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Unexpected Rush: A Play-by-Play Novel

By Jaci Burton



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All the Right Moves

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When the chemistry is this combustible, lines tend to get crossed. And when Barrett and Harmony's secret gets out, it just might be game over...



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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Jaci Burton's Novels

"Jaci Burton's stories are full of heat and heart."—Maya Banks, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

"A wild ride."—Lora Leigh, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

"Jaci Burton delivers a hot read."—Fresh Fiction

"Passionate, inventive, sexually explicit."—*USA Today*

About the Author

Jaci Burton is the *USA Today* and *New York Times* bestselling author of the Play-by-Play series including *All Wound Up*, *Quarterback Draw*, *Straddling the Line*, *Melting the Ice*, *One Sweet Ride*, *Thrown by a Curve*, *Playing to Win*, and *Taking a Shot*, and the Hope series, including *Hope Flames*, *Hope Ignites*, *Hope Burns*, *Love After All*, and *Make Me Stay*.

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Chapter One

"Men suck."

Harmony Evans tossed her purse on the kitchen table of her mother's house and pulled up a chair next to her best friend, Alyssa. It was Thursday night—family dinner night at Mama's house. Everyone was coming over, as it always was at Mama's. Right now she'd prefer to be sitting in the corner of a dark bar, nursing a dirty martini. She was going to have to settle for sweet tea because, short of death, you did not miss Thursday night dinner at Mama's.

She'd already come in and kissed her mother, who was holding court in the living room with Harmony's brother Drake and several of his friends, giving her time to catch up with Alyssa.

Alyssa laid her hand over Harmony's and cast a look of concern. "Oh, no. Is it Levon?"

Harmony wrinkled her nose, preferring never to hear the name of her now ex boyfriend again. "Yes."

"Did you dump him?"

"I did not break up with him. He gave me the classic, 'It's not you, it's me' speech. He's doing so much international travel with the law firm, and he just can't devote enough time to the relationship, so it wouldn't be fair to lead me on when he knows he can't commit. He went on with more excuses but it was all blah blah blah after that." She waved her hand back and forth.

Alyssa's gaze narrowed. "What a prick. Why is it so damn hard to find a man of value, one who will respect

a woman and give her honesty?"

"I have no idea." Harmony pulled one of the empty glasses forward and poured from the pitcher that sat in the middle of the table, already filled with tea and ice and loaded with so much sugar she'd likely be awake all night. At this point, she didn't care. She'd work it off in a gym session tomorrow. "All I know is I'm glad to be rid of him. It was bad enough his bathroom counter had more product on it than mine did."

Alyssa laughed. "It's for the best, Harmony. What does a man need on his counter besides a toothbrush, soap, deodorant and a razor?"

"According to Levon, there was stuff for his beard, trimming devices, facial scrub, moisturizer—separate ones for his face and his body. An entire manicure set for his nails, to use when he wasn't off getting manicures of course."

"Of course," Alyssa said, then giggled.

"Oh, and the scents. Let's not forget his entire rack of colognes."

Alyssa nodded. "The man did reek, honey."

"I think he owned more perfume than I do."

"Never a good sign. See? You dodged a bullet."

"I did."

Alyssa lifted her glass. "Let's toast to that."

They clinked glasses. "To men we're lucky to have not ended up with," Harmony said.

"What are we toasting to?"

Harmony looked up to find Barrett Cassidy standing at the kitchen table. He was her brother Drake's best friend and teammate, and since the guys both played for the Tampa Hawks football team, and Barrett also lived in Tampa, it meant she'd often see Barrett at Mama's house for dinner. Along with several other members of the Hawks football team.

One of the nicest things about living in Tampa, as a matter of fact. She'd often thought it fortuitous that her brother had been drafted by the hometown team. It had kept him close to home all these years, and of course, one couldn't complain about the awesome eye candy her brother brought home now and then.

Especially Barrett. Most especially Barrett.

"We're toasting the end of Harmony's relationship with a man who was absolutely not right for her," Alyssa said.

Barrett arched a brow, then gave Harmony a sympathetic look. "Really. Sorry about that."

