

THE
HEART
OF
THE
GOLDEN
GIANTS



*Stephanie
Perry Moore*



The savvy cheer squad at Grovehill High is trying to win state. Their routines are tight, but the girls need to bring it if they are going to win. Coach says one team, one goal, no drama. The fresh guys playing Giants football are tough athletes. But too many prima donnas could keep these awesome ballers from being dynamic and taking it to the Dome.



RIEL
SAVVY
Girl

Blonde bombshell Ariel Holiday
thinks she is entitled to whatever she wants.
But her friends aren't always impressed.

CHAPTER ONE

Serious Chemistry

So let me get this straight ... Miss Ariel Holiday is seriously not jealous that Ford Frost chose Skylar Cross over her?" my annoying girlfriend Vanessa asked, trying to bait me. "I see you looking at the two of them smiling, probably inwardly wishing it was you he had his arms around."

"Don't forget I have a boyfriend," I said to Vanessa, trying to disprove her point.

Vanessa rolled her eyes, insinuating that I'd made a ludicrous statement. "Don't play me. You forgot about Rocky all summer. You were too busy chasing Ford like a dog chases his tail. He told you no, and yet you were still on him, trying to

get with him for another round. I'm supposed to believe all those desires are gone?"

"I really don't care what you believe, Vanessa," I said to the sassy African American girl. "I mean, I do care because I want us to be better friends, but you're being catty right now and honestly a little rude. If you haven't noticed, it's been hard for me being brushed aside. Why are you rubbing it all in my face?"

"Because I'm just trying to understand where you're coming from. You said you want to be closer friends with me, but honestly you're one of the meanest girls I know—besides Jillian Grayson that is. Look me in the eye and tell me you're truly happy for Skylar."

The answer was yes, but I couldn't explain why. Vanessa wasn't too far off. Most people considered me a brat. My grandfather owned a winery, which my dad helped run and would be inheriting soon. Having one of those in the southeast was rare. We were well off. My mother was a party planner. She'd actually put together this lovely shindig we were hanging out at in the Crosses' home to celebrate the return of their other daughter, who'd been kidnapped by

her biological father who, thankfully, was now in jail. Powder Springs, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta, had always been a quiet little town, but lately there had been a lot of drama going on, and it was far from a dull place.

I don't know what made me so spoiled. My dad giving me everything I wanted, or basically being an only child for the last seven years since my cool brother, Axel, went off to college and then moved overseas to go to graduate school. I was never trying to be mean; I was just looking out for me. Being brash came naturally. It seemed like nobody but me was going to make sure Ariel got everything she wanted.

Girls were jealous. I was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed bombshell. I'd been a cheerleader since I was small. I was the best tumbler on the squad, until Skylar came along. Honestly, at first I resented her—the adorable little brunette that everyone fell in love with, including the boy I had my eye on. Yeah, I did have a boyfriend, but he was in college, and I wasn't an idiot. Rocky was swinging from any girl's tree who would have him, and he expected me to sit and be sweet. Please. Truthfully, I didn't even know why we hadn't ended it.

Skylar ran up to me and Vanessa. She grabbed both my hands and twirled me around. I was shocked when she gave me the biggest bear hug I'd had in a long time from any girlfriend.

She said excitedly, "You just don't know how much this means to me, Ariel. My sister's back and Ford asked me to be his girlfriend, and because of you, we can try this thing."

"You deserve some happiness," I said to her genuinely. "You lost your mom a couple years ago. I can't imagine what that's like, and because you pointed that out, I'm going to cherish mine. Frankly, Ford can't take his eyes off of you. I wouldn't want a boyfriend like that. So just keep your legs closed, because I don't want him to do you like he did me."

I could tell I put some doubt in Skylar's mind at that point. I hoped she knew I wasn't trying to cause a rift between her and Ford, but sometimes without thinking I said the wrong thing. Like I told Vanessa, it wasn't easy seeing Skylar get what I had wanted. I was spiteful. I was harsh. I was hurtful. A part of me wanted to tell her, "No, don't worry. Everything is going to be okay for you. He won't treat you like he

treated me; you're extra special. When that time comes for you guys, he's going to treasure it." But a bigger part of me didn't want things to be so perfect between her and Ford.

Skylar looked like I'd taken away her security blanket. I wanted to apologize, but I couldn't. Celebrating for me was over. As I turned to find my mom and tell her I was heading home, I got a shock that made me jump. There stood my boyfriend, Rocky, right before me, next to the uninvited Jillian.

"Oh my gosh, it's you!" I said as I gave him the type of embrace a toddler gives her mother after not seeing her all day.

