

The book cover features two photographs of men. The top photograph shows a man with light brown hair, blue eyes, and a light beard, wearing a light blue button-down shirt with the top buttons open. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The bottom photograph shows a man with dark hair and a beard lying on his side on a white pillow, looking towards the camera. The background of the entire cover is a soft-focus bokeh of warm, colorful lights in shades of purple, pink, and orange.

Norman Stark

DIFFERENT BOYS

a novel

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Title

Copyright

PART 1

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

PART 2

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18

PART 3

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19

PART 4

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7

Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19

PART 5

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17

PART 6

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5

Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18

About the Book

Now for the first time, gay romance series “different boys” appears in full novel form. Follow twin brothers Colin and Tom as they navigate their love lives and sexy escapades — for better or worse.

Colin and Tom are polar opposites. Colin works as a flight attendant, jet-setting between Europe and America. He’s a card-holding member of the mile-high club and wouldn’t have it any other way. Who needs monogamy when the next erotic adventure might take you to a sassy Frenchman in Paris? An Italian stallion in Rome? Or a feisty cowboy in the deep, deep South?

For Colin’s twin Tom, however, relationships mean commitment. And that is exactly what he wants. Tom dreams of finding a soul mate, someone to shower with attention and with whom he can spend the rest of his life. Until he finds his knight in shining armor, however, he’s focused on managing his own little boutique in San Francisco. Then one day, Mr. Right falls—literally—at Tom’s feet. Have Tom’s wishes for true love been answered?

In the end, Colin and Tom are just two guys trying to find happiness. The perfect balance between sex, life, and love. But the burning question is—how?

About the Author

Norman Stark is the pseudonym of a successful author who has developed plots and written screenplays for numerous TV productions for a number of years. He lives with his partner in Cologne, Germany, and is an expert on the colorful world of gay society.

Norman Stark

different boys

a novel

Gay-Romance

Translated by Iona Italia



»be« by BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT

Digital original edition

»be« by Bastei Entertainment is an imprint of Bastei Lübbe AG

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. This book uses American English.

Copyright © 2016/2017 by Bastei Lübbe AG, Schanzenstraße 6-20, 51063 Cologne, Germany

Written by Norman Stark

Edited by Claire Bacher

Translated by Iona Italia

Cover design: Birgit Gitschier, Augsburg

Cover illustration: © shutterstock: CURAphotography | Ollyy | Melpomene

eBook production: Urban [SatzKonzept](#), Düsseldorf

ISBN 978-3-7325-5521-5

www.be-ebooks.com

Twitter: [@be_ebooks_com](https://twitter.com/be_ebooks_com)

PART 1

Chapter 1

Tom: *Happy Birthday, bro!*

Colin: *Happy Birthday to you too, bro!*

Tom: *See you at Mom's?*

Colin: *Sure thing, see you at Mom's ☺*

The guy looked good enough to eat, no doubt about it. He had a body that could have rivaled a Greek statue. Velvety, chocolate-brown skin showcased the rounded contours of his muscles. He lay there in front of them like a heavenly angel who'd floated softly down to earth.

"I'll take the chest," Tom decided, reaching for the knife and plunging it into the Adonis at about the level of his heart, to the delight of the onlookers. The other guests were dancing exuberantly to the pounding beats coming from oversized speakers, which seemed to be engaged in a kind of good-natured contest to see which was the loudest. The air in the room was muggy and hot — the place was jam-packed, after all — and there were throngs of thirsty people at the bar gasping for a cold beer or perhaps something stronger. To cut a long story short: The party was a success.

"You can have the chest, as long as you leave me *that*," Colin grinned, indicating the generous bulge beneath the skimpy underpants.

"Of course, dearest brother," Tom purred, passing Colin the knife. "But I've already conquered this lover's heart." Tom closed his eyes and bit into the man's pecs with relish while Colin carefully extracted his favorite part of the body.

"That is absolutely scrumptious," he raved, smacking his lips. "Let me guess ... apricot jam?"

"Someone knows what he's talking about!" Sophie flattered him, batting her eyelashes at him playfully.