Harmony shrugged. "Nothing to be sorry about. Alyssa's right. He wasn't the man for me."

"Then I guess I'm . . . happy for you?"

She could tell this was uncomfortable for him. “Come on. Sit down and have a glass of iced tea with us.”

“I’m not sure I want to wade into these waters. Breakups are not my territory.”

“Oh, come on, Barrett. Surely you’ve dumped a woman before,” Harmony said, pouring him a glass. When he didn’t answer, she added, “Or you’ve been dumped.”

He pulled out a chair and sat. She’d never realized before how utterly . . . big he was. He’d always kept his distance from her, preferring to hang with Drake, so this was the closest she’d ever been to him. Both he and Drake played defense for the Hawks. Like her brother, Barrett was absolutely pure muscle. But she never paid attention to Drake. Barrett, though? Oh, yes. Just watching the way his muscles flexed as he moved was like watching liquid art. She could stare at his arms for hours, but she tried not to ogle. Too much, anyway.

“I’ve been dumped before, sure,” Barrett said. “And maybe I’ve broken up with a woman or two.”

Alyssa leaned close to Harmony. “He’s downplaying being the one who dumped the woman.”

“I heard that, Alyssa.”

“I meant for you to hear me, Barrett. You’re just trying to be the good guy right now because we’re roasting the not so good guys.”

Barrett narrowed his gaze. “I told you I shouldn’t be sitting here. If you both want to bad-mouth my species—which you have a right to since some asshole broke up with you, Harmony—then I should leave. Also, I’d suggest something stronger than iced tea. It helps.”

So maybe he had been dumped before. It sounded like he knew how to get through it.

“It’s okay, Barrett,” Harmony said. “Me getting dumped is definitely not your fault. I’m not as broken up about it as I should be, all things considered. So you’re safe here.”

Besides, looking at Barrett could definitely make her forget all about Levon and his prissy bathroom counter. She wondered how many items Barrett kept on his bathroom counter? She’d just bet not many.

She turned her chair toward him, determined to find out. “Actually, I have a ridiculous question for you, Barrett.”

He turned his gorgeous blue eyes on her and smiled. “Shoot.”

“How many items currently reside on your bathroom counter?”

Barrett cocked a brow. “Huh?”

Alyssa laughed. “Very good question.”

“I don’t get it,” Barrett said.

“We’re conducting a poll about men and their bathrooms,” Alyssa said. “Indulge us.”

Barrett finally shrugged. “Okay, fine. Uh . . . soap, of course. Toothpaste and toothbrush. Deodorant. Maybe a comb?”

Harmony smiled when Barrett struggled to come up with anything else. She knew he was an absolute male of the not-so-fussy-about-his-grooming variety.

He finally cast her a helpless look. “I don’t know. I’ve got nothin’ else. Did I fail?”

“Oh, no,” Harmony said. “You most definitely passed.”

“You should go out with Barrett,” Alyssa suggested, nudging Harmony. “He’s a nice guy, and he obviously doesn’t keep thirty-seven things on his bathroom counter.”

Barrett laughed. “Yeah, and Drake would kill us both. Well, he’d definitely kill me.”

The idea of it appealed, though. She’d had such a crush on Barrett when Drake had first introduced them all those years ago. And now? Hmm. Yeah, definitely appealing.

“What my brother doesn’t know won’t hurt him—or you. What do you say, Barrett? Care to take me out?”

Barrett was at a loss for words. Harmony was his best friend’s little sister.

Only she wasn’t so little anymore.

He and Drake had been friends since sophomore year of college and had bonded then. They’d celebrated when they’d both been drafted by Tampa. Both of them played defense, they’d been roommates in college, and they’d become friends. It had been that way ever since.

He’d been coming to Drake’s mom’s house ever since college. Harmony had been just getting out of high school back then. She’d only been a kid. Now she was a woman, with a career of her own, and she’d just been dumped by some guy obviously too stupid to know what a treasure he’d had.

She was beautiful, with dark brown skin, straight dark hair that teased her perfect shoulders and those amazing amber eyes. She had the kind of body any man would want to get his hands on, curves in all the right places, and that sweet, kissable mouth . . .

