

Long and completely skippable A/N:

I'm going to do some defending of myself because the direction the show is taking has me frustrated and that in turn is what inspires my writing and then I come out sounding like I think Castle is perfect and I hate Beckett and that is not the case. Quite the opposite. Check my favorites, you'll see I only read fics where there is a happy ending for Caskett. I am a serious Caskett shipper! I like the show better when they are happy. Baring a few episodes where they completely lost the plot, like the one with Eric Vaughn, Seasons 5, 6 and 7 were my favorites. I love Caskett but I am against this wave of everything is Rick's fault going on lately. Lanie's comment on the last episode had me really mad! Why is everything always his fault? And that frustration is what feeds my inspiration for fics, then I come out sounding like I think he is perfect because my fics are always defending him, but someone has to!

I think Castle has messed up too, but they always seem to make him deal with his messes. Make him atone some way or another, but with her they either gloss over the hurt like with naked punishing or have her mad at Castle so she doesn't have to atone, like with the whole lie about having heard his declaration of love being instantly forgiven because he lied about Smith.

So I look for fics that fix that and that is also what I write. Not because I think he hasn't messed up but because I do get to see him own up to his messes on the show and would like to see the same for the others, especially Beckett.

So please bear with me. I am still hopeful we'll get back to having fun with Caskett and this is just a phase!

This is an AU that considers 8x16 happening before the first of April.

Disclaimer: I think the show would be going in a completely different direction if I was the owner, so yeah, pretty sure I don't own Castle.

Summary: Rick's surprise birthday party doesn't go as planned as he tells his friends and family some hard truths. Spoilers for Season 8

"Not so Happy Birthday"

"Kate," a British accent asked as she was accommodating the snacks. His meeting at Black Pawn should be done by now and he should be almost home. He would love the surprise. She knew he had told her he just wanted a romantic dinner, just the two of them after he had had lunch with his mother and daughter, but she felt this would be better. After all, this was one of the landmarks, 45, mid-decade.

"Yes?" she asked distractedly. She liked Haley. At first, she hadn't known what to think of her but she had been quite useful in cases. And now that she knew Jackson had sent her and she had decided to stay to look after her family she had decided to include Haley in their group.

"Where are Rick's friends?"

"We're all here," she said pointing at where the Ryans, Laine, Espo, Martha and Alexis were all chatting on the couch.

"Yes, your friends are all here, but where are Rick's friends? This is his birthday party after all."

Kate bristled a bit. She didn't like the direction this conversation was going. "They are our friends."

"You sure?" Haley asked but she had no time to answer as she heard the sound of the keys being inserted on the lock.

"Linus, lights out," she called and as Rick opened the door, as she had programmed the home operating system, the lights came up as everyone called "Surprise!"

"Happy Birthday babe," she said with a smile. Everyone was smiling, everyone except the birthday boy. Why wasn't he smiling? He wasn't smiling. He was staring at all of them, his keys hanging limply from his hands.

"I thought we were going to have a romantic dinner just the two of us," he said with apparent calm. Apparent calm because she knew that tone. That was *the I'm angry but I'm in public and don't want to make a scene* tone. Usually that tone was reserved for his ex-wife Gina. She did not like that tone being used with her.

"I thought celebrating with our friends would be better," she said approaching slowly. What was going on?

"Yeah Castle," Espo started but was cut by Rick's voice.

"Your friends."

"What?" she asked confused.

"Your friends," he repeated firmly and she could see he was losing his battle with his temper. "If the last several months have taught me anything is that even after almost eight years they are still your friends and I'm just someone they relate to because of you."

"Castle, that's not true," Ryan tried to defend them.

"All I wanted was to spend my birthday with my wife," he said firmly. "All I wanted was to spend my birthday without being called a screw up, without being accused of being responsible for everything that goes wrong under the sun. I've spent the last six months being accused of being the reason for our separation. Of the only support I got, the only people on my side, were a machine I programmed," he pointed at the pyramid on the counter "and a person I've only known for the last six months," he finished pointing at Haley who shrugged as if saying "told you so". "All I wanted was to spend a few nice hours without anyone snapping at me, treating me like dirt, an idiot who had to be the one to screw up his marriage. You complained about a *day* where Lucy treated you unpleasantly, well *welcome to my life* for the last *six months* and how I was treated by the people I thought were my friends and my own mother and daughter!"