"With regard to men or to cakes?" Mary asked, amused. She held a delicate index finger to her pursed lips with girlish innocence.

"Both," Tom said confidently, laughing. "Colin's definitely had more experience with men, but I'm more of a connoisseur of baked goods."

Tom divided the hunk into pieces, slicing along the outlines of his six-pack, while Colin greedily stuffed the pastry privates made of cake, cream filling, apricot jam, and rich chocolate frosting into his mouth. He groaned with pleasure. "I have to admit, I think I got the best bit."

"You seem to really like our cake. Just be careful you don't choke on it, Colin!" Marie warned him, giggling, as she accepted a slice of the abs. Sophie patted her reassuringly on the shoulder and reached straight for the slice with the belly button. "Believe me, my dear, Colin's had a lot of practice. He can cope with a pretty big portion without any trouble!"

"At least you'd have a really good headline," Tom chuckled. "San Francisco flight attendant chokes on a penis!"

Colin punched his brother on the shoulder in mock anger. Sophie pulled the corners of her mouth down into an ironically tragic expression. "We come all the way from San Diego to celebrate your birthday, and you go and die an agonizing death by asphyxiation, just because you can't get a man down your throat. That would be truly unfortunate."

"You're quite right. You and Mary have always been shining examples to me," Colin grinned. "No one is quite as classy as you two when it comes to picking up men."

While the other guests enjoyed the cake man, laying waste to his sweet body, Sophie and Mary exchanged conspiratorial grins and held their tongues. Their silence spoke volumes. But they weren't even the tiniest bit

ashamed — quite the contrary. Colin and Tom had known the two of them for many years and had always been amazed by their wild sexual exploits. They were involved in a pretty serious line of work, though: They were journalists working for the tabloid *EXPOSURE*, ferreting out the dark secrets of movers and shakers in politics, economics, and the media and revealing them to the world. They were good at that. But they were just as skilled at getting laid as they were at shedding light on compromising situations.

“Happy to be of service at any time, should you need further advice on the matter,” Sophie murmured, eyes half-closed, as she inserted the moist cake between her crimson lips. She let the tip of her tongue dart out lasciviously.

At that moment, a small man with a happy grin plastered across his roundish face was jostling his way through the tightly packed guests. He walked up to the counter and clapped his hands to attract attention. The DJ lowered the volume, and all eyes turned to look at him expectantly. *Jason isn't really the type to make a big speech*, Tom thought, surprised. Jason was the good fairy in Tom's design boutique, A-TOM, located on Valencia Street in the Mission district, one of San Francisco's trendiest shopping areas. Customers seeking to jazz up their homes with the appropriate accessories soon discovered that Jason was their man. And the same was true for those who wanted to find out all the latest gossip about the scene.

Jason clearly wasn't used to standing in front of a large group of people. He awkwardly picked at his right hand with his left index finger and smiled nervously. “I-I think,” he began, stammering, “that Tom and Colin deserve a little serenade.”

“Please, no,” Tom and Colin pleaded in unison, but Jason had already raised his short arms into the air, unfazed. He waved them around like a conductor during the first bars of an overture, and the guests obediently started to sing “Happy Birthday.” Jason made heroic attempts to guide

them, but the voices were determined to wobble past the right notes. The dissonant pitches swelled to a crescendo, finishing with gusto in the long drawn-out cry of “Happy birth-day to you!”

Colin and Tom applauded appreciatively. Despite the complete lack of musicality, their friends’ singing had made them very happy. The brothers had agreed that they wanted the 29th year of their lives to start with a bang. Because once you crossed over the line into 30s territory, you were faced with the pathetic remnants of your life — a life in which you had to switch to anti-wrinkle face cream and would be mercilessly rejected by the search criteria on dating apps like Grindr.

At least the two of them shared a birthday, allowing them to truly commiserate. In fact, they’d been born at almost the same exact time: After spending nine months together in an increasingly crowded womb, Colin had been squeezed out just two minutes earlier than Tom. The woman who had bravely endured it all was standing there at the counter, beaming with happiness. Ella.

