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from Players

WIDE RECEIVER

I WOULDN'T TELL ANY of the guys this, they'd never let me live it down if they knew, but I threw up in the bushes after seeing what they did to that girl in the basement. That's like a real pussy thing to do, right? After puking in the bushes on the side of the house where the party was, I walked home alone. I cried the whole way, too, pussy. I mean, you don't see something like that and think it's okay—I didn't think what they did to that girl was okay. But if you're a guy, you don't *cry* about it, and you certainly don't throw up in the fuckin' bushes. Maybe that's why Coach smacked me in the face that one time and called me a pussy.

The quarterback chewed me out for dropping a pass I should've caught in a game a few weeks ago. He was pissed about losing and he yelled at me for a minute, not long, really. I didn't cry, but I was embarrassed as hell. I didn't have my shirt on and I guess my chest and neck got all red, the way they do when I'm nervous or stressed out, like when I'm taking a math test because fuck if I know how to solve for x . I was so embarrassed I just sort of stood there, turning all red and shit, and I didn't say anything to defend myself. Situations like that, I don't ever know what to say. The kid laughed and shook his head at me, patted me on the back, and that was that. That's how guys do things sometimes. It sucked and everything, and like I said, I was embarrassed as hell, but then it was over.

But Coach, I guess he was sort of watching from somewhere else in the locker room, and he saw what happened between me and the other kid. He came after me like I'd done something terrible, like I'd taken a shit on his clipboard or something, and slammed me up against the locker—the *noise* that made. He got in my face, real close, so close that I could smell his Nicorette gum, which is nasty, if you ever smelled it. Then he slapped me on the cheek a bunch of times—not hard or anything, more like fast little taps, to sort of annoy me more than hurt me. While he was doing that he said, “Man up, you pussy” three or four times. Coach walked out of the locker room after that, all bouncy, smiling at the

players like he just won a bunch of money or something.

I must've turned all red again, but the guys, they couldn't even look at me. It was quiet in the locker room after he left. It got like that sometimes, so quiet you're scared someone can hear what you're thinking. We'd all just sort of look down at our feet or keep doing what we were doing—put on our deodorant or get dressed, check our cell phones, whatever it was—so we could make like we didn't notice, because noticing means you have to react, and sometimes you don't know the best way to react. Sometimes you don't know what it means if you don't react at all.

And sometimes you just puke in somebody's bushes.

THE SLUTTY GIRL

WHAT DO GIRLS DO when they don't want word getting out that they hooked up with a guy, or in this case, a bunch of guys?

They lie. This girl is a *liar*.

Yeah, she was definitely drunk—it's clear from all the pictures, and everybody at the party saw that she was drunk, even if they were drunk themselves—but could she have been *that* drunk? I mean, we're talking like a four-hour gap of time where she doesn't remember anything.

Really?

I'm not sure I buy it because if a girl's desperate enough, she'll do *anything* to keep this kind of story from getting out. I bet that if people didn't have so many pictures from that night, we wouldn't be calling it what the cops and the principal and the girl and the girl's parents are calling it. Without those pictures, it'd be just another hookup at a party. Unfortunately for her, there is proof of what happened there—and believe me, I saw the pictures, a *lot* went down that night. So she had to say something to get herself out of it. But if you put yourself in a position like that—where it's just you and a bunch of guys and you're drunk and they're drunk and you're the only girl—I mean, c'mon, you know you're *asking* for it.

The thing about doing those things when you're drunk is that, when you don't want to admit that you did them, you can blame it on the alcohol. That happens a lot. But I've been drunk enough to know that alcohol just brings out who you really are and what you really want. That's all alcohol does. If you're funny, you're going to be really funny when you're drunk. If you're an asshole, then you're a bigger asshole. And if you're a

slut inside, well, that'll come out too. So, she's just all embarrassed that her slutty side came out even though it's not supposed to.

And all girls have one, a slutty side.

You see it come out in spurts, like Halloween. Ever notice how girls use Halloween as an excuse to slut it out for the night? But it's somehow acceptable because it's *Halloween* and because girls don't dress like that every day—now *that* would be a different story. *That* would be a problem, right? But the truth is that girls like Halloween for that very reason. It gives them a minute to see their slutty side because we're told by everyone—our parents, our teachers, the school dress code—that we can't be sexy all the time. Halloween's the one exception.

We can't help that we all want attention. We're kind of taught that getting attention from guys is important, I think, so girls are all trying really hard to get it, but we don't want to admit it because when you admit that you like attention, that's a problem—then there's something wrong with you. Then you're a slut. Not a Halloween-Only Slut, but like an Everyday Slut. So when you're drunk, you're not trying as hard to not want so much attention. You just sort of let that go and then your slutty side comes out. That's all that happened here. Well, that and a bunch of pictures for her to face in the morning.

Maybe she was surprised at just how slutty her slutty side was, because she definitely has one.

All girls do.

I was at that party and she was dancing with the quarterback most of the night. They were *into* each other—everybody could tell—and all of a sudden some pictures of things they did turn up on our cell phone and Facebook pages, and now the girl's changing her tune. She was drunk, yeah, but she wasn't too drunk to be dancing, and she wasn't too drunk to be talking and laughing and having a good time. Who *knows* what else she wasn't too drunk for later on?

And hey, I'm not judging. I like to have a good time. Everyone around here knows it.

SO AT THE PARTY, a bunch of guys from the football team were trying to get girls to do things like kiss each other or dance like strippers. But the guys know which girls they can ask and which ones they can't.