And he had no business thinking about Harmony at all because there was a code—no messing with your best friend’s sister.

Absolutely not. No. Wasn’t going to happen.

He pushed back his chair and stood, looking down at Harmony as if she was Eve in the garden and she’d just offered him the forbidden apple. “I know the rule, Harmony, and so do you. I think I’ll go check out what your mom made for dinner tonight.”

He might be tempted, but there was too much at stake. He was going to step away from the sweet fruit laid out in front of him before he decided to do something really stupid and take a taste.

Because going down that road would spell nothing but doom.

Chapter Two

After Barrett walked away, Harmony stared at his retreating form, confused as hell by what he'd just said.

"What was that all about?" Alyssa asked, pulling Harmony's gaze away from Barrett's fine ass.

"I have no idea." She pushed back from the table. "But I'm going to find out."

Mama's house was much bigger than the one they'd grown up in. First thing Drake had done when he'd gotten his initial pro paycheck was buy their mother a new house. She'd objected, saying she liked her old one just fine, but Drake had insisted her old house was crumbling down around her. He hadn't felt right about her staying in it, and she had finally relented.

Mama was a proud woman. She didn't need anyone to take care of her. And for years, she'd been the one taking care of both Drake and Harmony. But their old house had been a wreck, so Harmony had been so glad Mama agreed to the new one.

There was a crowd around her brother and Barrett right now, and the last thing she wanted was to nudge herself in the middle of Barrett and Drake. Drake was overprotective and had been since their dad died when Harmony and Drake were young. Mama had raised them alone, but Drake, being two years older, had put himself in some sort of parental role which had been ridiculous at the time, but after Dad passed, Harmony had felt lost and leaned on Drake for support. He'd been her closest ally and her best friend.

Until she'd turned fifteen and had fallen madly in love with Kellan Smith. Drake had done everything in his power to squash that romance.

In hindsight, a good move, but at the time she'd hated her brother for getting in the way of the love of her life.

Fifteen-year-olds often didn't make the best decisions. Kellan had been fine looking, and had moves a young Harmony had never before been subjected to.

Nor should she have been, since Kellan had been nineteen at the time.

Drake had cornered Kellan and threatened to not only kick his ass, but have him arrested. When Kellan had dumped her, she'd been devastated.

She hadn't found out about Drake's threats until later. And she'd been pissed.

Her brother had always been up in her business. Which she supposed had been fine when she was a teenager, but she was twenty-five years old now. Way too old to have him monitoring who she saw and who she didn't.

And she still needed to know what Barrett had been talking about, so she waited until Barrett wandered into the backyard by himself with a beer in his hand.

She followed him, one eye on her brother, who was preoccupied with the television, laughing with some of the other guys from the team.

Satisfied Drake didn't have his eyes trained on her, she slipped out the back door.

Barrett stared out over the garden.

She stepped up next to him. “A little too noisy in there for you?”

He frowned at her. “What are you doing out here, Harmony?”

“Trying to get you alone so I can ask you what you meant by the rule.”

He took a long swallow of his beer. “The rule. The guy rule.”

Somehow she knew she wasn’t going to like this rule. “What guy rule?”

He turned to face her, his body so imposing. She imagined he was quite threatening on the football field. But to her, he was just Barrett. Sexy, incredibly hot Barrett.

“The unspoken rule about not messing with your best friend’s little sister.”

She gave him an incredulous stare. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. I’m not a child, Barrett. I’m a grown woman who can make her own decisions. And you’re a grown man capable of making your own decisions as well.”

He looked unmoved by her statement. “You’re Drake’s sister. That makes you off-limits.”

“Unbelievable. What is this, medieval times? Who comes up with this shit? Do you guys get out a notebook in the locker room and make lists?”

He didn’t smile. “This is serious business, Harmony. And no, we don’t make lists. It’s an unwritten, unspoken rule. Every guy knows it.”

If her eyes rolled any harder, they’d roll clear out the back of her head.

“It’s a stupid rule.”

“Nevertheless, it’s there. And I’ll honor it.”

Before she gave herself a headache, she walked off, back inside.

Alyssa joined her. “What did he say?”