Ella’s full name was Annabella, but polysyllabic first names had gone out of fashion long before she entered her thirties. A catchy name like Ella was more suitable for the 70s soundtrack of Abba, the Bee Gees, and The Jackson 5. The bar where Colin and Tom were celebrating the start of their 30th year on the planet was Ella’s domain. Tucked away on a side street in the Lower Haight, the rustic old pub had become a kind of San Francisco institution. You wouldn’t find any imaginative designer interiors here, like you would in a trendy club, nor would you be served any fancy new cocktail creations. But Ella’s hospitable nature and her terrific selection of craft beers had won the hearts of many members of the Bay Area’s gay community.

After everyone had drunk a solemn toast to the twins, Ella went up to her boys, spread out her arms under her flowing Hawaiian-print wrap, and draped them over her

sons' shoulders. She sighed happily as she pulled the twins' heads to her ample bosom with maternal affection. "I'm so glad I've got you!"

Colin and Tom briefly allowed their heads to sink into the fluffy featherbed of Ella's chest. It took them straight back to their childhood in a flash. Back then, they'd been grateful for physical closeness to their mother's breasts. But at 29, they were getting a little too old for it. "OK, OK, Mom," Tom panted, nearly suffocating, and carefully pushed himself out of her tight embrace. "We love you, too."

"Hmpf!" Colin nodded in agreement. Ella's generous bosom was cutting off his air supply. He wriggled out of her grip and gasped for breath while his mother sobbed, overcome by joy.

"Before everyone starts bursting into tears, I've got just the right antidote," Deb promised from behind her mixing board, dropping her index finger onto the power button of her control panel like a ballistic missile. The room exploded with the sound of Lady Gaga's "Poker Face," and the crowd began to move as one to the beat. Deb was a mechanic by trade, but despite her love of seriously unhip lumberjack shirts, she had a well-developed instinct for the right song at the right time. Colin and Tom had been happy to leave the evening's music selection in her capable hands.

Tom watched with amusement as Mary and Sophie used their practiced eyes to locate the only straight men in the room. They danced up to their prey, hips swaying provocatively. They definitely wouldn't be spending the night alone. And neither would Colin. Adrian was just sashaying up to him now, having spent most of the evening undressing him with his eyes. Adrian had broad shoulders, a powerful torso, strong upper arms, and the unmistakable aura of a powerful man. Just Colin's type. Tom shook his head. He found Adrian visually attractive, but he'd never developed the kind of predatory instinct that Colin had. You

could definitely tell that they were fraternal twins and had inherited different genes. Not just because Tom had dark hair, while Colin's head sported a blond crew cut. When it came to their dealings with men, the twins seemed to be from different planets.

Ella was hard at work behind the bar again, pouring one beer after another to keep the mob of crazy dancers well hydrated.

"Want me to give you a hand, Mom?" Tom knew that his mother would gladly do everything herself, even play the music, if she could. She would do anything for the twins and for her daughter, Lisa. But he didn't want her to spend all night slaving away behind the bar.

"Don't even think about it," Lisa interrupted. Tom had scarcely seen his beloved sister all evening. But now she was squeezing her slender body behind the bar with determination. She pulled her brown hair back and began passing Ella empty beer mugs.

"You and Colin should celebrate in peace tonight. You only turn 29 once, you know," she smiled at Tom.

"That's sweet of you, Lizzy," Ella said warmly.

"I'm happy to help, but please stop calling me Lizzy all the time!" Lisa demanded indignantly.

"Of course, Lisa," Ella conceded with raised eyebrows and carried on pouring beer in silence. Colin had heard the baby of the family snap at their mother, too. Their sister — three years their junior — hadn't always been so uptight. In the past, she hadn't cared whether you called her Lisa or Lizzy — or Plug, as Colin and Tom had christened her. She had been perfectly happy as long as she could hang out with her two older brothers. And when Colin and Tom surprised her and Ella with their double coming-out, Lisa boasted at school about the fact that she had two gay brothers. When other kids made fun of them, she punched them in the nose — hard. But those times were long gone. Nowadays, she probably would have preferred it if both her

brothers had married beautiful women and given her lots of nieces and nephews.

