

WIDE OPEN
Offensive Line Series

By Tracey Ward

Text Copyright © 2016 Tracey Ward
All Rights Reserved

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the author, except as used in book review.

This is a work of fiction. Characters, names, places, events or incidents are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or to places or incidents is purely coincidental.

KURTIS MATTHEWS

SCOUTING REPORT

Position: Tight End

Height: 6-3 **Weight:** 243 **Age:** 25

Born: Wayne, N.J.

College: Florida State University

High School: Wayne Hills High School

Draft Declaration: December 26th

Awards

SENIOR YEAR:

First Team ACC All-American

John Mackey Award

JUNIOR YEAR:

William V. Campbell Trophy Winner

First Team ACC All-American

John Mackey Award Finalist

SOPHOMORE YEAR:

John Mackey Award Finalist

Records

N/A

CHAPTER ONE

KURTIS

February 15th
Charles Windt Stadium
Los Angeles, CA

I'm hunkered down on the line.

We're third and nine against the Cardinals.

Diaz takes the snap from Lefao, falling back to hide in coverage. I break through between linebackers looking to blitz, slipping past them with ease, and I'm running toward the end zone. All I need is the ball. All I need is for Diaz to look up and find me.

Coverage is coming. I've been spotted and I can't stay open forever. I glance over my shoulder, my breath hard and fast in my ears, echoing inside my helmet over the thunder of feet on the field. Through the chaos, Diaz spots me. He hesitates, scanning the line, checking for other options. He's wasting time. He always did.

Duncan Walker – covered.

Tyus Anthony – never made it out of the line of scrimmage.

I'm his only option, but even I'm about to disappear if he doesn't make a fucking decision soon.

Finally he sends the ball my way, arcing it high. Too high. He's trying to get it way ahead of me to avoid an interception from the looming linemen. I have to hurry to get to it in time, running for all I'm worth. A gasp goes up in the stadium, followed by a mournful groan. The fans; they think I'll never catch it. It looks too far for me to reach, but I never have a doubt. I can feel it in my hand before it gets there.

It drops into my outstretched palm, balancing precariously on my fingertips. I wobble it, dancing it into my hand before pulling it in tight against my chest just as a Cardinal plows into me. He reaches one arm around my waist to try to drag me down. His other arm is at my chest, clawing at the ball, trying to knock it loose. I spin in his arms, a risky move that could tangle our feet, and it almost does. I almost go down. The important thing is that *he* does. His arms slip away as he stumbles and falls to his knees. I

keep on twisting out of his grasp until I'm facing the end zone again. Until I'm free. Fifteen yards fly by in a flash and then I'm there.

Touchdown. Game over.

They scream my name in the stands. The team mobs me. They hug me, hit me. Love me. They're my brothers. My family. I've never felt so good in my entire life. Never been happier. It is without a doubt the biggest, brightest moment in my career. Possibly my life.

Three dark years later, and it still is.

"Kurtis."

I freeze on the empty field, my shoulders falling heavily as the façade slips away. The roar of the crowd fades. The scent of stale beer and victory escapes on a labored exhale. The faces of my family disappear so swiftly I feel physical pain in my gut, like I've taken a hit I never saw coming.

Coach Allen stands at the entrance to the tunnel. He looks frail inside his dark, heavy coat. It's another illusion. A new deception I've conjured on the field, because no matter how old or shrunken Coach Allen may appear, the man gets stronger with every passing year. I'll be dead and buried some day and he'll still be here, standing on the sidelines orchestrating the stars.

"Coach," I reply gruffly, my breath coming quick and shallow from my run down the field.

He looks me over, his blue eyes sharp as an eagle's. "What game was that?"

"Cardinals."

"The winning touchdown?"

I nod once, not the least bit ashamed. It seems like an act of hubris to stand on a vacant football field and replay the greatest moment of your life to an audience of no one, but when your moments are few and far between, you find that it's something else. Something bigger than ego. Stronger than fame.

It's self-preservation.

"It was a good game," he tells me, honest and unsmiling.

"It was my best game."

"To date."

“Right.”

He reminds me steadily, “It’s the off-season. You shouldn’t be here.”

“I’m not practicing.”