He didn't hug me back. "I've been texting you all night, trying to surprise you and let you know I'm here. I run all over town trying to find you, and then I get information you ain't been thinking about me? And now you're gonna front on me like we're cool?" he yelled in a salty voice.

Parents and folks at the party began staring our way. I never liked to be embarrassed, and it was always me causing the scene if there had to be one. I walked over to an isolated corner, away from the crowd.

“Okay, I’m sorry. Let me give you the proper hello,” I said, leaning in to give him a big kiss, but he stepped back. It looked like he wanted to slap me.

In all the time I had known Rocky, he’d never hit me. And I knew he wasn’t going to do that now. But still, I was absolutely stunned by the look on his face and his aggressive body language. While I knew he was cheating on me at college, I certainly thought that when he came home, we would pick up where we left off. We would be cool, and everything would be great, but this was far from perfect. This was far from what I’d imagined.

“What is wrong with you?!” I hissed. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“What is wrong with *me*? You’re the slut going around town spreading your legs for anyone in the world who wants to hit it,” he screamed.

“What are you talking about?” I said to him in a quiet voice, hoping he’d take the hint and use the same volume. I was humiliated that the entire house heard him berate me.

“Oh, so you’re just going to deny it? You’re just going to stand right there and lie to me? You’re just going to tell me anything, and I’m supposed to believe it?” he said, his voice escalating with each word.

He grabbed the collar of my shirt and started shaking me. I could feel everyone’s eyes on us. Then I heard Ford’s voice.

“Rocky, man ... there you are. Jillian told me you wanted to see me.”

“Oh, yeah ... I wanted to see you all right,” Rocky said as he turned slightly. Ford could see the tears in my eyes and my growing embarrassment and humiliation.

When Rocky drew his hand back, looking like he was going to sock me, Ford stepped in. “What is wrong with you, dude? You never treat women like that! No way. You better step off.”

“Of course you’d come to her rescue,” Rocky said to Ford, then turned and glared at me. “Now you’re gonna try to tell me you don’t know what I’m talking about? You two have been together. You know what? You’re right. I shouldn’t hit her.

I should beat *you* down. You're my boy. I'm calling you and telling you to make sure no one is with her, and you're hitting it with her all the time."

Neither Ford nor I could respond to that. We both were caught off guard. We were busted, but it had only been that one time. It didn't mean anything. Well, it meant something to me, but not to Ford. So it shouldn't even count. Plus, what about all the times Rocky had been with other girls? I wasn't stupid. I'd even gotten a phone call from this girl at Bama who called me to find out who I was. Not to mention some of his postings on Facebook. All of his old teammates knew what he was up to.

"I'm just supposed to sit home and be a good girl, while you can be a ladies' man?"

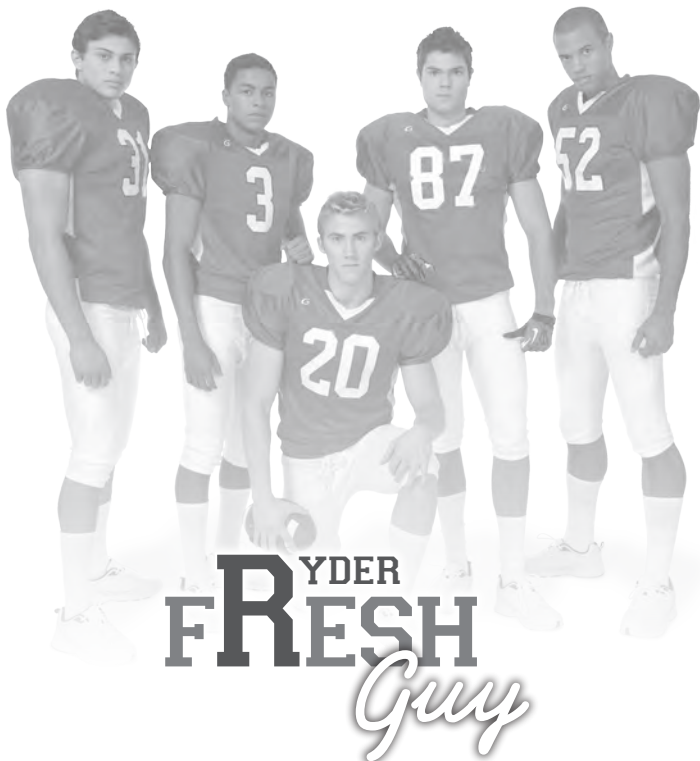
"At least I'm not a tramp," he said to me coldly.