The reason for this change in her personality was a few feet away, pressing himself against the wall next to the counter as if he were trapped in a cage full of vile serpents. Greg. Lisa's lord and master, and the begetter of her two children. He was morosely nursing a Bud Light. Bud Light — in a bar famous for its craft beers! "He's very sentimental about his home," Lisa would explain when people pointed out the absurdity of his choice. She always defended him. Greg's home was somewhere out there in the Midwestern expanse of the flyover states. Way out there, where the air was pure, the prairies full of corn, the women obedient, and the men heterosexual. Greg was deeply conservative and had been brainwashing Lisa with his petit-bourgeois values. In his simplistic world, the line between good and evil was as sharply defined as the side part in his grey hair. For him, Colin and Tom belonged in the evil category. It was a wonder Lisa had been able to accept their invitation to the party. And even more surprising was the fact that Greg had come along himself. But he'd obviously only come in order to keep an eye on Lisa — and to demonstrate just how much he disapproved of all this.

Behind that scowling facade of his, he was probably praying for heaven to send all these sinners a warning sign. His prayer seemed to have been answered, because just as Deb began blasting Madonna's "Girl Gone Wild," everything stopped working. Suddenly, it was pitch black in the room, and Madonna fell silent. A murmur went through the uneasy crowd.

Colin felt someone grab hold of him between his legs. A moment later, he heard Adrian's voice in his ear: "I haven't given you your birthday present yet."

At the same time, Deb's firm instructions rang through the darkness: "Nobody move! We don't want anyone to get

hurt. I've got everything under control." But Colin didn't intend to keep still. He ran his fingers along Adrian's pant leg and pressed his hand against the noticeably hard place beneath his zipper.

"Can I open it right away?" he asked in a whisper.

"As long as you don't tear the wrapping paper, sure."

A pale cone of light appeared on the wall. The illuminated patch moved shakily back and forth, heading toward the storeroom.

"We're just going to check the fuses," Deb announced. Ella was lighting her way with an emergency flashlight from behind the bar. But the darkness was evidently having a stimulating effect on the guests. The fact that they could no longer see seemed to make them want to talk and laugh all the more excitedly.

And Colin found it exciting, too. No one could see him fondling Adrian, even though they were surrounded by people. *It's almost like being in the dark room in Underground*, he thought as he carefully unzipped Adrian's fly and let his fingers slip inside. He encountered something hard that was twitching expectantly at regular intervals, as though it wanted to get out. Adrian was obviously just as turned on as Colin was. He wrapped his fingers around Adrian's manhood, feeling his hot breath on his face. Colin slowly moved his head forward until their lips met. They started kissing, wetly and eagerly, as Colin massaged Adrian's shaft.

Click. The lights came back on with a merciless glare. "OK, there we go," Deb's hoarse voice boomed out from the storeroom. The thought *That's impossible!* shot through Colin's head. He and Adrian were right in the thick of it. They pulled apart, and Colin hastily attempted to free his hand from his partner's fly. But the ball of his thumb was caught in the zipper. He was stuck. And it hadn't gone unnoticed. He could hear the people around them giggling. With a pained grimace, Colin twisted and turned his arm,

but his panicked movements just drew more attention to his predicament. He and Adrian were caught in the spotlight like two pro wrestlers, except that they hadn't exactly been wrestling each other; they'd been groping each other. Being caught red-handed was highly amusing for everyone — everyone except them.

Tom averted his eyes, sighing. It was common knowledge that his brother liked to get handsy when the opportunity arose. But the fact that he was doing it in public and, above all, at his own birthday party, well, that was a first.

"Wait a sec, I'll help you," Adrian said, a little irritated, and unbuttoned his pants in front of everyone, an act that was met with enthusiastic cries of "Oh, yeah!" from across the room. Colin freed his hand from its prison and then held both hands up in the air in a placating gesture.

"There's nothing more to see here. Go back to partying," he commanded ironically.