She didn't know what to say. Of course she had witnessed the boys and Lanie being a bit rough with Castle, but she never said anything, because that led credibility to their separation, right? She hadn't realized he was hurt by that. He never said anything, just kept showing up. And she had just been so moved, so relieved at Martha's and Alexis's support that she never wondered how he felt that they hadn't sided with him. She had been worried she would regress with Alexis, go back to how they were right after she was shot when the girl seemed to harbor some anger towards her, and when she just accepted Kate back... as if she'd never left... she had

been too happy to even consider that Martha and Alexis might have thought Castle was the one who screwed up.

“Rick-“ she started but she had no idea what to say.

“Just you and me, that’s all I asked Kate. I guess even on my birthday I can’t get a break,” he finished not angry, but hurt, snapping around and leaving the apartment slamming the door, which had still been open, shut.

“I,” Alexis started in a lost voice. “I didn’t think I was hurting him. I just thought. Dad doesn’t have the best track record and I assumed-“

“Maybe you all shouldn’t have assumed,” Haley mumbled from her place on the couch sipping her wine.

“We’re his friends. Of course we’re his friends! He knows that!” Javi said looking at the others incredulously. “Right?” he asked with less confidence.

“I guess we might have been a bit tough on him,” Lanie offered cautiously wincing as she remembered her comment over the dead security guard’s body.

“Might?” Jenny snorted.

“Mrs. Ryan?” Martha asked.

“Just that, Kevin told me, or more like ranted, about what’s going on. And I haven’t said anything, well, because I didn’t know what was going on, but the fact is, that from everything I’ve heard you guys pretty much took Kate’s side. I don’t think he wanted you to take a side,” she tried to placate them all as everyone started protesting at once. “Just like he didn’t when the two of you,” she pointed at Ryan and Espo, “were fighting.”

Espo and Ryan looked uncomfortable at each other and Ryan shrugged, “I guess we’re just used to Castle being the fall guy. It’s like Lanie said, it’s always his fault...or at least, that’s how it’s always been because he was the outsider at first.”

“And that’s his point,” Haley pointed out. “After eight years he shouldn’t be the outsider anymore.”

Kate hated that the new girl was right, because she was. Looking back Kate realized that Ryan was right, Rick had always been the fall guy, and at first it was because he was the outsider and they were closing ranks. But when he’d disappeared. When the evidence pointed to him having disappeared by his own volition, the boys had instantly backed her up. When he had left with Gina, no one asked what happened, the boys, Lanie, even Captain Montgomery, automatically sided with her. Every single time. And eight years later, she knew he wasn’t asking them to side with him. Because Rick would never do that. He was just asking them to have both their backs. She had been touched when the boys declared they were on her side in the separation but she should have said something. She should have told them not to take sides. She never once thought that this was leaving Rick hanging out to dry.

“No, he shouldn’t,” she said quietly and then looked at Martha who hadn’t said much. Was just sitting quietly with the same devastated look she must have been sporting and she sat next to her.

“Martha?” she asked.

"I do tough love. That's what I've always done, that's our way. I hadn't realized he thought I wasn't on his side. Of course I was. Of course I was upset that you hurt my boy. He's my boy! I don't want to see him hurt!" she said desperately. "But I always thought that if I was tough he'd have a thicker skin. He needed one growing up. So he wouldn't let the other kids taunts get to him. Because he didn't have a father, because his mother was an actress, because he was the scholarship kid. That's what I was still doing. I thought he knew that," she finished in a whisper.

"He does," Kate said softly. "But, maybe we can tone it down a bit. We're all too used with the fact that everything seems to bounce just right off of that thick skin. He's right. Not everything is his fault and we are all guilty of acting as if it was. Myself included."

"We're his friends," Espo repeated. "But maybe we haven't been showing that to him and we should."

"So, we start to," Lanie said and the others nodded.

"I'm going to go look for him," Kate said. "Can you guys wait here?"

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Haley asked again and this time she answered differently.

"No, but I think that if I can convince him that you guys are his friends that you, we all just-"

"Screwed up?" Alexis asked and Kate smiled.