“You’re on the field running drills.”

“I’m not in uniform.”

“It’s a gray area at best. Dangerous ground. Especially now.”

I bristle, frustrated and trapped. “Yeah, I heard about the documentary.”

“They’ll start filming in April. All of our noses need to be clean.”

“I bathe in bleach, you know that.”

“I do,” he agrees quietly. “But I also know how dirty the past can be. It gets dustier every year. Fainter. It’s a tricky thing when you bring it out into the light. It never looks exactly the way you remember it. A lot like that play.”

I frown, confused, but then it dawns on me. I close my eyes, immediately remembering. “I spun left, not right.”

I run through the play in my mind again, trying to remember it the way it really was. The way it felt. I can’t conjure it now. It’s too old, too confused. I want it too much.

I open my eyes to tell Coach Allen that he’s right, that he’s always been right about me, but when I look for him he’s gone. The black mouth of the tunnel yawns wide and empty.

I’m alone.

CHAPTER TWO

HARPER

April 7th
Charles Windt Stadium
Los Angeles, CA

I stretch my legs out, teasing my frigid skin with the weak warmth of the sunlight slowly cutting across the stadium. Capris were a poor choice. Spring is here, but summer is a long way off, and I feel it here in the shade. I feel its absence all around me.

The eastern half of the bowl is in full exposure and probably ten degrees warmer. It taunts me. Mocks me and my shadowed position in the western half. Travis and I sat here on purpose, putting our backs to the rising sun to keep it out of our eyes, but as a shiver rushes through me I think I'd take a burned out retinae or two for a little heat. I actually miss the humid mornings in Ecuador, and that is not a thing to miss. That and the bugs. The drug cartels.

On the field in the half-light is the entire Los Angeles Kodiak team; yellow, orange, and white flashing across the impossibly green field as they run sprints over and over again. It's the first day they're allowed to start off-season workouts and they're getting an early start, same as the New England Patriots. Same as our sister team following them in Foxborough, Massachusetts. It's the official start of the new season, meaning today is the first day of the *Road to the Ring*.

This documentary crew, this team that I've formed and led for the last four years, won an award for exposing a water contamination cover up in Minnesota. We spent a year in South America following the rise of a new and horrifying drug making its way across the borders and into the hands of children. I've been to the White House, I've hugged the First Lady. She congratulated me on being a role model for young black women everywhere. For being driven, empowered. A speaker of truth.

I wonder what she'd say now if she saw me sitting in the stands of a football field mildly entranced by the curve of a man's calves. They flex and ease under tanned, taut skin, liquid like water. Powerful like steel. They're mesmerizing.

"Harper."

I blink rapidly. My surroundings snap back into focus, Travis' eyes waiting patiently for mine. "Yeah, sorry. I zoned out."

"You look tired."

"Ouch, asshole," I chuckle.

"The truth hurts."

"So does getting slapped. Remember that."

"You're not sleeping, are you?" he asks seriously.

I hesitate, squinting up at the pale blue sky. Thin clouds wispy, stretched to their limits until their nothing but a delicate lace against the atmosphere.

I admit quietly, "No, I'm not sleeping."

"You can't do this shit again."

"I don't do it on purpose."

"Are you going to take something this time?"

"Yes."

Travis hesitates, choosing his words carefully, but I know what they are. I know what's coming before he opens his mouth. "Are you going to lie to me again?"

"No," I answer immediately. I lower my eyes to his, holding them earnestly. Promising him the truth as much as I'm able. "I will not lie to you. I swear."

He watches me for a long time. He's gauging the weight of my truth, the value of my word, and I would be offended if I didn't know I deserved it. If I hadn't wasted it's worth only one year ago.

"You've gotta learn to ask for help, Harper," he says for the millionth time.

"I know."

"You know it because you're smart, but you're proud too, but knowing a thing and acting on it aren't the same thing."

I unconsciously rub my right wrist, erasing an ache that isn't there. "I don't want to get into this again. Not today."

"Believe me, neither do I."

"Good." I gesture to the clipboard sitting in his lap. The pages flutter in the cold breeze, begging for our attention. "Can we get to work? Who are we looking at?"