Clearing his throat, Adrian zipped up his pants and declared, tight-lipped, that he had to go to the restroom. He withdrew from the room, bright red in the face, while the other guests turned away, grinning, pretending nothing had happened.

All except one: Greg. He banged his glass down hard against the bar, alarming the people around him, and pronounced his judgment: "Lisa, we're leaving!"

It was an order. Lisa had to obey. Greg grabbed her tightly by the wrist. She looked at Colin and Tom, indecisive and torn. "But ..."

"I'm not happy with the way this party is going," Greg announced disparagingly. "In any case, we only booked the babysitter until nine o'clock. Or don't you want to say good night to Victoria and Lucian?"

Guilt-tripping. That was Greg's usual ploy when he wanted to ensure Lisa's compliance. He was always putting her down so that she felt like a bad wife — and a heartless

mother, too. Even now, you could hear the implicit accusation: that she would rather have fun with her gay brothers than dedicate herself to her children.

"But, Greg, you still have a little time left." Ella tried to defuse the situation. "Lisa so rarely gets a chance to see her brothers. Come on, let me get you another Bud."

"No need," Greg snapped, still tugging at Lisa's arm. "Come on, we're leaving now!"

Deb had overheard the burgeoning quarrel, and it was making her feel uncomfortable. She turned the music back on. But even Lady Gaga couldn't prevent people from noticing the argument, and all conversation in the room subsided.

"Greg, you're really out of line here." Colin decided to stick his neck out. "We all just want to have fun. Each in his own way."

Greg's eyes narrowed, and he lowered his fleshy head like a bull about to charge. "The things you think of as fun, we find abhorrent!" he growled scornfully.

"Greg!" Ella blurted out, shocked. Everyone was stunned.

"We?" Colin insisted, challengingly, turning to look at his sister. "You, too?"

Lisa just shrugged her shoulders despondently and squinted nervously at Greg. She didn't have the courage to contradict him.

"Well, that's charming," Colin snorted sarcastically.

Tom placed a hand on Colin's shoulder to try to appease him. "Leave it ..."

Greg turned toward the door, dragging Lisa behind him like a rag doll. Making no attempt to resist, Lisa stumbled along after her husband. "Goodbye, my darlings, enjoy the rest of the party," she called out helplessly.

"Come by the shop again sometime for a coffee," Tom responded. He didn't want this incident to drive them even further apart than they already were. But before Lisa could

answer, Greg had pulled her roughly out of the room. He slammed the door behind them, completely killing the party mood. Everyone was looking at the ground in speechless embarrassment.

“Well, happy birthday,” Jason remarked dryly. But no one seemed to be in the mood to celebrate anymore.

Sophie said exactly what everyone was thinking: “What an asshole!”

Mary agreed. The two women from San Diego sat down at the bar with Tom, Colin, and Ella to try to cheer them up. After Greg’s noisy exit, the atmosphere in the pub had hit rock bottom. But Deb was pulling out the big guns, playing all her life-affirming Celine Dion power ballads to try to get a good vibe going again. And Jason was flitting around with glasses of cava to help people recover from the shock. It was definitely helping.

The awkward silence was soon replaced by merry laughter. Out on the dance floor, people were beginning to relax and sway to the beat. But it wasn’t going to be that easy to cheer Ella up. “Unfortunately, that asshole is my son-in-law,” she sighed sadly, looking around herself in search of nothing in particular. “After that little performance, I think I need a stiff drink.”

Jason handed Ella one of the remaining glasses of cava. “Here, have some champagne, it’ll do you good.”

Ella took the glass with a half-smile. “I’m afraid it’s only cava.”

“Oh, really?” Jason was surprised. “Well, never mind. The main thing is, you can pop the cork with a bang!”

“Exactly,” Ella said resignedly. She put the glass to her lips and leaned back so that the cava streamed down her throat, almost choking her with its bubbly foam.

"I just can't understand where Lisa got her taste in men. Bob's not like that, is he?" She was racking her brains to find an explanation.

"Nah, he's the exact opposite," Tom replied sarcastically.