"Hold up, Rocky, dang. You don't have to talk to her like that," Ford said. "You're crossing a line, and you need to leave."

Skylar came over with her father, and Mr. Cross asked, "Is everything okay over here? Y'all are getting pretty loud. This is supposed to be a celebration."



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Ryder Packer is a player on and off the field.
*But when there's too much pressure,
will he punk out?*

CHAPTER ONE

Severe Attraction

Dang, winning sits well with me, Packer!” our starting quarterback, Chaz O’Neal, said as he came over and hit me in the back real hard after our first game. “Now all I need is to go find me a honey and really celebrate.”

Chaz was motioning toward his groin, joking around. I pushed him in the chest. I wasn’t wanting to see him getting warmed up in that area.

Frowning, I said, “Feel free to get your groove on, but don’t nobody want to see how you work it!”

Chaz ignored me and kept going as he spotted a group of girls fawning over him from the stands. He was hyped, but he wasn’t the only one who had an affinity for winning. All of my teammates

stormed the field, along with family and friends. Celebrating our first victory felt fantastic. The Grovehill Giants wanted to take it to the Dome and play for a state title. A near-perfect or perfect season was what it was going to take, and we were on our way.

“Your boy choked up,” Chaz said, squeezing his neck with his hand to demonstrate. “I got the starting job now.”

Chaz was referring to Gage Wolf, the smug white boy who was usually starting quarterback. If Coach had left Gage in the game, we certainly would have been on the other side of victory—the losing side. I popped Chaz in the arm, alluding to the fact that in no way was Gage my boy.

“Just because my game was off tonight doesn’t mean you’re going to start the next game,” Gage said, busting into the conversation and pushing Chaz.

Chaz wasn’t a punk. He was actually from the hood and pushed Gage back. Gage was just one of those crazy dudes who thought he could take anybody.

“Ford, get your boy!” I yelled out to another white guy on the team. Ford was real cool.

Ford grabbed Gage, and I held Chaz back. Actually, I wanted to let go. Gage needed to watch his mouth.

“Get off of me, Packer! Seriously, Ryder!” Chaz said, all fired up like a guard dog who wanted to attack.

“Yeah, let the dog go,” Gage egged on.

“Man, you’re just jealous. I ain’t even gonna let you make a fool of me. Quitcha crazy talk. Let me go, Ryder. I ain’t gonna mess with that punk,” Chaz said as he worked his way loose and stormed off.

Ford let Gage go, and Gage came over to me and said, “You’re getting in my way by hanging with the wrong people. I’m staying the starting quarterback. You might want to support that, Packer, or else ...”

“Or else what, Gage? You had poor plays. So now you want to threaten me. I’m supposed to be scared?” I said to him, stepping close as the tension rose between us.

Smirking, Gage scoffed and said, “I don’t make idle threats, and I don’t play fair. I will be quarterback of this team, and if you don’t support that, you’ll regret it.”

It took everything inside me not to go ballistic on his tail. I was fed up with Gage thinking he could come up in my face and front on me. He was the one who needed to be taught a lesson, but, rationalizing the whole situation, I stayed cool knowing dumb-dumb was just mad at his own piss-poor performance.

“Son, there you are!” my dad said, all excited as I walked up to my folks.

I had the best parents in the world. They had never missed a game since I was in the peewee league. They always told me I was great at playing football. They were real protective too. My dad was a middle school principal in our school district, and my mom didn’t do too badly either. She was an orthodontist with her own thriving practice. I wasn’t as well off as some kids at my school, but we were way better off than most.

“All right, you boys have been out here celebrating on this field for a while. What time are you bringing it in?” my mom said as she looked at her watch.

“One,” I said, giving her a kiss so she’d ease up.

Looking at me like I’d lost my mind, she said, “One! Boy, please.”

“You let Ronnise stay out until two the other night,” I said, wanting to get the same treatment my older sister got.

“Ryder, don’t play with me. Ronnise was just hanging out with her girlfriends before getting ready to go back to Howard. You know that. That was the only reason I allowed it. Plus, she’s three years older than you and certainly not as wild.” My mom looked at my father for backup. “Ronald, tell this boy.”

My mom liked to control me. She thought I was still her little baby. She and I butted heads often. There was only one person who could control my mom. Though she had a more dominating personality, my dad knew how to work his charm on her.

My dad just put his arms around her waist, brought her toward him, and said, “Ryder is going into his junior year, baby. He knows what to do.”

She came up to me and squeezed my cheeks. “Be good, boy ... and twelve o’clock is the latest I’ll go. You are not staying out until one.”