"Yeah, maybe we can still salvage the evening. I'll let you know before we come back."

"If he doesn't want us here we'll leave," Ryan said. "He was right, he should get a break on his birthday."

Xx

She found him exactly where she thought she would. The New York Public Library. The place where he confessed to her he came when he was lonely, because growing up making friends wasn't easy. As Martha said, he was the outcast, the fatherless boy. He wasn't really reading anything. He was just sitting on the same table he had been that day when she had arrested him with his head propped on one hand and the other drawing patterns on the wood towards the corner of the table. She sat on the other side of the corner, where he could see her without having to move his head. She took the hand drawing patterns and whispered.

"I'm sorry."

"I told you I wanted just the two of us," he mumbled.

"I'm sorry I didn't realize how you were feeling towards our friends."

"Your-"

"No Rick, I know you are hurt and as Alexis said after you left, we all screwed up, but they are your friends too."

He looked at her with such sad eyes she wanted to rip the world apart just to make him happy again. "You're right," she continued. "We're all guilty of scapegoating you. And that's not right. But that doesn't mean we don't care. You believe I love you don't you?"

"Of course."

"Then why aren't you angry at me? I blame stuff on you all the time. Why do I get a pass?"

"Because, because I love you and I can't live without you," he said exasperated.

"What about everyone else? The boys? Alexis? Your mom?"

"Of course I love them. I wasn't going to say anything! And I didn't at lunch, even though Alexis and Mother went on about how I had to make sure not to screw up again now that you were back home," she winced at that. "I just wanted one night Kate. One night where Richard Castle wasn't to blame for bad weather, and traffic and war in the Middle East. Then I'd go back and I wouldn't say anything. And I was ready for that night. I was looking forward to that night and then I got there. After spending hours listening to Gina and the big wigs at Black Pawn laying on me because of how the separation had hurt my image, and I think I'm gonna have some respite, but *nooo*. Everyone's there and all I could think is; here we go again. More comments on how I need to make sure not to screw up again, and I don't even have Lucy anymore, you took Lucy away! And I lost my cool. I'm not a robot Kate! Even I have a limit!"

She was sorry now that she took Lucy away. At the time she had been uncomfortable and upset that he didn't seem to mind that Lucy didn't like her. That he seemed to treat the machine like a member of the family and had wanted him to feel that way too. She hadn't realized that the operating system was his coping mechanism. How he was holding up with everything that had been going over the last six months. That he had had no one else to talk to and had to talk to a machine.

All these years she never questioned the fact that after he started shadowing her his life ended up rotating around hers. His closest friends were the friends he made through her and that he had distanced himself from the friends he had before. She never questioned how that would affect him if something were to happen to their relationship because that was never a possibility to her. To her they would always be together, partners. That was one of the reasons she had been so afraid of pursuing a romantic relationship with him, because she had been afraid of losing his partnership and she couldn't see her life without him by her side. Except, for the last six months, for everyone else, they had been separated and their friends had sided with her leaving him hanging out to dry. All alone. With just Lucy to share his woes with.

"I'll bring her back. I shouldn't have changed the settings. I should have talked to you instead."

"That's not the point Kate," he said clearly lost. "I'm not delusional. I know Lucy is not a person. But I had no one else, and I've had to just let tart comments slide because I love you, and I couldn't not be around you. And I am the boys' friend, and even though I realize now that they're just my friends while I'm with you-"

"That's not true."

"I didn't make this up Kate. They told me themselves," he said sharply. "It wasn't just the comments. I'm used to the comments. Even when we're in good terms I'm the butt of the joke and usually I don't care. Usually I laugh with them. But I wasn't in a good place, and maybe I would have liked them to lay off a bit but the problem wasn't just that they didn't. They made the fact that I was not welcome anymore in the circle of friends clear. Like the baby shower! You don't even like babies or baby stuff! But you got to be the one to go to the shower. They could have invited us both and let us decide, but no. Ryan pulls me to the side and states that I better not show up and upset Jenny with a scene. Why couldn't he have pulled you to the side and said that?"