Colin concurred. "He'd be the last person to have anything to do with so-called family values."

"Did he get in touch with you today, by any chance?" Ella asked sheepishly.

Tom and Colin shook their heads. Bob rarely gave any signs of life, even though he had strong ties to Colin, Tom, and Lisa, too. He was their father, after all.

Bob McBride was a Michigan boy who had joined the armed forces in 1979. Thirteen years later, the father of three had been dishonorably discharged from the army and was completely MIA. He'd been a man of rock-solid principles and iron discipline, an exemplary all-American boy, when he fell in love with Ella. That was in 1981, when Bob was stationed in Oakland. Looking for a little excitement to remedy the boredom of everyday life in the military, he started hitting the pubs and bars that had sprung up near the army base. Ella was looking for a little excitement, too, but above all she was looking for a job that would give her the money she needed to move out and get away from her narrow-minded parents.

Ella and Bob's love affair was passionate — so passionate that Ella had Tom and Colin and then Lisa in quick succession. By that point, Ella had subverted her Prince Charming with her ideals of peace and freedom. So much so that he became a deserter and then abandoned his family. From then on, Ella had to make it on her own, with three children to look after. Bob went back home to the Midwest, where he made a new life for himself with a new woman — in a one-horse Michigan town named Gaylord, of all places. The last time anyone had heard from him was Christmas three years ago, when he had sent an email. He

had attached a photo of himself in front of his mobile home, proudly holding the severed head of a deer up to the camera.

"I'm going to go see what happened to Adrian," Colin decided soberly. "He's probably scared to come back out."

Colin disappeared into the restroom. Tom had a sneaking suspicion that he knew how his brother planned to take his mind off of the little drama.

Unfortunately, he wasn't as good as his brother at relieving his frustrations that way; in any case, he had no interest in a quickie in the restroom.

Suddenly, someone was pushing a beer into his hand.

"You could probably do with this, for the shock," said the generous donor in a soothing rumble. Tom turned his head toward the voice, confused, and got a surprise. It was someone he'd never seen before — at his own birthday party no less! The man opposite him correctly interpreted Tom's confused expression.

"I'm Sasha. Adrian brought me," he said, clearing up the mystery. "I'm sorry he's been causing a little trouble tonight."

Tom hastily reassured him. He explained, at some length, that Colin was actually the troublemaker in this instance, and that the real villain was his brother-in-law, who had a fundamental problem with gays.

Sasha attempted to process the complex tangle of information as Tom rattled it off, but after a few minutes, he raised his hands in surrender. "You can explain it to me calmly another time," he suggested. "Right now, you just need to drink your beer before it warms up to room temperature."

"Sorry ..." Tom laughed, embarrassed, and clinked glasses with him. In fact, the beer was already lukewarm and tasted stale, but Sasha's charisma made up for that.

"I hear that you own a designer boutique around here, is that right?" Sasha asked with interest. He'd obviously

made some inquiries about his hosts. "Perhaps I should stop by sometime soon," he mused. "I moved house recently, and my new digs are still a bit bare."

"Well, I'm no furniture dealer," Tom said playfully, "but if you're a fan of offbeat designs, I think we'll be able to find something that would look good in your new apartment."

"I do know a little about design," Sasha replied good-humoredly. "I'm the art director for a small advertising agency in the Tenderloin. Art and commerce are sometimes closely related."

Tom agreed, laughing. "Tell me about it. You've got to earn money somehow."

He liked Sasha's sense of humor — and, to be honest, he also liked the man's slightly protruding ears, which gave him a rather boyish look. "Another brew?" he asked, and Sasha nodded.

"Yes, please."

Tom became engrossed in a conversation with Sasha about fabric choices for drapes and completely forgot that there were about 60 other guests with whom he ought to exchange at least a few words. But Colin was there, too. Or, rather, Colin was back. He'd just returned from the restroom with Adrian, and their glowing faces suggested that they had taken full advantage of the privacy.

"You look like you've been in the wars," Ella remarked dryly. "Need some refreshments?"

