



*Hot
or
Cold?*

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Sam splashed warm water on his face, and let the rivulets drip down his shirt.

It was the eve of his birthday. Despite the thick blanket of December cold, his friends were in the lawn outside his apartment, dancing to the extremely loud techno music.

He sighed and opened his eyes. The face in the mirror reflected worry, not excitement. He should have felt happy. In an hour, he would be twenty-five. In an hour, he would know how far his soulmate was from him. What would she be like? Would she be dusky? Tall? Pretty? Would she have brown hair and eyes like him or would she be a blonde with blue eyes? Could Cindy's friend Sasha be his soulmate? They had gone on a couple of dates and things were going well.

His phone chimed. The sudden brightness forced him to tear his eyes away from the mirror. He had a text from Ethan.

Where are you, bro? It's time to cut the cake.

Coming.

With one last look at the mirror, Sam shoved his phone and his keys into his pockets and made his way across his house. He put on the thickest of his jackets and opened the door to his house. The loud music hit him like a brick. Cindy soon found him and dragged him to where his cake was.

The music was abruptly cut off and someone handed him a plastic knife. Before he knew it, people were singing happy birthday. He went through the motions expected of him for the next forty-five minutes. Eventually, all the guests left, except Cindy, his roommate's girlfriend.

Sam returned home, wished his roommates goodnight, and closed the door to his room. He plopped into the bed and stared at the ceiling.

As the clock passed midnight, biting cold began to sink into his bones. He reluctantly slipped out of the bed and closed the window. On his way back, he grabbed an extra blanket. That helped for a bit, until he found himself

shivering beneath two layers of blankets. He got wrapped himself in a thick sweater and added another blanket, but by morning, it was as though ice flowed through his veins. He got out of the bed, added a coat over his sweater, and wrapped himself in a blanket before he stepped out of the room.

Ethan was making pancakes and shuffling through songs. The smell of coffee and syrup pulled him to the table where Cindy was having breakfast.

“What’s all this?” Cindy pointed her fork at him. A drop of syrup rolled off the piece of pancake skewered on it.

“Way too cold. Hey Cindy, on your twenty-fifth birthday, did you wake up at the North Pole?” Sam poured himself a cup of coffee and let it heat up his stiff fingers.

“Nope. I mean I was colder than usual, but nowhere close to this.”

“Ethan?”

“Same. How far away is your soulmate, dude? Imagine if she was all the way across the country.”

“I hope you meet her soon so you can return from Antarctica.” Cindy’s phone rang. The name made her jump. She grabbed the phone with one hand and shoved the last piece of pancake into her mouth with the other.

“Sorry, I need to take this. I’ll see you in the evening, darling. Bye, Sam.”

Ethan went to see her off, and Sam sat in the empty kitchen slowly eating his pancake.

Sam rummaged through his bag and pulled out the keys. He opened the door, removed his shoes, let the bag fall off his shoulder, and took a seat on the sofa beside Ethan. He offered Sam a glass of whiskey and he gratefully accepted it. They watched football in silence for a bit.

“You seem stressed.”

“Don’t ask, dude. Not a single good day this month. Every meeting began with a joke about the number of sweaters on me.”

“Tell me the best one.” Same gave Ethan an angry look. “Sorry, sorry. You’ll find her. Don’t worry about it. Hey, why don’t you take random buses around the city?”

“What do you think I was doing the whole evening? No luck. The entire city feels buried under a glacier.”

“Hopefully the tropical sun will heat you right back up tomorrow.”

“I don’t want to go to Benny’s wedding.”

“No, no, no. You are not ditching me at the last minute. You are coming with us, and we are not discussing this any further. I’ll drag you to the plane if it comes to that.”

Ethan was right. The tropical sun did warm Sam up. He removed his sweater, folded it, and shoved it in the bag his other two sweaters had previously been shoved in. He collected his bags and joined Ethan and Cindy in waiting for the rest of their friends. By the time they reached the hotel, the sun hung just above the horizon.

Sam found his room and closed the door behind him. It was two hours until the rehearsal dinner. He had some time. He unpacked his bags, took a quick shower, and steamed his suit for the evening, all with forty-five minutes to spare.

