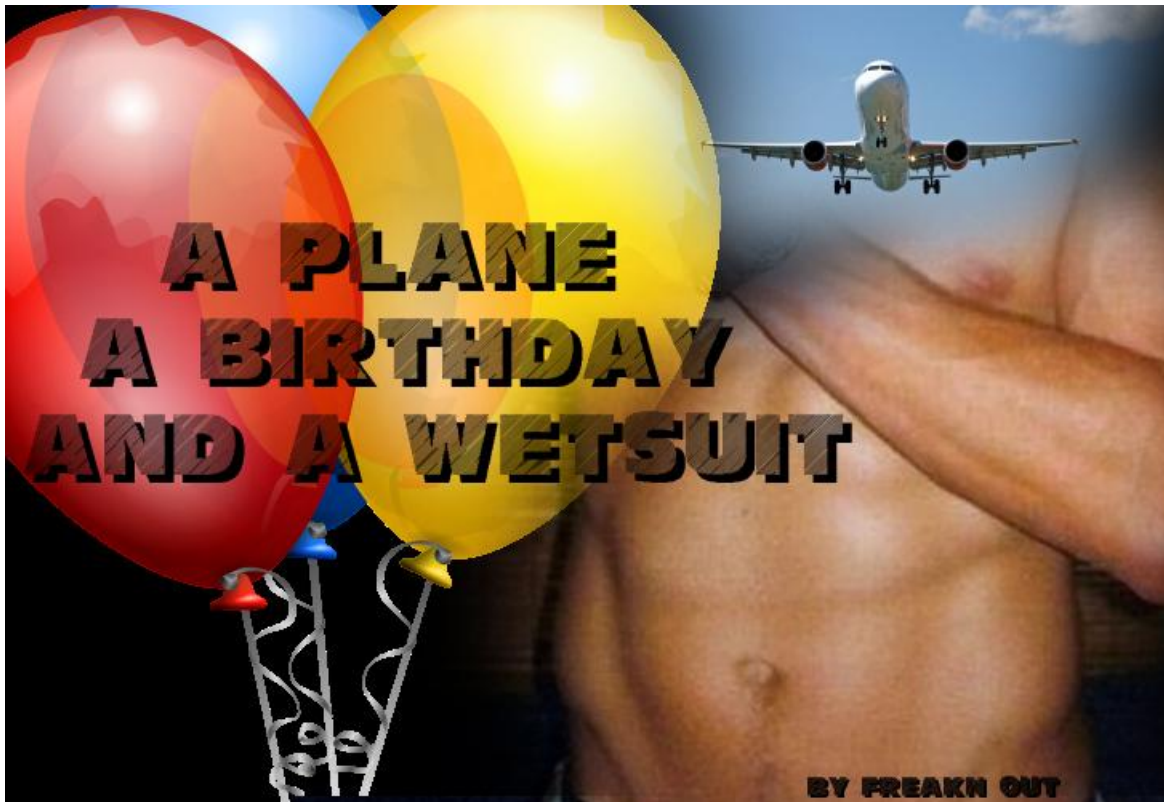


## A plane, a birthday and a wetsuit:



It's Jensen's birthday, he's missing home and he's missing Jared: *Grabbing the handle, I turn towards the sliding doors and make my way out into the waiting room, searching for an ATM. I freeze as my eyes land on a bare male chest. A really, really hot male's chest. My eyes slide down the man's form to take in the wetsuit?*

2,000 words, PG, schmoop



I stare blankly at the sleep-tussled man, wondering if that really is me. I look tired, my eyes slightly puffy and my cheeks still pillow-creased. I splash water over my face to try and wipe the zombie look off, but then I just look like a wet zombie – not much better.

A year older. It doesn't feel real, like maybe someone's playing pranks on me and has changed the dates.

Has it really been a year since Jared was tackling me and tossing me in the pool as a 'birthday present'? Has it really been that long?

Am I really that old?

Thirty-one.

Shouldn't something be different? Shouldn't I have gotten somewhere in life by now? What do I have to show for all the years? What have I accomplished? I always imagined I'd be married by now, living in a nice house with a pretty wife and maybe even some kids.

Sure, acting is going well, but I just feel like there should be something more.

I feel old.

Turning away from the mirror, I wander through the hotel room to change into something more appropriate for the outside world and grab my cellphone from the bedside table. Three new messages.

Hey, sweetie. Happy birthday. Too bad you couldn't be here, but we're all thinking of you. Love Mom.

Dude, ur shit old nw. Hw mny wrinkles do u hve? Steve says hi as well.

But it's the last one that makes me smile. It's just a smiley and I know exactly who it's from.