She poured herself another glass of iced tea, still wishing it was that dirty martini, because this day was getting more bizarre by the minute. She took several sips of tea and leaned against the kitchen island. “It’s some moronic man code about not getting involved with your best friend’s sister.”

Alyssa gaped at her. “What? That’s dumb as hell.”

“Which is what I told him.”

“Did you also tell him you’ve had a crush on him since the first time Drake dragged him into the house, back when they were in college?”

“I most certainly did not.” She’d never told anyone—other than her best friend—about her years-long crush on Barrett.

“You should tell him. Maybe that would change his mind.”

“I don’t think so. And don’t you tell him, either.”

Alyssa made crisscross motions over her heart. “Your secret goes to the grave with me, sister. You know that.”

Said crush had ebbed and flowed over the years. She’d been nineteen the first time she’d laid eyes on Barrett. She’d taken one look at tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed Barrett and had fallen instantly in lust.

Even though he’d been a few years older than she was, she hadn’t cared. No other guy had existed for her after that. Barrett had been nice to her, though he had largely ignored her, as older guys did to nearly invisible teens.

Still, her crush had endured.

During her college years she’d found other guys who actually noticed her. Then she’d replaced her fantasy of Barrett with real men.

Like Levon.

She snorted.

“What?” Alyssa asked.

“Just thinking about my journey in the man department over the years.”

“Oh. Yeah. You’ve chosen some true keepers, Harmony.”

Harmony pursed her lips. “It’s not my fault. I’m smart, I’m kind, I’m generous, I’m funny, I’d like to think I’m a proud, damn fine-looking woman, and I’m hot as hell.”

“Hell yes,” Alyssa said.

“And yet for some reason I keep attracting these losers.”

Alyssa gave her a look of commiseration. “It’s not like I’m dating winners of the year, either. It’s hard to find a good man.”

They looked at each other and grinned.

“And good to find a hard one,” they said simultaneously, then laughed.

“Too bad Barrett is off-limits,” Alyssa said. “That man is the definition of hardbody.”

Harmony didn’t believe in off-limits. She wasn’t giving up just yet.

Chapter Three

Barrett stood outside, thinking.

Thinking and watching Harmony and Alyssa inside in the kitchen, both of them talking and laughing.

Not that he was paying attention to Alyssa. Alyssa was pretty and had a banging body. But it didn't seem to matter, since his gaze was focused on Harmony, on the way she put her entire body into it when she laughed, the way she tilted her head back, exposing the soft column of her neck, the way she reached for Alyssa's hand when she had something important to say.

The woman had expressive body language. It wasn't the first time he'd caught himself watching her, noticing her hair, the way she walked, the subtle curve in her hips or even her slender fingertips. And then his mind would wander to those fingertips and her hands, imagining her wrapping her hand around his neck while he explored her mouth, or raking her pretty fingernails down his bare chest or using her sweet soft hands to stroke his—

Jesus. Had he really paid attention to all those things? He had been, for a while now. And then she had to go and ask him to ask her out on a date. It was like she'd read his mind, as if she'd known all the fantasies he'd been having about her lately.

Which he had no goddamned business having.

Because of the rule.

Drake was his best friend. They'd been like brothers both on the field and off. He'd never step on that friendship by touching his kid sister.

But that was the problem, wasn't it? Harmony wasn't a kid anymore, and hadn't been for a long time.

He just hadn't noticed she'd grown up—until recently. He wasn't sure when it had happened. Maybe earlier this year, at the New Year's Eve party Drake had thrown at his mom's house.

They always liked to congregate here. Mainly to keep Mama Diane company, and hell, Diane liked a good party as much as anyone.

That New Year's Eve Harmony had worn some slinky silver dress that clung to her curves, revealing cleavage and skin, and she hadn't brought a date that night.

Neither had he, which meant he'd been scoping out the single women at the party.

He hadn't meant to scope her out, but when he'd walked in the kitchen and she'd been bent over the dishwasher, revealing silken legs and sexy thighs, all he could think of was spreading her legs and . . .

He jerked his attention away from the window, realizing he was standing out in the backyard with a fucking hard-on.