“We want to spotlight Trey Domata for sure,” Travis tells me as he puts a check beside the name. “He’s the quarterback and the team captain. He was a big deal during last year’s Draft. Kind of an upset. People love him. They’ll want to hear from him.”

I crease my brow thoughtfully. “He’s part of a duo, isn’t he? Or a trio? He does advertising with some other players.”

Travis nods, flipping his roster to another page. “Colt Avery and Tyus Anthony. A running back and a wide receiver. They do those naked Dairy Queen commercials. They’re the heart of the offense and the reason people think they can win the Super Bowl. We should spotlight Avery and Anthony too.”

“What about the defense?”

“I picked a few guys based on playing time. The ones with the most experience. I think we should talk to one more, though. A newbie to the team last year. Sam Linden. He was hurt in the middle of the season but has been clawing his way back. His would be a good perspective to get on film. Sort of a race to get back on the field. Get another go at the ring.”

I nod, scanning the field for the names he’s told me. I spot Domata easily enough. He’s one of the only men on the field in a red shirt. He and two others, the backup quarterbacks, are clearly marked with the color, warning everyone to keep their hands off. No hurting the talent. They’re too important to the game, I guess. Avery is close by. His helmet is off, his handsome face flushed and smiling as he runs. Anthony is harder to find but eventually I spot him as he pulls away from the thick of the herd. He’s smaller than the rest. Shorter, slighter. Faster. He blows them all away. The only person even close to keeping up is Avery but he’d never catch him if he had to. Anthony is far too fast.

When the team comes to a halt they stop to laugh and slap shoulders encouragingly, nearly knocking each other down. The defense is in the weight room lifting, it’s only the offensive line outside right now, and there’s something about them. Something familial. I expected them to be a team full of frat boy types, but they remind me of a military unit. More of a brotherhood. All of them swarming together, swirling like a solar system in perfect harmony. They’re drawn to each other.

All but one.

It's the man with the calves. He strays naturally from the swarm like their gravity can't hold him. Like he's pulled by the weight of another star, one no one else can see. He drifts slowly into the shadows, his hands on his hips and his head of dark hair bent down low. Exhausted. Guarded.

"What about him?" I ask Travis, nodding toward the dark star on the edge of the field.

Travis looks, squinting through his black rimmed glasses. His face clears when he realizes who it is. "Kurtis Matthews. You don't want him."

"Why not?"

"He's not good with the press."

"We're not the press."

"Yeah, I know, but to him anyone asking questions is an enemy. The guy is silent as the grave. He has been ever since the end of his rookie year."

"What happened?"

"No one knows. He won't talk about it. He was hot shit with the Kodiaks, they almost made the Super Bowl, same as last year. Then suddenly at the end of the season he was traded away to Montana. The deal was shit too. It was like they were desperate to get rid of him."

I watch him walk slowly, circling nothing. Moving like he's afraid to stop. "Is he a bad player? Why'd they take him back?"

Travis snorts. "Fuck no, he's not a bad player. He's the best, but he was pretty much benched in Montana because the team didn't have the offense to use him. You know that Draft upset I told you about? The one with Domata?"

"Yeah."

"Matthews was part of that deal. The Kodiaks traded away their star running back, Duncan Walker, to get a first round Draft pick and Matthews. They were lucky it worked. They landed Domata as the QB, got Matthews back as their tight end, and it turns out hiding behind Duncan Walker was this stellar talent in Colt Avery. Throw Anthony and his speed in there and suddenly the Kodiak's have an offense that's made for making the playoffs. No one saw it coming, but everyone is watching them now."

"But nobody knows why Matthews was traded away in the first place?"

“Nope,” Travis shakes his head. “Not a clue. He was a partier his rookie year. Ran around with a whole entourage, drove fast cars, tore through women. He was in Vegas every other weekend blowing through the city. Then all of the sudden, poof. Nothing. He falls off everyone’s radar, moves to Montana, and refuses to talk to the press anymore.”

Kurtis runs his hands through his thick hair, leaning back as he pushes it off his forehead. I catch a glimpse of him in profile; strong jaw, dark stubble, aquiline nose, a barrel chest bulging against his sweat soaked t-shirt. He’s large and beautiful. Dark and brooding. He’ll be incredible on camera.