Sam fell into his bed and slipped under the sheets. His eyelids felt heavy. They had flown halfway across the world. The jetlag was manifesting as a dull ache behind his right eyebrow. It was a bit hot, so he pulled a leg out of the sheets. Perfect. He barely had the energy to attend the dinner, and even less intent. He wasn’t looking forward to him and his three sweaters being the butt of all the jokes.

Suddenly, Sam sat up. He jumped out of the bed and paced around the room. For the whole month, shower had been a nightmare. The chill had taken everything away from him – football, video game nights, even his weekly hikes. Yet, here he was, walking around the room with just a shirt. Sure, it was a little colder than he would have liked, but nothing like the frigid cold he had gotten accustomed to.

His face lit up with a smile. His soulmate was close. Probably a guest, or maybe someone in the wedding party. The thought of finally meeting her sent a spark of warmth through him. With an urgency that hadn't existed a minute ago, Sam got dressed and left the room.

The rehearsal dinner had been organised at the restaurant within the property. Sam walked parallel to the swimming pool and arrived at the restaurant. A doorman greeted him as he held the door open for Sam. When he took a step inside, a wave of heat washed over him. He flagged down a waiter and asked to be led to the table reserved for the party. The waiter obliged and led Sam to an empty table. Sam was among the first to arrive. Without people to be around, he would have no luck finding his soulmate.

Dejected, Sam chose to wait by the bar. He pulled up a stool and made himself comfortable as he ordered a beer. His eyes wandered around to the other people at the restaurant before settling on a beautiful woman at the other end of the bar. Sam sucked a breath and wiped the sweat off his brow with a handkerchief. Everything about this woman was gorgeous, from the brown wavy hair cascading down her shoulders, to the silky black dress that ended just below her knees, to the shimmery silver heels.

The mug of beer appeared before him as he removed his tuxedo, folded it, and placed it on his lap. He took three deep swigs before setting the mug down on the coaster and contemplating his next move. Sam stole another glance at the woman in black. She wasn't warm or sweaty, but that didn't mean she couldn't be his soulmate. Maybe it was her dress keeping her comfortable. Sam couldn't know for sure until they kissed, but he had been

waiting for this warmth for so long. Sam waited for ten minutes. When nobody approached her, he stood up, ran his fingers through his hair, grabbed his mug, and approached the woman.

She saw him out of a corner of her eye, and placed her drink down on the counter as she turned to him. One look into her honey-brown eyes and he was smitten.

“Do I know you?” Her smile was pleasant and warm. Sam’s eyes fell on the heart-shaped silver pendant almost touching the neckline, but he didn’t let his sight linger.

“Hello! My name is Sam. I saw you from across the bar and I couldn’t look away. So, I was wondering if you would let me buy you a drink.”

“Sure!”

“What’s your poison?” He asked, taking the seat next to her.

She smiled, and told him her drink, which he repeated to the bartender.

“So, Sam, what brings you here?”

“Uh... One of my best friends is getting married tomorrow. The rehearsal dinner begins in...” Sam checked his watch. “Shit! It already started. Hey, I need to attend this, but will I find you here afterwards?”

“If fate connects us, fate will lead you to me.” She winked at him.

Sam jumped to his feet and walked briskly to the table reserved for the rehearsal dinner. He plopped down into the empty chair between Ethan and Cindy, who both shifted towards him.

“Where were you? And where’s your tux?” Cindy asked.

“Forget that. Why aren’t you buried in five layers of cashmere? Does this mean...” Ethan gasped. “Did you find her yet?”

“I guess? I was talking to this gorgeous woman at the bar, and I started sweating.”

“Did you kiss her yet?”

“What? No. Don’t I need to take her out on a date first?”

“Yes, and it was nice of you to think that, Sam.” Cindy whispered. “Is she here on a vacation?”

“I didn’t ask.”

“Is she here with friends?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Is she single?”

“I don’t know.”

“What did you ask her? Did you get her number at least?”

He shook his head.

“Name?”

“No, but in my defence, I was running late. But we have plans to meet up after this.”

“Good luck.”

Cindy let out an exasperated sigh.

As soon as the wedding party left the restaurant, Sam bolted towards the bar. His hopes dashed when he found the bar empty.

“Excuse me,” he called out to the bartender. “My name is Sam. I shared a drink here with a gorgeous woman in a black dress earlier today. Is she around? Has she left? Did she leave a message for me?”