"I don't know, but Rick. They also didn't know how to act. We – I put them in an awkward position–"

"When Javi and Lanie broke up, all the times they broke up, I never stopped inviting them both. I never took sides. I even tried to explain to Javi why Lanie was angry with him. Came up with the stupid idea of an impromptu bachelor party to take his mind off the break up and the fact that he got passed for best man and at the same time give Kevin a nice send away. I didn't ask them to throw me a party or take me to Vegas. All I wanted was maybe for one of them to have a drink with me and hear me out without saying anything back. Instead, I got kicked out of stuff. I didn't want to have to deal with that today."

"Sorry babe, I hadn't realized it. I thought you'd be happy. You love a party," she tried to smile at him and her spirits lifted a bit when he nodded slightly with a sad smile. "And they are your friends. They are, and maybe when you're less angry you'll see that and let them apologize."

She decided to ignore his incredulous snort. A thought came to her. She had been feeling guilty, didn't understand why he still had writers block even though they had been back together for almost four months.

"Does this have anything to do with why you haven't been able to write the new Nikki Heat?"

He shuffled uncomfortable, "Nikki Heat is about all of us. I was sincere when I gave my speech. I really thought they had let me in, but then I realized they hadn't, and how do I write about that world, that is based on my world, when my world turns out not to be how I thought? I'm not stupid Kate, I hear you, and I know that they care about me but they haven't let me in completely. I thought I was one of the team and now I see I'm still an outsider. Your writer."

"No," she shook her head. "That's not true. They've rallied when you needed them."

"Yeah, they have. But would they have if you hadn't been there? If whatever was happening to me didn't affect you? Before our separation, I would have said yes, but now... I just don't know anymore."

"Then let them show you. You gave them a wakeup call today Rick. Now you need to give them a second chance. You've never blinked, never hesitated in forgiving me. I'm asking you to do the same for them, but not just roll over," she added at his mutinous face. Because she felt he needed to hear that she thought his forgiving nature was a quality not a weakness. "Call them to task if they start again, don't just let it slide until everything boils over."

"They're still home aren't they?" he asked resigned and she nodded sheepishly.

"I promise to kick everyone out if one of them makes one sharp comment," and then she went for the pièce de résistance she knew he wouldn't be able to say no to. Not matter how upset he was with them. "And your mother and Alexis were really upset with themselves. They hadn't realized what they were doing. They think you hate them," bit of an exaggeration but desperate times...

"Of course not," he cried aghast and cringed as the librarian glared shushing them. "I'd never hate them. No matter how upset I may be!"

"Then let them tell you," she leaned on his arm giving him her best puppy eyes and he huffed but nodded.

Xx

“Dad,” he heard from his side. They had come back. Everyone was looking awkward, except Haley. His spirits did lift up a bit when he heard Lucy’s voice crying “Happy Birthday Rick!” and Alexis sheepish, “I changed back the settings,” and Kate’s “Thanks.”

To say the party was awkward was an understatement, no one seemed to know what to say and Rick had decided he sure as hell wasn’t going to be the one to begin. So after a while of silent staring he stated he was famished and he was going to get himself some snacks and moved to the counter and away from everyone.

“Yeah pumpkin,” he said gently.

“I’m sorry I made you feel I wasn’t on your side. I was, and I was wrong to assume you were the one in the wrong. I shouldn’t have. And even if you had been. You’re my dad, I should have sided with you anyway, I just didn’t want to see you upset, and you’re happy with Kate and you were miserable and I didn’t want you to be miserable again and I kind of just assumed because mom said-”

Rick frowned and cut his daughter’s babbling asking, “What did Meredith say?” He had tried really hard not to tarnish Meredith’s image to Alexis. He never told her why they got divorced. She never knew about Meredith’s infidelity, and really, how do you explain to a three-year-old why mommy doesn’t live with them anymore?

Alexis bit her lips and he knew he wouldn’t like the answer. “I wanted to help. I thought, maybe if I knew what went wrong I could help you get Kate back. Your plan of working cases didn’t seem to be working dad! You just kept getting yourself in dangerous situations-”

“Alexis,” he stopped her rant to focus her. He wasn’t going to have this talk with her again. He wasn’t a child. He knew the risks involved. But he also knew he wasn’t as incompetent as everyone seemed to think. He was a good shot. He had taken self-defense classes. And yes, every now and then he got his ass kicked but he had a pretty good record of getting himself out of trouble as much as in. He and Slaughter had managed to knock out all the bad guys out alone before backup showed up.

