of the bar as a woman in a pencil skirt and heels taps over with a clipboard and a question. I open the tan folder firmly, determined to concentrate.

The floor plans and electrical plans drawn up by the original contractor are detailed, and it takes mere minutes to discern where I need to start. As the day progresses and I evaluate the job, I conclude. Luckily, I'm almost certain I won't have to rip up any of the newly-laid floors, and I probably won't need any more access to what's behind the walls than the access panels that already exist can provide me with. This means I won't have to go to Rick with news of costly expenses.

However, not ripping up the floors means that I'll need more wire for splicing. The previous electrical contractors didn't run the wiring efficiently in some sections of the club, so to do the job properly, I'll need to extend it.

This job won't be easy, but I think I can do it in time for the club's opening. I glance over the notepad on which I've been writing my notes and requests. This needs to get to an accountant or someone.

I've been in back rooms checking breakers and upstairs figuring out the wiring for hours, so I'm surprised to walk back into the dancing hall to find it bustling. Dancers practice on the stage under the watchful eye of a middle-aged woman standing with crossed arms, and a group of matching, royal blue T-shirts are making trips back and forth between the hall and the parking garage with sleek round tables and chairs in hand.

Sticking close to the wall to stay out of the way, I sweep the activity in search of Cullen or Rick.

My eyes flick past the stage, freeze, and snap back to the dancers.

Or rather, snap back to one particular dancer.

Hair whips past her shoulder as she swiftly shifts her hips that are positively luscious, and for just the briefest moment, a sheet of wavy blonde obscures one of her piercing blue eyes. The bottom edge of her spaghetti-strap crop top rises and falls with the undulation of her irresistible body, revealing tantalizing flashes of perfect skin.

My hands twitch with the desire to rip off the bit of clothing and see what lies beneath. I have to know if the rest of her is as perfect as her hips and ass, how soft her lips feel, what it does to my body to feel her hands against me....

Shit, I may as well be back in high school. I'm getting a hard-on just watching a girl dance.

My mind wills my body to move, but my eyes refuse to leave this woman. Now that the initial impression of perfection has faded, I can see that there's something off. She can't quite seem to pick up the moves as quickly as the others; her blue eyes are always darting to glance at them. Even so, when she starts a step after the others, she finishes first. The other dancers move gracefully and nearly in unison, but it's like my girl can't slow the tempo of her dancing. She moves quickly and with purpose, and the effort of it sends the swells of her breasts moving with rapid breaths.

My girl. I find myself wanting this girl so badly, and I'm grateful for the heavy tool belt hanging from my hips that hide exactly how badly that is.

One of the thin straps on her top slips. She replaces it with a practiced flip before the garment can slip and I all but groan. The quiet noise I make finally jolts me back to reason. Remembering

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that eyes can and need to blink. I tear my eyes from the enticing beauty.

Rick. I'm looking for Rick. Or Cullen. Both of whom are fortyish-year-old men, not deliciously sexy dancers that are literally hired to distract men.

I can't spot either of them and figure they may be in the rooms behind the bar. I'm glad I stayed back by the wall. No one has noticed me staring, and I want to keep it that way. I don't need some princess showgirl to throw me off track. If the girl sees me and her blue eyes meet mine, I won't be able to keep myself from talking to her, and I haven't left the past behind me far enough for that.

Better to find Rick and put the intoxicating dancer out of my mind. If he isn't behind the bar, he might be in the parking garage

—either place will be far from temptation I see on the stage.