“Sorry sir, I can’t tell you about other patrons. What I can tell you is that there have been no messages for you.”

A drop of sweat rolled down the side of his face.

“Okay, thank you. If she comes back, please let her know Sam was here.”

“That would be difficult, sir, since the bar has closed for the night.”

Crushed, Sam thanked her and left the restaurant. He walked around aimlessly for the better part of an hour. His wandering led him to the beach, where a group of people were celebrating something. Amidst them was the woman in black. When she noticed him, she waved and began to walk towards him.

“I guess we are connected by fate.” She said with a smile.

“I never believed in fate, but now I am starting to. Hey, I never got your name.”

“Jenny.”

“Lovely name. Well, Jenny, would you like to walk around with me?”

“Okay.”

He offered her his hand and she took it. Together, they walked along the beach. He told her about his work, and she told him about her life in college. As the night progressed, he began to feel colder and colder. By the time they stood outside Jenny’s room, he was on the verge of shivers and she was snugly wrapped in a thick shawl.

“I had a great time with you, Sam. Maybe we could do this again tomorrow?”

“Tonight was really lovely, Jenny. Truly. It pains me to say this, but I don’t think this is going to work out. I’m sorry. You are an amazing woman and I hope you find your person soon.

“Worth a shot. It was good to meet you, Sam.”

“Same here. I’m sorry it didn’t work out between us.”

“Me too.”

She kissed him on the cheek and went to her room. Sam took the long path back to his room, and sank into his bed. He had less than twenty-four hours to find his soulmate and not a clue as to where he would start. Failing was not an option. He could only tolerate the icy cold in his room for so long. Lost in the thoughts of his soulmate, he didn't realise when he fell asleep.

The bride walked down the aisle with the biggest smile Sam had ever seen on someone, but he found himself unable to share her joy. He was happy for his friends, but also a bit envious. Benny had found her forever person, but all that waited for Sam back home was a cold, empty room. In the last twenty hours, he had gotten accustomed to the normalcy. He couldn't keep his life on pause any longer.

Benny's vows were so beautiful they moved him to tears. He felt a tap on his shoulder and hastily wiped his face with the sleeve of his pastel pink shirt. It was too warm to wear a tuxedo. When he turned back in his chair, he found Ethan's hand around a crying Cindy.

“Did you find her last night?”

“I found the girl, but she wasn't the one.”

“Oh man, I am so sorry. The search continues, then?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

After the wedding, Ethan and Cindy helped Sam talk to every guest in attendance. His temperature kept rising and falling, but he didn't feel the intense heat everyone felt the first time they met their soulmate. There were moments where he felt close to that heat, but never for the length of a conversation.

When he had spoken to all the guests, he made his way to the open bar. He had four hours to kill before he had to head to the airport. More than enough time to drown the thoughts of tomorrow in whiskey.

“One whiskey on the rocks, please.” Sam said, taking a seat. The man in behind the bar poured him a drink and struck up a conversation. They spoke a bit about books and football for the better part of an hour.

“Sir, I am going to go on a break now, but Samantha here will take good care of you.”

The bartender left, and a beautiful girl about Sam’s age took his place. Sam introduced himself and asked for a beer. She placed a frothy glass in front of him, and he noticed how sweaty her hands were, but no more than his own. A bulb lit up in his head.

“Samantha, could I talk to you for a little bit?”

“Sure. What do you want to talk about?”

“What do you do when you aren’t bartending for weddings?”

“I am a student at the University. I dropped off for a couple of years to take care of my dad, but now I am back to studying.”

“Finals must be round the corner, huh?”

“Oh yeah, next week. But I am not worried.”

“Could I bother you for a small favour? You see that man in a salmon tux? That’s my friend Ethan. Could you please get him for me? Thank you so much!”

Samantha smiled at him and moved towards Ethan. As she walked away, Sam noticed the weather become more cool and pleasant. She soon returned with a confused Ethan following her. Sam had all the confirmation he needed.

“What’s up, bro?”

Sam leaned in close to Ethan's ear and whispered, "Depending on how she answers, I might not take the flight back with you. I think she is the one."

"All the best." Ethan whispered back.

"Samantha, would you like to go out on a date with me?"

"I thought you'd never ask!" Her laughter punctuated her words. "I get off work in two hours. After that?"

"Sure!" Sam replied with a smile.