“Add him to the list,” I tell Travis, watching as Kurtis walks to the line again, joining the crowd only when he has to. The whistle blows, sending them running. “I want to talk to him.”

“You won’t crack him,” Travis warns me, but he makes the note.

“Who said I want to crack him? I just want to talk to him.”

“Right.”

“He’s been close to the Super Bowl twice and come up empty handed. He’ll have some good insights into what that’s like.”

“Nope. That’s a solid reason. I totally believe you.”

I glare at him. “You ‘totally’ do not.”

He grins. “You’re right. I don’t.”

“Whatever. Put him on the list.”

“I did, but you’ll have to get it approved.”

I groan, rubbing my hands briskly up and down my frozen legs. “I can’t believe I have a babysitter.”

“Content Consultant,” he corrects me.

“She’s a babysitter, bought and paid for by the NFL because they don’t trust me.”

“Well, you don’t know shit about football.”

“You do. Why couldn’t you be my Content Cunt?”

“Consultant.”

“That’s what I said.”

Travis chuckles. “The good news is you’re not bitter.”

“Bitter that they hired another woman to look over my shoulder and try to run my show? What’s to be bitter about?”

“Because you know they want us for our name,” Travis tells me simply, acknowledging the truth we both see but have never given a voice. “They want us to shoot it, they want our name attached to the project to give it some depth, but they want things done their way with their people. And that’s what Carmen Kelly will do. Jump through their hoops.”

“And drag me along with her,” I grumble.

“If only you knew how to jump on your own.”

“I guess I never learned.” I tear my eyes away from the running horde. I hadn’t realized I was watching them again. Watching him; the dark star. I glance at my watch. “It’s almost ten in the morning on the east coast. Have we heard anything from the Foxborough team?”

“Nothing yet. Derrick is maintaining radio silence.” Travis spins his pen in his hand, his mouth pulled into a grimace. “He’s waiting for you to call him.”

“Let him wait,” I reply brusquely, standing to leave. To unthaw my frozen ass.

“You guys can’t keep playing games with each other like this.”

“I don’t jump through hoops, remember?”

“Yeah, we all do. You remind us every day.”

I scan the field, feeling a pain in my chest. A burn that hurts like fire.

“Am I jumping now?” I ask Travis seriously, my voice dipping low and quiet, a rare show of insecurity. One I’ll only ever share with him. “With this job, did I jump?”

He immediately shakes his head. He’s been waiting for me to ask this question. “No. You didn’t sell out, Harper. You did what you had to do.”

My lip curls up over my teeth. “I’m doing it for the money.”

“You’re doing it for the team. For the crew. Think of what this money can do for us. It’ll set us up for the next three years. We can pick whatever subject we want to do next and we’ll do it all on our terms.” He closes the notebook to stand, to face me. “No one is complaining. We all know what this is. It’s a ticket to the next level, and you bought it for us. We’re grateful.”

I nod twice. It's all I can manage. The pinch in my chest eases but it doesn't go away. It probably won't, not until this job is over. That's why I need to dive inside it as soon as I can. Lose myself in it until it's done. Until I can put it behind me.

Tonight Travis and I will go over the plan for the next nine months, setting up a schedule for interviews and spotlights. We'll make travel arrangements to follow the team when they're away, we'll coordinate with Carmen Kelly, with the coaches and the staff, and somewhere in Massachusetts Derrick is hopefully doing the same thing with the New England Patriots. That's his job. That's why I sent him there; to be another me.

To get him away from me.

CHAPTER THREE

KURTIS

April 10th
Charles Windt Stadium
Los Angeles, CA

“Good morning, Mr. Matthews.”

Crystal greets me with a practiced smile from behind the half-circle reception desk. The black top gleams under the myriad of pot lights in the high ceilings. Every floor of the Kodiak executive offices are built like this. These rooms were designed with athletes in mind. Wide doors, vaulted ceilings, inspiring artwork. Beautiful women.