She handed them each a beer, and Colin toasted Adrian with a lewd smile. "Bottoms up! Which is something we should do more often ..."

Adrian burst out laughing. "You should celebrate your birthday more often, then."

In the restroom, Adrian had quickly overcome his inhibitions and revealed himself to be an energetic stud who knew how to make vigorous use of his tongue. Colin was enjoying the comfortable afterglow in his groin. Adrian seemed to have triggered a flood of hormones. *Never mind,*

he thought, *the night is still young, and it won't be long until we head off to Underground.*

Gradually, the party was beginning to show signs of breaking up. It was already past one o'clock in the morning. Sophie and Mary had worked their magic on the two straight guys they'd spotted at the beginning of the night. Sophie was stroking her conquest's chest in a pretty unmistakable way, and Mary was gazing deep into her new acquaintance's eyes, lewdly licking her lips. They had obviously reached some kind of agreement with the men, because after a little while, the four of them said their goodbyes. With knowing looks, Tom and Colin wished them a fun evening and promised to visit them again in San Diego soon.

As a grand finale, Deb had selected Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On." Everyone knew the lyrics by heart, word for word, and sang along happily. But there was one guy who stood out, enthusiastically throwing his whole body into it: Dale.

Dale had just celebrated a major birthday a few weeks ago. He hadn't thrown a wild party. He had just had a very civilized dinner party at his home so that he could attempt to prove it was possible to prepare delicious food not only without meat, but also without salt or spices. It had been a pleasant evening all the same, and Dale had been delighted with the many books on sacred art in the early Middle Ages that he'd received as gifts. He was your classic bookworm. But tonight, Celine Dion had unleashed a hitherto unsuspected urge in him to move his body.

He threw his arms into the air in ecstasy. "Near, far, wherever you are," he bellowed. An empty space quickly formed around him, as everyone was afraid of being injured by his uninhibited dancing. But Dale didn't want to keep his ebullient happiness to himself; he wanted to share it with someone, so he grabbed Jason before he could escape. Dale pulled him to his narrow chest and swayed to the beat.

Jason endured his captivity stoically even though, with his generous physique, he easily could have defended himself against the involuntary dance number. "We'll stay forever this way," Dale bawled into his ear. And, to poor Jason, it felt as though they just might, especially considering all the alcohol the crooner had consumed. The other guests observed the strange *pas de deux* with amusement.

Colin was laughing, rather pityingly. "Dale's a really sweet guy," he whispered into Tom's ear, "but he's obviously afraid of being left on the shelf."

Tom didn't find that very funny. He wouldn't be 29 forever. At some point he'd be 40, too ... or 50, like Dale. Would he be just as lonely, desperately clawing at younger guys, with no prospect of ever finding someone? Tom swallowed. He didn't want to end up that way. Old and lonely. No, thanks!

Chapter 2

Usually, Tom couldn't bring himself to eat anything in the early hours of the morning. Not even hot dogs. But Sasha had ordered the works from the little booth in South Beach: two bacon-wrapped dogs with onions and French fries on the side. Tom usually preferred his hot dogs plain, but after spending the evening sampling every alcoholic drink they could find behind Ella's bar, his body was craving salt and fat. Besides, he definitely hadn't wanted to turn down Sasha's offer of a bayside stroll together to enjoy the early morning fresh air. Now they were sitting on a wall, looking out toward the Bay Bridge, considering what kind of furniture would best suit Sasha's new apartment. The first rays of sunshine in the cool blue early morning sky were casting a shimmering veil of gold over the bay. In the distance, a barge was chugging sedately across the glistening grey water.

Sasha dunked a French fry into the greasy mixture of ketchup and bright yellow mustard smeared across his paper plate, and his eyes fell on the stick of processed potato in his hand, decked out in red and yellow. "Maybe one of those Gerrit Rietveld chairs would look good in my living room," he mused aloud. "You know, that red and yellow one that looks like a 3D Mondrian."

"I think you mean the red and blue one," Tom grinned at him, and Sasha cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Um, yeah, that's the one. Here I was trying to impress you with my knowledge of design ... and I blew it!"

