



TOUGH GIRL

QUICKREADS

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Wesley Chan stopped what he was doing and listened. He could hear Dave talking to someone in the next aisle over. “Whoa! You’re new here, huh? Who are you?” Dave was saying.

A young woman answered him in a mocking voice. “I’m the president’s wife,” she said. “I just *love* shopping here at Sav-Mart.”

Wesley couldn’t help smiling.

Dave laughed and said, “No, who are you, *really*? I’m not letting you go by until I get your name.”

Now her voice was rough and harsh. “You’re in my way, *dude*,” she snapped.

“Hey, what’s with all that attitude?” Dave

asked in surprise.

She swore. Wesley had never heard a girl swear like that. Then she said, “You don’t like attitude? Okay, well how do you like *this!*”

“*Ow!*” Dave howled.

Wesley ran to the next aisle. Dave had an angry red mark on the skin above his jaw. His eyes were wide.

A Chinese girl about his age was glaring at him. She looked furious—and tough. *Very* tough.

As the shift supervisor, Wesley thought he should step in between them. “What happened?” he asked.

Dave was upset. “I was just being friendly,” he gulped, “—and she *hit* me!”

Wesley turned to face the girl.

“Are you the boss?” she asked in a cocky, challenging tone.

“Um—I’m one of the assistant managers,” said Wesley.

“So are you going to tell me what to do?” she asked impatiently.

“Why don’t you help me stock the break-

fast cereal?” he suggested.

The girl shrugged and followed him to the cereal aisle.

The two of them pushed a large cart stacked with cereal boxes. If a brand of cereal was low, or sold out, the shelves had to be restocked. They worked almost without speaking.

Wes glanced at the new employee as she worked. She wore a heavy plaid shirt with a tear in one elbow. Her skirt was tiny. There were smudges of bright pink eyeshadow above her eyes, and dark circles below. But her well-shaped lips looked as smooth as the petals of a flower.

Noticing that the girl’s hands were shaky, Wesley asked, “Hey, do you want something to eat?”

“Sure,” she answered.

They went to a cramped, ugly room at the back of the store. It was supposed to be the “employee lounge.” Beside a table and a few beat-up chairs was the tiny office Wesley shared with the other assistant managers.

Wesley opened a package of muffins and held one out to her. “Thanks,” she said. She ate it before Wesley was halfway through with his. Then she grabbed another.

Wesley grinned. Every other girl he knew was on a diet.

After work, Wesley hustled through the San Francisco fog toward his car. As he unlocked the door, he spotted the girl waiting at the bus stop.

“Can I give you a ride?” he asked.

The girl shook her head and turned away.



The next night, on break, Wesley watched her gobble muffins. “You’ve got a great appetite,” he said.

“It must be because of all the drugs I take,” she said.

Somehow, Wesley knew exactly what to say. “You don’t take drugs,” he said.

She shook her head and smiled—and it was a real smile this time, full and sweet. Wesley felt lightheaded.

“What are you reading?” she asked. “Is that a schoolbook?”

“Yeah. Economics. I’ve got one more semester before I graduate from San Francisco State,” he said. “What about you? Are you in school?”

She ignored his question. “Are you majoring in business?” she asked.

“Right again. Sounds pretty boring, huh?” said Wesley.

She gazed at him. “I bet you get all A’s, don’t you?”

“Uh—not *all*,” Wesley said.

“You’re the perfect son,” she said.

Wesley felt stupid. Actually, he *was* the perfect son—respectful, hard-working, and successful.

She patted his shoulder as she walked past him. “Cheer up,” she said. “They’re all proud of you, I’m sure.”

The next day, Wesley arrived at work just as the sun was going down. It was a perfect spring evening, warm and clear. The girl seemed to be in a playful mood. They were

loading cooking oil onto the shelves when she said, “Wesley—*catch!*”

Was she about to throw a bottle of oil? “*Don’t!*” Wesley cried out.

She threw—a wild, high throw he couldn’t catch. He cringed as it hit the floor—but the plastic bottle bounced.

Sharp words sprang to his lips, but her laugh was warm and light. He couldn’t help laughing, too.

She stopped and smiled. “My name is Zoe,” she said.

“Zoe,” he said slowly. “Zoe what?”

“Zoe Zoe,” she said. “Want to go to the beach tonight?”

“Uh—sounds good,” he said.

He’d never been to the beach after dark. Was it a safe thing to do? They might trip over driftwood or step on something sharp. Who knows? A crazy person might even be out there.



Zoe whipped off her sneakers and ran across the sand.

Wesley followed, the breeze blowing soft in his hair. He was surprised that the beach was so beautiful at night.

When Zoe stopped, Wesley caught up to her, his breath coming hard. She was wearing shorts and a T-shirt. Her overalls and sweater were piled in a heap on the sand.

“We’ll freeze!” he cried out. But he took off his shirt and shoes.

Taking his hand, she led him into the surf. A small, cold wave curled around his feet. He shivered.

They’d walked in up to their knees when a larger wave broke and knocked him flat. The shock of the icy cold water made Wesley gasp.

Zoe was already ducking under the waves. He followed, worrying about jellyfish and the undertow—and the absence of a lifeguard!

Beyond the breaking waves, Zoe lay on her back in the water. Floating beside her,

he looked up at the starry sky. The water gently rocked them back and forth. He forgot what time it was, even what day it was. For now, the rest of the world had disappeared. At this moment there was only the sky, the water, and the two of them.

When they got out, the breeze on their wet clothes made them shiver. “Hurry!” Wesley said, his teeth chattering. They snatched up their clothes and shoes and raced to his car. He turned the heater on full blast.

He held out his sweatshirt. “Want to dry your hair?” he said. She bent her head toward him. Gently, awkwardly, he started rubbing her hair.

Then she looked up, her face soft and questioning. The sweatshirt dropped to the floor and they kissed. Wesley felt like he was floating in the ocean again—so far out, he’d never make it back.

Again, she wouldn’t let him take her home. But her goodbye kiss lifted his spirits as he headed home.

Coming in the door at 2:00 A.M., he tiptoed

through the house, careful not to wake his parents.

Finally, Wesley lay on his bed, exhausted. He closed his eyes and saw sand and stars and Zoe's face.



On Saturday night, she said “yes” to a movie. “I’ll meet you at the theater,” she quickly added.

“Why won’t you let me give you a ride?” Wesley asked.

Zoe looked annoyed. “Just let it go!” she snapped.

Wesley backed down. “Okay, okay!” he said. “I’ll see you at 7:00 tonight.”

During the previews Zoe’s head started to nod. She looked so tired! Wesley put his arm around her, and her head dropped to his shoulder. She slept through the whole movie.

Zoe woke up, startled, when the lights came on. For a moment, the tough look on her face was gone. She looked like a scared little kid.