

Stand Tall

by ColieMacKenzie

They stumble through her door, her lips frantic on his, her fingers gripped tightly around the back of his neck, cold against his skin. He presses her against the wall, can't make it further, urgency in the roll of his hips. She gasps, wraps a leg high around him. He still tastes desperation on her tongue, a bitter flavor that mingles with her familiar sweetness and he snakes his hands underneath her leather jacket, grasps her waist, his fingers meeting over her spine that arches toward him in supplication. Her skin is warm and soft and everything he's ever wanted and he thrusts his tongue into her mouth, his strokes deep, feverish. She makes that little sound in the back of her throat, that almost helpless mewl that always brings his blood to boil and he runs his fingers down over her ass, lingers where he can feel the hot play of her muscles clenching at his touch. The eager jerk of her pelvis urges him to move, move and he grips his hands beneath her thighs, leveraging her up until her legs are gripped around his hips, their bodies pressed together and too much fabric separating him from her naked skin.

"Bed..." She demands breathlessly, her head falling back when his teeth graze over the side of her neck. "Take me..."

Oh, he'll take her alright. He'll take everything she'll give and then he'll ask for more because he's done with holding back, done with careful and half-assed and scared. He grips her tighter, starts striding toward her bedroom with her lips sucking on his earlobe and his knees like Jello as he passes her dining room table.

It does something to him, that table.

He stops in his tracks, stares for a long moment because there it is, still set. Her table is still set, with the colorful vintage plates she likes so much, with silverware aligned and wineglasses and napkins, the flowers arranged, undisturbed since when was it? Two days ago when they fought and he saw his life unravel before him? Only two days ago and yet it felt like a lifetime of pain, this cloying sadness, and anger so heavy on his shoulders that he almost buckled and broke under its weight. Two days and he knew he couldn't live without her, didn't want to. No matter the obstacles or difficulties they might face, they'd do it together because he can't live without Kate and "God, I missed you," he almost weeps the words into her skin, his face pressed to the curve of her neck. He inhales her sweet, familiar scent, soaking her inside himself, his knees almost buckling with the overwhelming sense of relief that hadn't quite set in yet.

"I missed you too," she whispers, curls her fingers into the hair at the back of his nape, running soothing circles along his scalp. "I missed you too."

She guides up his head until his eyes meet hers, her pupils a dark jade, still shimmering with things unsaid, a myriad of conflicting emotions, and then she leans her forehead against his, her eyelids sinking closed.

"I love you." And there's a lingering ache in the words, like she can't quite encompass all that's happened and his heart leaps into his throat, his arms tightening around her. She's everything, *everything*, and even if she makes him work for it, really work hard for all the not-so-obvious parts and pieces of her soul,

he'll do it, he'll do it forever because isn't that what intrigued him about her in the first place? Gorgeous, intriguing, endlessly mysterious Kate Beckett, with her layers and her walls, and every layer he'd uncovered, every stone he'd unturned left him only more amazed by her, utterly enamored.

She sinks against him, a pliable thing in his arms, warm and soft and so sensuous and he finally dislodges his feet, ambles forward, slow but determined steps until they're in her bedroom. He lies her down gently on the bed, watches her sink into the comforter, starts peeling her clothes off her body, starting with the too tight leather jacket that seems like armor now, like she needed a protective coating around her heart to face him in that park.

She watches him with wide eyes, dark and solemn in the pale expanse of her face, lips open and shimmering in inviting pink. The conundrum that is Kate Beckett, still hiding when she struggles, contemplates, worries, and yet from the moment she'd shown up at his door, drenched in rain and desperation, with her heart on her sleeve and love in her eyes, she'd been more open, more giving with him than he'd ever expected. Smiles so wide like he'd never seen her give anybody but him, whispered confessions in the dark of the night, stories shared from the depths of her heart, sprawled naked and open before him in every way imaginable.

He sees it all now, sees where he's been too slow to catch up as well, too surface and content with the status quo to look deeper, to move forward with her. She was ready to move, and they were standing still. He knows there'll be times like this again, struggles and questions, worries and heartaches - what relationship worth its salt didn't have those? But they'd faced down serial killers, bombs and freezers, drowning in the Hudson and an accusation of murder - they can do anything, *anything*.

As long as they do it together.