Sasha hastily stuffed the fry into his mouth. Tom patted his shoulder reassuringly. "It was worth a try. Anyway, I agree with you, actually. Rietveld was influenced by

Mondrian. And you've got a bit of ketchup there, by the way."

"What, where?" Sasha looked shocked.

Tom indicated the place on his own face: beneath and to the left of his nose. Sasha stretched out his tongue and tried to reach the offending splotch. He twisted and wriggled his tongue, furrowing his brow in concentration, until Tom snorted with laughter and handed him a pack of Kleenex. "Try this."

Sasha took a tissue, thanked him, and wiped his face clean. He then devoured another handful of fries with ketchup, smearing his face once again. Tom watched Sasha with amusement. It was probably better not to say another word on the subject. Sasha's ravenous appetite for fries and his slight confusion about the colorways of famous designer objects didn't quite fit his expected image of a successful art director of an ad agency. But Tom liked these little shortcomings.

Sasha suddenly felt Tom's gaze resting on him and froze in place, confused. "Is something wrong?" he mumbled with his mouth full. "Have I got ketchup somewhere again?"

Tom shook his head, smiling, and the question just popped out before he had a chance to think about it: "Why don't we go to my place for a drink?"

Sasha gently stroked the surface of the shiny black sculpture with his fingertips. It was made from interwoven arcs of metal and resembled a large flower from a distance. Then he took a step back and observed it, fascinated.

"Have you just moved to San Francisco? Or did you simply want a new apartment for a change of scenery?" Tom inquired as he lit a few candles on the windowsill.

Sasha dismissed the question with a casual gesture. "I just wanted to leave my old apartment. Nothing else. Is that a one-off?" he asked, looking at the sculpture.

"Yes, isn't it crazy? I'm sure I could get a similar piece for you from the artist, if you wanted," Tom assured him. Sasha really did know a lot about art, he realized, impressed. He was starting to feel his awkwardness gradually evaporating into thin air. On the way home, he'd been racking his brains over whether he was doing the right thing by inviting Sasha home on a whim. That wasn't usually his style — it was more in Colin's line.

Tom put the thought out of his head. It was ridiculous to compare himself to his brother. Colin would never talk to his lovers about art; he'd just drag them straight into bed. No, the way things were going so far, everything was just fine.

"Would you like something to drink?" Tom suggested, opening the fridge.

"What have you got?" Sasha asked, peering into the fridge over Tom's shoulder. Their arms touched gently as he did so, and Tom felt goose bumps rising.

Sasha indicated a bottle of cava. "Would it be OK if we opened that?"

"Sure," Tom grinned. "It's my birthday, after all!"

"Not any more, it isn't," Sasha winked. "It's been over for about six hours now. But don't worry, I won't tell anyone."

Tom poured out two glasses, and then his cell phone beeped. There was a message from Colin: *I'm at Underground. Come join me!*

Tom briefly considered it. Should he? He could bring Sasha with him. But then he dismissed the idea. He had no idea where or how the night with Sasha would end, but he wanted to find out.

Sorry, I've got other plans, he typed in response and switched the phone to silent.

“To you!” Sasha raised his glass and smiled. Tom clinked glasses with him and, for a moment, he lost himself in Sasha’s eyes. They both took a swig of cava without breaking eye contact. Tom’s heart was beating wildly in his chest. This was it: the characteristic moment of silence in which anything was possible. You just had to make up your mind and have the courage to take the first step.

Tom put his glass down and hooked two fingers around the buttons on Sasha’s shirt. “It was nice of you to come.”

He gently pulled him closer. Sasha accepted the tacit invitation, and the two of them fell instinctively into a kiss. Sasha’s lips were still a little cool from the cava. But they were soft and supple. Tom carefully opened his mouth and felt his way forward with his tongue. Sasha parted his lips, too. They let their tongues slowly circle each other. As they did so, they wrapped their arms around each other’s bodies more and more greedily. Then Sasha began to move his hips in a gentle rhythm, and Tom adapted to that rhythm. And, with swaying steps, they moved toward the bedroom.