My phone starts ringing a few seconds later and I answer it with a grin, "Hello?"

"Hey, gramps. How's it feel like on the other side of the hill?"

How the hell does this idiot manage to make me so happy?

"What the hell are you talking 'bout, kiddo?"

Jared snorts, "They say life's downhill after the thirty year milestone, so sucks to be you."

"Ha ha. I think you got it wrong, Padalecki. Life starts at thirty. I'm in the groove now."

"Oooh, I'm so jealous. Seriously, man. Has the arthritis started setting in yet? Feeling creaky and sore?"

"Fuck you."

"Yeah, yeah. Anyway, the set's crazy over here, man. Dave and me put shaving gel in Amanda's shoe and geez, I didn't know anyone could scream that loudly. I wish you could've heard it. Like... shattering glass loud."

Something twists inside me at the thought of Jared having another prank buddy, but that's completely irrational. "Sounds cool."

"Yeah, it's awesome. But hectic time schedules. I don't think I've slept properly for weeks.... When's your flight?"

"In a couple of hours. Damn, it'll be good to be home. When will you be getting in?"

He hesitates for a few seconds. "I... Jen, I don't think I'll make it today; the director wants us all to stay here tonight so we can get started early tomorrow.... I swear, that man is trying to kill us... but... tomorrow we'll go out and celebrate your coming of age, 'kay, man?"

“Sure, no, I mean, that’s fine. My flight’s only getting in at around one anyway, so yeah... I’ll see you tomorrow.”

When we hang up, I feel even more depressed. Shouldn’t birthdays be cool? Today just seems to be getting worse.



The flight is awful. The air conditioner is on too much, pumping dry air into the heated interior, making everyone uncomfortable and irritable, especially me. I don’t like flying. It’s unnatural and has a concept that’s too terrifying to think of. I mean, we must be, what? 30 thousand feet up in the air...

Usually, I have Jared here to distract me with his easy smile and contagious laughter... Damn, I miss that kid. It’s only been three weeks and we’ve talked on the phone practically every day, but I really, really miss him.

It’s like I’m an addict, needing a Jared shot to keep my mood up. When I’m around him, being dragged into his countless schemes, I feel like a kid again. He makes me feel good about myself, like, when he compliments me, I know he really means it. He’s the most honest person I’ve ever met (except when he’s pranking, then he’s just sneaky), but despite this, his doe-eyed look always gets him out of the ‘How does my butt look in this?’ question.

These past three weeks have been boring as hell, spent mostly sitting around in hotel rooms feeling tired and homesick. And today’s my birthday and I was really looking forward to seeing my best friend again... but now that’s not going to happen.

Instead, I’ll be going to an empty house, spending the night feeling sorry for myself and feeling as homesick as if I were in a hotel room.

See, truth is... Jared’s my home... I only feel like I’m truly accepted and cared for and - dare I even say it - loved, when I’m around him. His presence is just so solid, like a loyal wall that never lets me down.

Thinking my head back against the seat, I stare up at the ceiling, wondering what it is about flying that makes my mind wander so much. I mean, I’m practically gushing about Jared. Honestly.

I guess I’m just really tired. And missing Jared. A lot.

Anyway... I’ll see him tomorrow.

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As usual, my suitcase is one of the last to arrive.

Grabbing the handle, I turn towards the sliding doors and make my way out into the waiting room, searching for an ATM. I freeze as my eyes land on a bare male chest. A really, really hot male’s chest. My eyes slide down the man’s form to take in the wetsuit??

My gaze snaps back up and my mouth falls open. It's Jared. Jared, my best friend, is standing there, barefoot, wearing only an unzipped wetsuit, his tanned six-pack bared to the world. The wetsuit clings to his narrow hips, threatening to slip lower, and his powerful thighs are clearly defined in the tight material.

Someone bumps into me from behind and I realise I've just been staring at him for the past few moments. As I tentatively approach him, his smile only widens. His beautiful dimples dance, and his annoying bangs fall into his face in that oh-so-familiar way, and my heart threatens to burst out of my chest.

"Hi," he grins happily.

As if that's a trigger, I drop my suitcase to the ground, not caring that we're in the middle of the airport, and I pretty much lunge at him, sending him skidding back slightly while he regains his footing. Then he's hugging back just as tightly, his arms wrapping around me in a strong embrace.

My cheek's pressed against his neck, my hands clutch at his bare back, and we're probably making a huge scene, but I don't care. Jared's here. He's in a wetsuit, but he's still here.

"Happy birthday, Jen," he whispers softly, his lips brushing my ear with every word.