"What?" She wonders quietly, sliding a foot up his shin and he realizes he's been staring down at her, her body naked underneath him, her long lithe limbs spread before him, her light skin shimmering in the hazy light that drenches the room.

"You are so beautiful," he supplies, watches the shy flutter of her lashes at his words, the spread of her tender smile.

"I mean it, Kate," he emphasizes, his voice more urgent now, "even when..." He catches himself, realigns the thoughts in his head, because even when he's angry, or hurt, or disappointed, this is the crux, it's all that matters. "You've *never* not been beautiful to me."

Her breath catches in her throat; he knows that she gets it when he sees her pulse race in the jumping vein in her neck. Kate reaches for him, her palm coming around his neck, tugging him down to her, meeting his lips.

He's worshipping her.

There's no other word for it. Gone are the edge of disappointment, the hints of anger and doubts, gone too the frenetic pace that had them stumbling through her front door, the frantic kisses as he pushed her into the wall.

It feels brand-new, almost like their first time, all over again; a detailed, determined discovery, a tender adoration, sweet reverence in every touch and kiss, every glimpse and stroke and nip infused with awed wonder.

And yet it's better, infinitely better when his caresses are steeped in intimate knowledge, when the way he knows her body, how he knows *her* has authored the promises and prayers of his worship.

She feels like she's floating, no longer anchored to the mattress beneath her back, weightless and humbled in the way she's giving herself to him.

His mouth slides down the column of her neck, her collarbone, between her breasts, like strings of warm, velvety pearls that tumble over her skin, rich and rare and valuable. His hands brace her ribcage, his fingers strumming the ridges of her bones, so skillful and tender as if she's a rare instrument and her blood is singing with it, her back bowed into his touch, offering all of herself to him. Her thoughts are running a mile a minute, the comfort and familiarity, the heat and fire of his caresses burning through the past weeks, purging her mind.

That bomb had changed her. More than any other time where her life had been in danger before. Too much time to think before the inevitable. 'There's no regrets,' she'd told him when she had to stand there, motionless, unable to even kiss him goodbye and aching with it, when she thought this was the end - and she'd meant it, at the time. But when she didn't die, when she could take that tentative first step and fold herself into the safety of his embrace she knew, starker and more clearly than ever before that she wanted her life to be with him, wanted a future with him. She'd been standing still, stuck on a single-minded goal for most of her adult life (until he entered it, made her ache for more, ache for him). She was feeling restless, anxious to move, to have more, *be* more.

She never doubted that he loves her; she *knew*. And yet she didn't seem to know what he wanted for *them*, whether he envisioned a similar future; they never even talked about any of it and she got scared. Vulnerable and insecure. It made her stupid, made her question, worries gnawing at her until she felt like she was drowning, dragged into a suffocating darkness that she couldn't seem to forge her way out.

She knows she made mistakes. Knows she should've asked her questions, should've shared her concerns, should've told him about this arising opportunity that has the potential to upend both their lives. Should've done so many things differently. Too many mistakes and then they were fighting and everything, every word and angry silence just seemed to confirm what she'd feared from the start, even before they ever got started - that she just wasn't enough. Not enough fun, too complicated, too much wall still intact. That one day he'd see her for who she truly is, and walk the other way. No longer the extraordinary, remarkable Kate Beckett, just the frustrating, maddening, *normal* woman that she is.

But the way he looks at her, every embrace and kiss and caress he's bestowing upon her body, every word and promise he's given are a testament to how she still amazes him, that her flaws and mistakes and the daily reality of *her* haven't made him love her any less, won't drive him away. He won't give up on her, won't ever let her go and the sense of relief fills her, spreads from the inside out, her skin vibrant with it. His fingers splay wide at her waist, cradling her like

she is precious, his thumbs smudged into the hollow valleys of her hipbones while his mouth traverses the length of her abdomen, stopping here and there for intoxicating kisses, his tongue curling, venerating at the altar of her body and she arches for him, seeking the blazing, fierce exaltation of his touch.

She'd thought he'd break up with her. She'd truly thought that when she'd meet him, that this would be it, that it'd be over and it scared her more, in different ways than anything ever had before. She felt like screaming, like clawing out and clinging on and yet nothing could make it past the tumor in her throat that seemed to strangle her, could barely breathe through the fist that seemed to squeeze the life out of her heart, its grip punishing, its nails puncturing her flesh, rupturing tissue and veins until nothing was left of her but an empty, shredded shell.