“I asked mom why you two didn’t work,” she rushed to say and he groaned, and could just imagine what bull Meredith must have spun. She would never own up to their daughter that she slept with her director.

“And?”

“She said you never opened up to her, that the soufflé fell.”

Rick rubbed his temple. He had heard that analogy before. From both Gina and Kate. Meredith had spun that on both of them. She could at least get new material. And while he had been guilty of not opening up to Gina that was not the case with Kate, or even Meredith. Meredith just wasn’t listening. She never did. The only show she was interested in was in the show of Meredith so of course the soufflé fell!!

“That’s not true pumpkin, and honestly. What happened between your mother and I is not for your ears. You are our daughter and you shouldn’t have to choose who was in the wrong and who wasn’t. I’ve tried very hard to not make you and I wish you hadn’t asked your mom.”

“Sorry,” Alexis sounded contrite and he knew she was. He pulled her close and hugged her kissing her forehead.

"My marriages aren't your duty to fix pumpkin. And yes, I was upset because, sometimes I feel you and mother don't think very highly of me-"

"No dad, never!" he felt her shake her head.

"I know I'm partly at fault. I joke a lot. But that doesn't mean I'm useless. I did manage to become a bestselling writer and remember to feed you every now and then. I'm pretty sure I even remembered to send you to school."

"You're a great dad."

"Then I need you to have a little more faith in me okay? I'm not made of steel, and well, we all saw how that one ended."

Alexis rolled her eyes, trust her dad to make a Superman vs. Batman comment in the middle of an important conversation.

"Kay."

"Dad."

"Hm."

"You amaze me every day too."

He smiled as she repeated his words of almost a year ago to him.

Xx

If he said the party got better after that he'd be lying. They spent a very awkward evening before the Ryans said they had to relieve the babysitter and everyone took the chance to leave with them. He wished they'd brought little Sarah Grace, at least he'd have had fun playing with her and could have avoided the small talk. No one brought up his blow up, they all just tried small talk which was awfully stilted by the fact that he wasn't retuning the repartee. He was upset. He'd been upset for quite a while. He realized Kate had been right. He should have said something earlier, so he wouldn't blow up at them all at the worst possible time. But as he said, his life hadn't exactly been a picnic for the last six months. The first two he spent trying to win his wife back and then he was just so grateful she was back that he didn't want to do anything to rock the boat. Then he had found that stupid video and been worried she wouldn't forgive him. He still didn't understand why he started the investigation on LockSat without contacting Kate. He figured he must have learned something during his extraction of Bilal and had followed the clues. That he might have wanted to bring something more concrete to Kate before involving her. Regardless, just like he told Haley, he shouldn't have made that decision alone and he wasn't going to anymore. He and Kate really sucked when deciding stuff unilaterally.

He thought once they told everyone they were back together everyone would back off. But no, the comments and sharp looks kept coming. Don't screw up again! His birthday lunch with Alexis and his mother, which he had hoped would be a celebration, had also been filled with such comments. He knew they both meant well. Like Alexis said, they wanted to see him happy, but why couldn't they have at least asked what happened before assuming he was at fault? And this wasn't the first time. He had seen Alexis look at him with pity. As if she thought he was fooling himself, every time he came up with a new idea. Yeah, he knew his ideas were out there sometimes, but they worked, most of the time. And of course, the cherry on the

cake had been Gina. Gina! His ex-wife had to give him a don't screw up again lecture. Seriously? Well, he had to give her that. At least Gina had reason to believe he was the one in the wrong. They weren't good married. They just didn't work as a couple, but he hadn't helped at all keeping her at arm's length. Never really letting her in. But still, by the time he got home his blood was boiling and when he saw the group assembled instead of just his wife he had tried to keep a calm head, but that had lasted all of two seconds before all the accumulated frustration of six months exploded.

He regretted being harsh with his mother and Alexis. He would never willingly hurt them, but at the same time he was glad he had finally said something. The talk with Alexis helped. Ever since this whole LockSat mess started, he really felt his daughter didn't respect him, had started seeing him as some kind of bumbling idiot and he had never felt that way before, no matter how much they joked around. He was glad they had started clearing the air.