And that totally isn't a small sobbing sound that I let out as I bury my face against him, breathing in his familiar scent and finally, for the first time in three weeks, feeling myself relax.

He slowly pulls back, his hands firm on my shoulders as he peers down at me, "You ready to go home?"

"Oh, you have no idea," I murmur. Then my eyes slide down his muscular form and I raise an eyebrow, "A wetsuit, dude?"

Laughing freely, Jared grabs my suitcase and steers me towards the exit, dodging curious bystanders. "Yeah, we were using it on set today, and I decided to steal it. I thought it'd be cool to surprise you with it."

"Oh, you surprised me all right. Me and half the airport."

Waving his hand, Jared lets out a 'pft', "Who cares? It made you laugh, didn't it?"

Again, the warmth spreads through me, making me feel like I'm glowing. "You're such a dork."

"Yeah, yeah. So how was it?"

I let out a groan and wait as he loads the suitcase in the back of his truck, "It was so boring, you have no idea. I don't think those people have even heard of a joke before."

"That bad?"

"Worse."

Jared whistles softly, "Sheesh... well... that just means we'll have to make up for it."

See, this right here is what I missed. This easy banter, easy conversation, easy everything. Jared's just got this air about him that makes me automatically relax.

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A few moments later, when we're sitting in traffic, he stops his excited ramble and just looks at me for a few moments. Then he smiles softly and reaches out to punch my shoulder, "I really missed you, gramps."

"Yeah, you too, kid."



As we get nearer to our house, I notice an increase in Jared's fidgeting.

Each time I ask what it is, he just grins and shakes his head, "Nothing, dude."

But when we arrive and pull up, Jared's lip is chewed raw and his eyes are verging on panic.

"Dude, what is it?"

"Uhm..." his voice squeaks slightly and he blushes as he clears his throat. "Maybe... maybe you should go in first."

"Jay...?"

"Just... just go on it, I'll be there in a... a few..."

Curiosity taking over, I slide out the car and grab my suitcase. After unlocking the door, I tentatively push it open, wondering what's going to leap out at me.

All that hits me is the delicious scent of roast chicken, and I feel my stomach grumbling about the airport food. Then I step further inside, and my heart leaps.

The table's all set out, with a tablecloth and candles and placemats and everything else. The light's turned low, everything seeming softer in the dim light, and there're wonderful smells drifting from the oven.

"Jared?" I call softly, wondering what all this means. I glance over at him, he seems to be contemplating whether to hightail it out of here or not.

Thankfully, he chooses the latter.

His face is flushed and nervous as he approaches, clearing his throat, "I... uhm... Do you want to... go... uh..." he lets out a soft sigh, "Okay, here's the thing... I was talking to your mom about what I should get you for your birthday, and she kept listing things, but I kept telling her that I wanted it to be really special, and eventually she got annoyed and said the only thing better that she can think of is if I gave you myself, but that she doesn't think that's very likely.... I think it was a slip, but... I... it didn't sound... anyway.... Uhm... so... do you wanna go out with me?" he finishes his ramble with a mumble, his gaze lowered to the floor.

My mouth is hanging open, my eyes flickering back towards the perfect dinner and then back to the blushing form before me. “You mean... my mom told you that I like you?”

How the hell does my mom know something that I’m only just beginning to figure out myself?

“Uh...” Jared looks even more mortified, “I... I mean, never mind...forget I said anything...”

It’s his dejected voice that finally gets through to me, and I step forward. “I never said I wanted a refund.”

“Wha... what?” Jared’s eyes cautiously meet mine. “Jen...?”

Moving closer to him, I reach out to skim my fingers over his bare abdomen, smiling as the muscles flutter under my touch. Gripping his waist, I tug him closer to me. “I guess mothers really do know best.”

He lets out a surprised laugh. “So... that’s a... yes?”

“Yes...” I grin back, tugging him inside, “But you’re going to have to wine and dine me before I put out, bitch.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he snorts. “At least I know you’re of age.”

“Ha ha, so very funny,” I grumble sarcastically. “Fucking kid.”

“Ooooh, and I got you cake... but I ate some of it...” he ducks his head guiltily as he pulls out a cake from the cupboard. It’s missing a slice. “And I tried to put candles in, but they wouldn’t fit, so I just decided to make you one year old again.” He grins and holds it out, “Oh, wait... I need to light it...”

I burst out laughing.

Damn, it’s good to be home.

As the evening progresses, I realise that this, right here, is everything I’ve ever wanted in my life, everything I’ve ever needed. And it’s all down to the bouncy kid in the wetsuit.

Maybe this birthday isn’t so bad after all.

