

a café seuil short story

THE FIRST DOOR

KP Maxwell

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A CAFÉ SEUIL SHORT STORY

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CHAPTER ONE

PORTLAND, Oregon. *How did he end up here?*

Damien Lambert had been at the top of his class in law school in Seattle. Well, okay. Second place. His roommate never failed to beat him out in everything, and she spent about half as much time as him doing it. But now Damien is here. In Portland.

Running away.

In fact, he's bumming a couch off of a friend he hasn't talked to since they went to the same stuffy all-boys high school in the same rural Midwestern town all those years ago. His friend, or maybe he should say his *acquaintance*, has spent the entire afternoon smoking pot in the small apartment where Damien's crashing temporarily. Damien just got here a few hours ago, and he is already regretting a lot about this situation, but he doesn't regret leaving Seattle. Yet.

"So you like... dropped out of law school? Rough, man," Ethan says unhelpfully, repeating the same sentiment he's already repeated several times that afternoon. "Yeah, you can chill here as long as you want." He makes a broad gesture at the refrigerator. "Feel free to eat whatever you find in there."

Damien's standing at the fridge, door open, and it's completely empty except a row of colorfully-labeled beer bottles, a jar of pickles, and a carton of milk that he suspects is out of date if he bothered to check. He closes the door and runs a hand through his sandy brown hair anxiously. He doesn't want to *chill* there for very long. *Chilling* isn't exactly in his vocabulary. Which is... potentially why he's so burnt out. Why he can't even *think* about continuing with law school.

He turns back to Ethan, feeling a fresh streak of fear run down his spine. The amount of debt he's carrying now...

What the fuck is he doing with his life?

He focuses on Ethan, instead, trying to calm himself. Ethan's busy rolling a joint on the coffee table in front of the couch. Damien hasn't seen his old friend in years, and he might not have recognized Ethan if he had passed him on the street. Ethan's once short, perfectly styled blond hair has grown out to his shoulders, and it looks like he hasn't washed it in a few days. He seems a bit taller, but perhaps with less muscle definition than he used to have.

They haven't kept in touch at all over the years. Damien may have taken a whole scorched earth approach when he left his hometown. Ethan's the kind of guy that Damien could always rely on, though, even all these years later. His name was the first that came to mind when Damien realized he needed to leave Seattle and all it took was a message. Ethan immediately offered him his couch.

Damien regrets that he hasn't paid any attention to Ethan's life, even though they have been connected on one of the popular social media apps the entire time. In fact, he doesn't actually know what Ethan *did* after Damien left for college other than, apparently, move out to Portland and smoke a lot of weed.

“What do you *do* again?” Damien asks shrewdly, and Ethan smiles widely at him, his blue eyes shining with mischief.

“Oh, you know...” He waves a hand with the freshly rolled joint and doesn’t bother to finish the sentence.

So, definitely something illegal. Right. Or he’s living off his trust fund, which is probably more likely.

Ethan’s family owns some moderately famous brewery back in Wisconsin, and he probably doesn’t have to work. Either way, Damien’s got to figure out a better living situation. Immediately.

But he has... nothing really. Leaving law school means being completely cut off from whatever life his parents wanted him to live. He left everything he owned in Seattle. None of it was really *his* anyways, though. He’s been living on borrowed time.

His old roommate keeps calling him – he has twelve missed calls and a slew of texts lighting up the screen of his phone. He almost wishes he had just left the damn thing on the bus he took down here. He has to figure out how to make it on his own now. She can’t help him. She wouldn’t understand. And anyways, he left a note, so it’s not like he just *completely* disappeared.

He breathes deeply, trying to regain some composure, and he immediately regrets it. The air is stale with the smell of old pot smoke and something sour. Damien’s sure this apartment hasn’t been cleaned since Ethan moved into it however many years ago.

His throat feels tight like he’s choking on the stale air.

“You don’t look so good, man. You want to lie down?” Ethan looks honestly concerned and gets up off the couch, offering Damien his place.

Damien nods, feeling the weight of the day pressing down on him. He stretches out on the couch despite the

queasy feeling in his stomach, the spinning in his head. He's a little too tall for the couch to be comfortable, but he's also exhausted. He immediately falls asleep.