When she turned around, I looked at my dad like, *What’s up, Dad?* He shrugged his

shoulders and pointed at my mom's back. So he was whipped. Maybe I had it wrong. Maybe she controlled him.

As I walked toward the locker room, I passed my own fan club. Girls were clustered together pointing and whispering. They were digging my chest, my brown face, and my muscles. I nodded, flattered at their attention.

"Hey, Ryder," one girl said, looking like she wanted to jump me.

And it seemed like she wasn't the only one who wanted to rip off my filthy uniform, throw it down on the turf, and have her way with me. But I kept it moving to the locker room. Most of the girls I'd ever known were just teases anyway.

I had had fun with some of my teammates over the summer. We enjoyed hanging out and meeting girls from a bunch of different schools. Truth be told, I had no problem getting one. I was just tired of playing their little girl games.

As I kept walking, I saw Ms. Davis heading my way. Talk about a woman. She wasn't just my Spanish teacher, she was the finest African American woman I had ever seen. She had a face that could be on the cover of a magazine

and a body that could win Miss Universe. I loved our tutoring sessions. When she wore those low V-neck shirts and bent over my desk while helping me understand, something inside me was inspired to learn.

“You played a great game,” she said as she batted her beautiful eyelashes my way.

Her makeup was just perfect, not caked on like some of the girls around school, but flawless. She was saying something to me, but the only thing I was doing was watching her lips move. I was mesmerized.

“So is that okay, Ryder? Ryder?” she repeated as she snapped her fingers to get my attention.

“I’m sorry, huh?” I said, coming out of my daze.

“Are you able to take me home?” she said again, this time a little louder. “I know I shouldn’t be asking, but I don’t have a ride.”

“Sure, yeah.”

“Well, you go ahead and get changed, and I’ll meet you over there.” She pointed at an isolated part of the parking lot. “With me being a teacher and all, I wouldn’t want anybody to get the wrong idea.”

“Of course not,” I said, grinning from ear to ear.

It took me no time to get cleaned up and dressed. My boys Stone, Hagen, and Chaz wanted me to hang out with them. I quickly declined and went outside to help Ms. Davis.

“You hungry? Can I take you to get something to eat?” I said, trying to make small talk and knowing that deep down, all I wanted to do was get her to her place and show her that I wasn’t a kid.

As if she were reading my mind, she took her hand and placed it on the back of my head. “You got a little cut right there.”

Her touch intensified my breathing. “Ahh, Ms. Davis—”

She cut me off and said, “We’re not in school. Call me Taylor.”

“Taylor, you can’t touch me like that,” I said as her hand moved to my face.

“Why not?” she questioned as she leaned over to my side of the car. “I’m just trying to make sure you’re okay.”

Her perfume smelled good. Her lips looked good as she licked them, and her hand felt good

on my skin. I pulled the car over. She put both her hands on my face.

“What do you want from me?” I said to her as we both leaned closer to each other.

“I don’t know,” she said as we continued to get closer. “What do you want?”

Our lips told the true story as they met for the first time—we wanted each other. Was I dog-gone dreaming? Dang, she was fine. When her tongue met mine, I knew this was for real.

“Ms. Davis!” I said as I pulled away after a long interlude.

“It’s Taylor,” she said seductively as her hands roamed.

She was super attractive, with her five-foot-seven frame, cute figure, hazel eyes, and natural hair that bounced and flowed, making me long to touch it.

“We can’t do this,” I said, wishing I could make it untrue, but I couldn’t.

“You’re right. What was I thinking?” she said, putting her head in her hands.

She was always so levelheaded, so clear-minded, and so strong-willed. She took charge of our class. Nobody played around in there

even though she was a young teacher. She had it going on. Now she was agreeing with me that we had to discontinue the pleasure, but I could tell she didn't want this to stop.

Saying what I needed to say, I voiced, "I better take you home."

She nodded and pointed the way to go. Then midway through the drive, she took her left hand and placed it on my right knee. Immediately I swerved, about to crash the car.

"Taylor, you can't be doing that now," I said firmly.

"You think badly of me?" she said as she realized her hand was roaming way too far.

I couldn't tell if she was pouting or thinking or what, but she removed her hand, and I was able to concentrate on safely getting her home. Last thing I needed was to be caught up in a scandal with Ms. Davis. First of all, my mom would kill me, and second, I had enough pressure on me as it was with football. A girlfriend was the last thing I needed, and when that girl was a teacher, it would be a million times more complicated anyway.

I had to stay focused on football. I was just a junior, but I was the captain of the defense. As