What the hell was wrong with him? He could still remember the day she'd gotten her braces off. She'd started late and she'd told him high school with braces had been a nightmare. She'd been so excited, and had told him she couldn't wait to show whatever boyfriend she'd had at the time.

She'd been barely what? Nineteen? Barely legal. He hadn't paid attention to her. He just remembered smiling at her and telling her she looked pretty.

She was more than pretty now. She was a knockout.

And he was never, ever going to touch her.

Downing the last swallow of his beer, he went back into the house and grabbed another from the fridge. Fortunately, Harmony and Alyssa had exited the kitchen, so maybe he could avoid her the rest of the night.

He made his way into the living room, where Drake and some of the other guys were playing video games. First he stopped at the dining room table to kiss Mama Diane's cheek. She was chatting with one of the neighbors.

She patted his cheek. "Where'd you disappear to?"

"Out back. Your vegetable garden is looking healthy."

"And don't think of running off with my tomatoes."

He laughed. "You know me so well, Mama Diane."

"Yes, I do. You hungry?"

"Always."

"You boys are always hungry. Dinner will be ready soon."

"Thank you."

He winded his way over to the sofas where there was a fierce game of war going on. At least on the television. Drake was in the middle of the action, killing aliens along with Bubba Sinclair and Lionel "Mean Man" Taylor, both part of the Tampa defense. It was almost always defensive players over for dinner on Thursday nights when they were in town.

Defense was king. It's why he'd always loved being part of a defense. Keeping the other team from scoring was what he did best.

And all these guys were beasts.

He loved them as much as he loved his job.

He couldn't wait for the season to start. Tampa was going to kick some ass this year.

Barrett watched the battle until a skirmish was completed. During a break, Drake leaned back on the sofa, tilting his head back. "You want in on this?"

"No, I'm good."

"Afraid I'll kick your ass?"

Barrett laughed. "I think you know better than that."

"Oh, I do, do I? Get said ass over here and let's see who's better."

"You all turn that off now," Mama Diane hollered. "Dinner's ready."

In an instant, the game was turned off, and so was the TV. They all gathered in the oversized dining room at the huge table—one of Mama Diane’s few requests once she’d acquiesced on the new house.

It was stuffed pork chops tonight, one of Barrett’s favorites, along with green beans, amazing mashed potatoes and baked apples.

Barrett made it a point to sit next to Drake, and as far away from Harmony as possible.

She shot a smirk in his direction when she took her seat at the opposite end of the table, as if she knew exactly why he’d chosen that spot.

She could think what she wanted to. The farther away Harmony stayed, the better.

He concentrated on his food, and the conversation about this season.

“Where’s that fine boyfriend of yours, Harmony?” Mama asked.

Harmony lifted her chin. “We broke up.”

“What? Why?”

Harmony focused on her dinner. “From what he told me, it was more about his business, and he didn’t have much time to spend with me.”

Barrett watched Drake lay down his fork. “Wait a minute. Levon broke up with you?”

“Yes, Drake. He broke up with me.”

“What the—” Drake, ever mindful of the no-cursing rule in Mama’s house, restrained himself. He picked up his fork and waved it at Harmony. “I need to have a talk with that man. Tell him how to appreciate what a fine treasure he had in you.”

Harmony leveled a glare at Drake. “No. You do not need to interfere. It’s over between Levon and me.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“He hurt my feelings. That’s about it.”

“Then I’ll have a talk with him.”

“No, you need to leave it alone, Drake.”

Drake looked over at Barrett. “I’ll be having a discussion with Levon.”

The one thing Barrett knew about Drake was that he was extremely overprotective of Harmony. Yet another reason he would never get involved with Harmony.

Not to mention the guy code.

Fortunately, the conversation soon turned to football.

“Look, we started out strong last season, and finished weak,” Drake said. “We’ll have to do better even before this season starts. Drafts and free agency helped, and we’ve all worked hard getting our bodies ready

during the off-season.”

“Everyone’s healthy this year,” Mean Man said. “That’s gonna work to our advantage.”

Barrett nodded. “I’m ready. We’re all ready. We’re solid going into summer workouts.”