Crystal is no exception with thick, brown hair and dark chocolate eyes. A perfect, pert nose. I used to flirt with her relentlessly when I first signed up with the Kodiaks. I’d go behind her desk like I owned the place, parking my ass on the surface next to her and looking down her shirt. I shouldn’t have done it. I know that now. It was sexual harassment and I had plenty of girls coming at me from every direction. I didn’t need to fuck Crystal too. And I didn’t. But it wasn’t for lack of trying.

Now that I’m back I feel weird when I see her. Like I owe her something. An apology probably, but I’m not good at that. I can never find the right words, not even when I mean them.

“Hey, Crystal.” I put my hands in the pockets of my jeans, stopping a couple feet short of her desk. “I’m here to see Coach Allen.”

Her smile grows, becoming affectionate. It makes me feel even worse because she knows me. She remembers me and the way I was. Why I was always here. “I figured. He has another appointment but I’ll let him know you’re here.”

“Thanks.”

The waiting area is painfully modern, covered in glass top everything and couches that slither across the room in fluid, yellow arcs. The space is empty except for one white chair with a uselessly low back. A woman is perched on it, her back perfectly straight, a small, tattered paperback held loosely in her hand. Her hair is long and smooth, a rich

black color that matches her skin. Her face is a perfect oval, her lips a pouting heart. Her body is an hourglass storing spare minutes in her breasts.

There are a lot of beautiful women in L.A. So many that you get desensitized to them. You pass them on the street, you wait in line behind them for coffee. You get déjà vu when you meet them because they all start to morph together in your mind. But every once in a while there's a stand out. A woman with a spark of something extra, something unexpected. You're not even sure what it is that sets them apart from the crowd, but it's exciting when you see it.

This woman has that something. She has that spark that feels more like a flame. A heat radiating from her center that mesmerizes me like campfire at night.

She looks up as I take a seat on the serpentine couch across from her. I smile subtly. She casts me a polite grin in return before turning back to her book. Her mossy green eyes are gorgeous and round. And checking me out over the top of the pages.

"Hi," I say quietly, calling her out.

She grins again, this one lingering on her lips. "Hi."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Uh, sure," she chuckles in surprise.

"Birthday cake. It's overrated, right?"

"That's not really a question."

"Sure it is."

"Not the way you phrased it. The way you're asking, giving me your own conclusions on the subject and asking me to agree, tells me you're insecure about the topic. You're looking for allies in your fight."

"Against birthday cake?"

"Maybe against birthdays in general." She leans forward slightly, lowering her book. Giving me her full attention, the full force of her eyes. "Tell me what the bad holiday did to you?"

I chuckle as I sink into my seat, throwing my arm over the back of the couch.

"Not a thing. Birthdays have always been pretty good to me."

"Are you sure about that?"

"They've gotten me this far, haven't they?"

“That’s another plea for me to side with you. You’re not sure you’re happy with where your birthdays have gotten you.”

I run my tongue along the inside of my teeth, considering her. She stares back at me without flinching. “You’re clever.”

“And you actually believe that. You didn’t ask me for my approval. You’re also dodging.”

“Dodging what?”

“Your own question. You’re offering me a compliment, redirecting my attention.” She gestures to my casual posture with long, elegant fingers. A ring glistens in the light, and I catch myself double checking if it’s on her right or left hand. I feel an odd sense of relief that it’s on her right. “Plus you’re pulling away. You leaned back into the couch. You’re distancing yourself from the subject. You don’t want to talk about birthdays anymore.”

“Do you?”

“Redirecting.”

I laugh, lowering my arm from the couch. I make a show of sitting forward with my elbows on my knees. “You’re a hard person to have a casual conversation with.”

“I could say the same thing about you,” she says with a slow, flirtatious smile.

“Want to start again?”

“We’ll only end up right back here.”

“Not if I rephrase the question. How do you feel about birthday cake?”

Her eyes dance like starlight on water. “It’s overrated.”

I laugh again, hanging my head in defeat. “I give up.”

“You concede?”

“I do. You win...” I look up at her questioningly, letting my sentence fade out.

She offers me her hand. “Harper.”

I sit forward, stretching my arm across the distance between us. “Kurtis.”

“It’s nice to meet you.”

“You too.”

The scent of her perfume wafts over me; citrus and sweet. Her fingers feel delicate against mine. Her skin is impossibly soft, but her grip is firm.

I release her reluctantly.