"Hey, kiddo," he heard and he looked up from his office chair. He had been a good host. He had said his goodbyes to everyone. Had kind of liked Lanie's hug as she whispered an, "I'm sorry Castle. Next time, just smack me around," and he had snorted at the image, even though he'd never hit a woman and thought Lanie could probably take him on.

He had even agreed to a Halo night - something he'd been banned from lately - with the boys when Espo asked. He recognized the olive branch and knew he couldn't expect more from them. If Kate was right, they would show him with actions, they wouldn't get mushy and talk. That was just not their style. They were guys after all. As much as he loved the female body, sometimes he wished he wasn't a guy and was allowed to talk some things out. But then again, if he wasn't a guy, yeah, that could be hot.

"Kiddo," she repeated and Rick was rudely pulled from his less than pure thoughts.

"Hey," he answered. "Everyone gone?"

"Yes, Haley was the last one. Just slipped away without anyone noticing."

"That's Haley." Poor Haley had endured all the awkwardness despite the fact that she was the only one here he wasn't upset at. During the party she had decided to share some wise words.

"Everything's awkward now. And that they stayed despite knowing there was no way for this not to be awkward shows they care. Things will get back to normal with time," he hoped she was right.

His mother came around and sat on the table. "You know I love you right? That I'm proud of you?"

"Should I call an ambulance?" he asked sarcastically.

"Oh, shush. I'm trying to be serious here. Just hear me out. I'm not good at this, and neither are you by the way, at least not outside the pages of your books," she gave him a look and he had to concede defeat because she was right. He did deflect a lot. He was deflecting now.

"When I heard Katherine had left you. I was furious with her. I'd watched you wait for that girl to be ready for years. Then I watch you hold back because you thought she wasn't ready when I know you. I knew you wanted to dive in right from the start. I remember when you bought that ring she wears," she gave him yet another look. "Right after she came back from hiding in the woods, in case you need reminding."

"I don't need reminding," he lowered his voice. Kate never knew that. The last think he wanted was for Kate to know he had that ring since before they were officially together. When she gave him a promise of someday. She'd think he was crazy.

"My point is, I knew how much you'd suffered and how happy you'd been since you two actually got together. And I saw how worried, how devastated you were when she just vanished without a trace for thirty-six hours and she had just walked out again. Of course I was furious with her. But I was also scared kiddo. That first time she went away, after she got shot, you were despondent after Captain Gates kicked you out of the precinct, after you lost your purpose. Before Gina kicked you in the behind to finish Heat Rises. Remember how she practically had to drag you to the signings? And when I read the end of Heat Rises Richard, I was so worried about your state of mind at the time. And here we were again, and I couldn't let you fall into that depression again and I did what I know. What I've always known."

"Tough love," he said simply.

"Yes, and I'm sorry. I shouldn't have implied I thought it was your fault. That you had screwed up. When I told you not to - when I was harsh with you today, and after your anniversary, I was just trying to protect you. I didn't want you losing her again. Because kiddo, I know this one isn't like the others. You survived losing them, but sometimes I worry, you won't survive losing Kate, so I just want to make sure you don't."

"I know mother, I just, I had a really bad day," he sighed rubbing his eye. "And, I was just feeling very sorry for myself and I shouldn't have said anything—"

"Yes you should, maybe you should have said something sooner. Maybe more diplomatically," she conceded shaking her head and raising her hands. "But you should have said something. You shouldn't just have to swallow your feelings. But I have to tell you something too, that you have learned in regards to Katherine and is valid for everyone. People screw up. Doesn't mean they don't care."

"I know," he nodded.

"I hope you do kiddo. I love you," she leaned down to hug him.

"I love you too mom," he said as he buried his face in her hair, and somehow, the familiar scent made things better, lighter, just like when he was a kid. Made him believe Haley had been right, and maybe now things would be better, with the boys and Lanie.

That night, as he joined Kate in bed he was feeling much better than when the day started. Yes, things were still awkward. But they were looking better. He was feeling so much better he missed her smirk as she turned to him with a predatory smile and asked:

"So, exactly when did you buy the ring?"

Damn those stupid shelves. Why didn't he just have normal walls?

The end

A/N: had to end up on a high note. Nothing is resolved but at least now they are on the right direction. At least I feel better.