“I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m itching for the upcoming season,” Mama Diane said. “I can hardly wait for the games to start. How about you, Harmony?”

Harmony nodded. “Absolutely. Wouldn’t miss it. I expect you guys to be good this year.”

“We’re always good.”

She shot a look over at Barrett. “Prove it.”

The guys all laughed.

“She’s looking at you, Barrett,” Drake said “There’d better be some takeaways.”

Barrett met Harmony’s gaze. “There will be.”

“I’m counting on a strong defense this year,” Mama Diane said.

The conversation continued over dinner—and after—when the guys piled into the kitchen with the plates and bowls to clean up.

The one thing everyone understood was, if you came for dinner, you were responsible for cleanup.

Mama Diane and the crew were used to cooking for large crowds. When he’d first started coming over here, he asked if it was an imposition to add him in. She’d told him she’d come from a large family and always wanted one of her own, but after her husband passed away, she’d never remarried, and she’d had Drake and Harmony to look after. And then Drake had gotten into sports and all his friends came over as kids, then high school, then college and pros, it had been a dream come true for her.

But she’d taught them right way that it was their responsibility to do the dishes.

It was the same thing at his house, so it was a rule he understood well.

And since Mama Diane and her sisters were great cooks, no one complained.

After dinner, everyone piled back into the dining room for pie. Multiple pies, actually. Strawberry rhubarb pie, apple pie, pecan pie and cherry pie.

Barrett chose the apple pie. With ice cream, because pie without ice cream was practically a sin.

After he’d had his fill, he rinsed his dish and put it in the dishwasher, then hung out in the living room with everyone.

“How’s the house coming along?” Steve asked him.

“I close on it next Tuesday.”

Drake turned to him. “Have you decided yet what you’re going to do with it?”

He shook his head. "I haven't hired a contractor. It's a great house in a perfect location. It just needs a complete gut job and a total remodel."

Harmony shifted away from the conversation she'd been having with Alyssa. "I didn't know you bought a house."

"Yeah. I'd been looking for a while. Found this place on the water, but it's older so it needs a lot of TLC."

"What it needs is a bulldozer," Drake said with a laugh.

Barrett laughed, too. "You're right about that, but the location was perfect. It's right on the water and has a boat dock. The property is in great shape and the dock is solid. It's just the house that needs some work."

"A lot of work," Drake said.

"Okay fine. A lot of work. I need to find a contractor."

"Harmony could help you with that," Mama Diane said. "Have you forgotten what she does for a living?"

He'd honestly never paid much attention, other than it had something to do with mini blinds or shutters or paint or something. "Um . . ."

Harmony rolled her eyes at him. "I'm an interior designer, Barrett. I own my own company. And because of that, I have contact with a variety of contractors."

He'd had no idea. "No shit."

"Language, young man."

"Sorry, Mama Diane." He turned his attention back to Harmony. "No kidding."

"No kidding. Why don't you take me by your house, and I can assess your needs? We can go from there."

Well, shit. The last thing he wanted was to spend any time in close proximity to Harmony. Especially alone. Not after what had happened earlier. "I don't know."

Mama Diane leveled a frown at him. "Are you insinuating my baby girl here can't handle the job?"

Double shit. "No, ma'am. I wasn't insinuating that at all. It's just that the place is such a mess, I don't want to burden her. I'm sure Harmony is very busy."

Harmony gave him that all-knowing smirk again. The one that said she knew damn well he was trying to weasel his way out of being alone with her, he'd gotten caught in a lie and now he was going to have to backpedal his ass off.

She gave him her sweetest smile. "It's hardly a burden, Barrett. It would be my pleasure to look over your place and offer my expertise."

"You should definitely use her," Drake said. "She's good at what she does."

It was all Barrett could do not to cringe at Drake's use of words. His gaze lifted to Harmony's and her lips curved.

“Yes, Barrett. You should use me.”

Goddammit.

Figuring he was truly fucked, he finally nodded. “Thanks. That would be great. I’ll text you and we’ll set something up.”

“Perfect.”

Somehow he felt like he’d just been ensnared in Harmony’s web.

And he was about to get eaten alive.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Gordon Woods:

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