She settles back into her seat, giving me an appraising look over. “That’s a pretty slick opening line you’ve got there.”

“You like it?”

She looks at me silently, reminding me what I’m doing. Telling me she knows it.

“Force of habit,” I confess with a smile. “Yeah, it’s a good line. It has a high success rate.”

“Until today.”

“Especially today.”

“I dismantled it,” she protests on a laugh.

“But we’re talking. You’re laughing. I call that a success.”

Harper chews on that for a second. “I guess you’re right.”

A silence draws out between us as the conversation lulls. She doesn’t pick up her book. I don’t reach for my phone. Neither of us looks away.

It should be awkward, but the weird thing about it is how natural it feels. How comfortable I am under her stare, intuitive and intelligent, tearing me down and digging deep. I don’t let people look at me this closely. I’m always dodging, always weaving, an indistinct blur they can’t get a read on. But now, with Harper, I feel pinned by her eyes. Settled in a way that’s utterly unsettling.

“You have beautiful eyes,” I tell her honestly.

She grins. “So do you.”

“If you like those you should see my feet. They’re spectacular.”

“I bet your calves are better.”

“That’s a fool’s bet. I’d never take it.”

“I’ve seen your calves. I’d bet the farm on it.”

I smile. “When have you seen my calves?”

“Any given Sunday,” she sings lightly.

“Now that right there feels like a dodge.”

“You should know. You’re the expert.”

“And another one.” I eye her shrewdly. “What brings you here today, Harper?”

“Business.”

“Lawyer?”

“No.”

“Agent?”

“No.”

I blatantly rake my eyes over her body; from her plain white Adidas three stripes to her perfectly styled hair. “Cheerleader?”

She snorts derisively. “No.”

“Jehovah’s Witness?”

“Do you have a moment to talk about our Lord and Savior, Tagalong?”

“You’re a Girl Scout leader?”

She shakes her head, smiling slyly. “No.”

“That was misleading.”

“It was a real question.”

“Do you really want to know how I feel about Tagalongs?”

“I’m on the edge of my seat.”

I grin. “They’re overrated.”

Harper laughs, the sound rolling over me in a warm wave that gives me chills. The sound is so sexy, setting something off inside me because I did that, I made her laugh. It’s a primal response and I don’t give a shit. She does something to me. It’s not just her body that has me hooked. It’s her mouth. Her mind. Her words and her intelligence emanating from her eyes. She’s the whole package, a gift from fate that I never knew I wanted, but fuck do I want it. I want *her*.

“Can I get your number?”

She calms, her smile fading but never disappearing. Not entirely. “That’s a bad idea.”

“Why?”

“It just is.”

“You have a man?”

“No.”

“My calves aren’t pretty enough?”

She chuckles despite herself. “No. They’re gorgeous.”

“Then why is it a bad idea?” I press.

“It’s, uh—“

“You didn’t say ‘no’. A ‘no’ I could take and walk away from, but ‘it’s a bad idea’? That was designed to make me curious, wasn’t it? You meant for it to slow me down but keep me swinging.”

Harper shuts her mouth firmly but her eyes are wide open. They’re watching me closely. “You’re pretty clever yourself, Kurtis.”

“Ms. White?”

I turn in my seat to look back at reception. Coach Allen is standing behind the desk next to Crystal.

He nods to me. “Kurtis, Crystal told me you were here. I have a meeting with Ms. White, but if you stick around I’ll have time for you after.”

“Thanks, Coach.”

“Everything okay?”

“It’s great.”

“Good.”

Harper steps past me, leaving her citrus scent in her wake. She slows to look down at me. “I’ll see you around.”

I lift a skeptical eyebrow. “Will you?”

“More than you know.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

She smiles sadly. “Try to hold onto that feeling.”

I watch her walk away with Coach Allen. She’s taller than I thought she’d be, probably only a few inches shorter than me, and that hour glass is storing more minutes than I imagined. Her ass is round and high, taunting me as it disappears from view. I’ll remember it, though. I’ll remember her every curve, every sound she made, every word she said, whether I want to or not. I know without a doubt as I sit back in my seat, rubbing my hand up and down anxiously along my neck, that Harper is going to haunt me.