She can't help the choked sob that the lingering panic drives up her throat, can't help the spill of tears that leak from the corners of her eyes, like ink that outlines their story, stark, jagged lines on her skin.

"Kate," he sighs, too much sorrow in his voice as crawls back up her body, his fingers delving into her hair, palming her head. He kisses her forehead, kisses away the salty tear tracks on her cheek, sipping the lingering sadness into his mouth, making it a part of himself, taking and accepting her the way she is, warts and issues and fears and all.

He never wanted to break up. He wanted her. Wants her. Despite the fight and misunderstandings, her lies and her issues, he came to make his stand. He put himself out there, mirroring the gesture she'd made one year ago when she came to him, stripped naked of all her defenses, when she had given all of herself to him. In a closing parenthesis to how she'd offered that which scared her the most, her heart, her love, he'd given her what had scared him the most - his commitment, for life.

This wonderful, infuriating, caring, loving man.

Kate folds her legs high around his waist, enfolding him in a snug embrace, skin to skin, wants to just soak him inside herself and never let go again. Her hands cradled around his head she looks at him, holds his eyes with hers. His gaze is hooded, pupils darkened with arousal and mixed with an overwhelming coil of emotions. Love, most of all, but lingering traces of worry, insecurity, concern that she just wants to erase, that they can move forward from because there's no point, no reason when all this time, they've wanted the same things, had the same concerns, were so needlessly afraid. No more.

"I love you," she whispers, her palms cradling his face, tugging him close until the tip of his nose kisses hers. "I love all of you, the silly and the thoughtful and the indecisive." She brushes a kiss to his lips, and another, but then pulls away before he can deepen it. He waits her out, his pulse throbbing visibly in the strong vein of his neck and she caresses her thumbs over his cheekbones, his jaw, his lips. Her heart is pounding, swelling with a truth slowly-unfolded and hard-won over five years, the truth she's been holding safe deep within.

"The fun, the relentless, the understanding, the fierce and protective. The smart, the forgiving, the tender, the good. All the good, Castle, all the good."

It eases something around his heart, snaps a band that he didn't know was still strangling him, deep inside where he doesn't ever let anybody look, where he

believed he'd not ever be good enough. Insecurities built over a lifetime that had left him doubting, hesitant and... God, he's not any better at this sharing-thing, now is he, hiding away the parts he doesn't like, isn't proud of? But she dug right to the heart of the matter, soothing the ragged edges of his banged-up heart.

Her fingers linger on his face, the truth of her words glimmering fiercely in her eyes yet her touch is tender, devoted. His throat feels clogged, his heart slamming against his ribs. He nestles between her thighs, a slow, precise roll of his hips that presses him against the heat of her, into the welcoming, familiar warmth and his whole body aches with it, with the lingering pain of the imagined near-loss that tried to swallow him whole. Her lashes flutter, her head tipping back on a soundless gasp that stutters from her chest, tumbles from her opened lips.

She's so beautiful, feels so good; she feels like forever.

Castle reaches for her hand, entwines his fingers with hers, pressing the tangle of their hands next to her head. Her eyes open slowly, wide and luminous, filled with the same ache, the same whorl of emotions that matches the storm of his.

"Say it again," he pleads, voice cracked and raw, his fingers squeezing hers, probably squeezing too hard but she doesn't flinch, just squeezes back, palms kissing, hot and hard. "Please, Kate, say it again."

She presses her left hand over his heart, and for one long moment they both stare at where her fingers brush his sternum, where the ring on her finger sparkles fiercely in the dusky light, a bright shine between them, binding them. Five stones, four small ones for the years he got to know her, framing on each side one large diamond for the year he got to love her, arranged in a holy trinity of past, present, and future.

Then her eyes lift back up to his, a smile etched into her face, wide and dazzling, infused with such happiness, so much awe and pure joy that it takes his breath away, makes him feel dizzy, overwhelmed, his heart thundering and his stomach flaring with a whirr of butterflies, leaves him punch-drunk, shout-from-the-rooftops happy.

"Yes, Richard Castle. I will marry you."