I guess I'm one of girls they can ask.

And so was *this* girl, the one everyone's talking about.

At one point in the evening, there was a circle of four or five football

players around the two of us, yelling, “Kiss! Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!” It got so annoying after a while that finally we just did it. We kissed. At first, it wasn’t a big deal. It was more like a little peck and we definitely didn’t use our tongues or anything. But we were drunk and when we heard the cheering all around us after that first little kiss, I don’t know, everything made it easier to get more into it. We made out for a good minute. We used our tongues. It was *real* kissing. There are pictures of that, too, I’m sure. *Those* certainly won’t help her case any when she’s running home trying to tell mommy and daddy that she’s a good girl in all of this, that she’s an innocent victim.

Me? I don’t care if those pictures get around. I stopped caring about that stuff a long time ago. Once you’re called a slut, once you’re given that label, especially in a town as small as this, there is *no* changing it. So the best you can do is try not to get pregnant before you graduate—there’s nothing like a giant belly under your graduation gown to show everybody just how big a slut you are—but you hope that wherever you go next, you don’t know anybody and you can start fresh.

But this girl totally blew it. She was starting her senior year totally fresh in a school where no one knew her. A new life was waiting for her here, at our tiny, shitty school, in September. She could have been anyone—the serious student with her heart set on the Ivy League, the adorable and spunky little cheerleader, the actress who participated in all the school plays, the kickass lacrosse player, whatever.

She could have been anyone, but now she’s all these other things: slut, cocktease, whore, victim, liar.

What I wouldn’t give to have had what she had on her first day of school here.

What I wouldn’t give.

COACH

THIS WHOLE THING’S got everybody crazy ’round here. You believe there’s people out there signing petitions or some such to get me canned? Like I had somethin’ to do with the whole thing, like I was there with those kids that night. Frankly, I don’t know what all the fuss is about. I think it’s because of some wacky lady—thinks I should get the ax because those boys are on my team. Thinks those boys need to learn a lesson.

Here’s a lesson for my boys: *Steer clear of women—they’re crazy*. Ha! Now, that is a good lesson, I don’t care how old you are!

What this lady doesn't know is that I'm part of this community. My family's been here for many generations and *nothing* is gonna change that. No wacky lady makin' noise gonna change that—now, that's a fact.

I went to this high school—was a three-sport athlete. Football was my favorite, and the years I played, I can remember all the fathers comin' to the games and cheering us on after a long day at the mills. It's where everyone gathers on a Friday night and it's been that way for years. Most of the men 'round here work in the mills, and I don't mind tellin' ya that's what I would'a done if I didn't make it to college.

I remember when I was a kid hearin' my father hacking away all night long, like he was workin' tar outta his lungs or somethin'. He played football too. I couldn't imagine that as a kid, someone as weak-breathin' as my old man playing football. But the team was good then, as it is now, specially since I took over the team twenty some years ago. I know what some people are saying about me these days—that I'm just a townie, a high school football coach and what I do don't mean all that much. But I know different. And I know that no matter how much noise that wacky lady's making about gettin' me fired, I will be able to keep my job. This town's with me, and that's a fact.

Saw a guy in the supermarket two days ago. Man told me that people 'round the neighborhood are upset that this girl's making such trouble for the team. They keep asking how long the boys are suspended, and I don't mind tellin' ya that if I could play those boys tomorrow, I would. Sure as anything, I'd play those boys tomorrow. What they're accused of doing ain't that big a deal. This girl's just sorry she woke up drunk with rumors swirling around about her. In a town like this, small as it is, rumors can hang around like a bad smell.

There's so many rumors going around about this mess, I don't even know what's true anymore. Some people are sayin' that I told the boys I'd handle the situation after they told me about the party. Talk about a no-win situation. If that's true and not some crazy rumor, then I'm a bad guy because I'm watching out for my players. But if I didn't do anything about it, then I'm a bad guy because I didn't watch out for my players. Talk about a no-win situation.

I don't mind tellin' ya that the girl just isn't my problem. What she did or didn't do that night, that isn't my problem either. What is my problem is these boys and what happens to them and their final season. They're seniors, ya know. This is their last season to play together, their last season to be scouted and maybe get to college on a scholarship. It just seems

unfair that all of that's in danger now just because some girl couldn't keep her skirt down.

These boys worked hard for me for the last three years. It's finally their season to reap some rewards for that hard work. If they don't get out, they'll stay here, and probably end up working in the mills and marrying some girl—probably his high school sweetheart—after knockin' her up. Then another kid and another kid, and soon the steel mill by day and the high school football games by night, and that's their whole life. And if that happens, these boys better hope they have sons, because there's nothin' like sharing the stories of the team with your own son. Tellin' those stories is a way to keep them alive, and watching your boy play, well, that's like watching yourself in uniform, makin' the plays and winning the game.

There's a reason this team's been winning all these years. I wish I could say it has everythin' to do with my coaching abilities, but I don't mind tellin' ya that it's not as simple as that. For so many people 'round here, this team's the light of the city. It's a gatherin' place more spiritual than church for many of them, and I bet you if Christmas or Easter or Halloween fell on game day, why, they'd postpone the holiday in favor of the game. That's just how it is with the folks in this town.

Except for one wacky lady callin' for my head. But she doesn't get the thing about this place. She hasn't lived here her whole life. Her daddy didn't lose his lungs to the mills.