DAMIEN WAKES MUCH, much later to pounding on the apartment door. He groans as he sits up. His neck is killing him, and his head doesn't feel much better. He can hear the steady rhythm of loud music coming from the walls of the apartment next to them. He's surprised it didn't wake him up sooner.

"Coming! Coming!" Ethan yells through the apartment, as if the person on the other side of the door could possibly hear him given the general noise levels in this place. Ethan jogs out of his bedroom, buttoning up a pair of too-tight jeans. His graphic tee is equally snug, and his shoulder-length blond hair is tied in a low ponytail at the nape of his neck, still damp from a recent shower. He flings the door open without bothering to look through the peephole first.

"Yo!" Another masculine voice shouts. "You joining us over here?"

"Yeah, just give me a sec," Ethan says and then looks back at Damien, an obvious question in his eyes. Damien shrugs. Sure, why not? He's feeling a lot better now other than the cramp in his neck, and when in Rome... He pulls off the hoodie he's wearing, deciding that the plain black v-neck underneath is fine enough for whatever they are doing tonight.

The other apartment is identical to Ethan's, except there are way too many bodies crammed into such a small space and probably not enough oxygen for any of them. It's smoky. The music is too loud. It smells like someone's

been bathing in beer. Damien wonders if the landlord even cares and what the other tenants think of it. He's not familiar enough with Portland to know about the neighborhood, but it seems a little... unsavory at best. Ethan grins at him and hands him a drink. Damien is desperately glad for it. He has another sometime later. And maybe a little pot as well. Just enough to send him spinning.

They go to a bar after a while to get some food, and it's only a few blocks from Ethan's apartment building. Ethan opens up a tab under his card, adding to Damien's suspicions about the trust fund. Damien feels weird ordering food, so he eats a couple of handfuls of someone's fries, standing around a table with Ethan and his friends. He has another drink or two. He doesn't pay for those either.

The night begins to blur around the edges. Someone grabbing his hip, handing him another drink. Someone pressing their body in a hot line against his side, an arm around his waist. Another drink. One of Ethan's even sleazier companions, he thinks, but he takes the glass anyways, vaguely hoping it's not drugged. The glass is cold in Damien's hand, and he can barely taste whatever's in it by this point.

The other man flashes Damien a smile. He's not bad-looking – messy brown hair, pretty fit – but Damien can't bring himself to care all that much. About the drink, about the guy, about this place. His mood is spiraling downwards. Not that he was in the best frame of mind to begin with.

What's the point?

Ethan is leaving then, loudly laughing with a group of some of the others from the smoky apartment, and he motions for Damien to come with them. Damien waves him

off, though. He can probably find his own way back. He doesn't want to go back to the apartment with them, and he wouldn't be surprised if they get the cops called on them tonight. He thinks he'll try to sneak back to Ethan's place after a bit longer, after he finishes this last drink.

The guy next to him is getting more handsy, though, now that the rest of the group left. He tilts his head, eyes darting towards the bathrooms, giving Damien an obvious invitation. Damien is not even vaguely interested, but he smiles like he is, and lets the guy head that way on his own. Damien downs the rest of the drink and slips outside into the cool night air. He has enough sense not to accept a drunk hookup in the bathroom of a bar on his first night here.

Ethan's group is nowhere to be seen, and everything seems to be moving in slow motion now. The late night city sounds are too quiet after the noise from inside the bar, like a sudden blanket falling over him. He realizes, in an offhand way, that he is probably too drunk to find his way back to the apartment, but he tries anyway. It's only supposed to be a couple of blocks.

Everything is still moving strangely around him, though, and it feels like the streetlights are strobing. In fact, he's already walked farther than he remembered from earlier in the evening.

He stops at a crosswalk and pulls out his phone to open up a map application, but the damn thing is dead. He slides it back into his pocket, suddenly feeling sick. He's pretty sure he's lost now, and he hasn't even been here for a day. There's no one around that he'd feel comfortable asking directions from. He probably should have just let the guy from the bar get off and then followed him back to Ethan's building. It's not like he hasn't done something like that on so many other nights, especially in undergrad. But

maybe never when he felt like *this*. He feels disgusted with himself. His life is a mess, and that last drink is catching up to him in a bad way.

The light at the crosswalk changes, and he crosses the street just to keep moving. Maybe find another bar, somewhere he can ask directions.

And then he sees it.

It's a door. In an alleyway. He's about to pass by it, generally knowing better than to even look down dark alleyways at this time of night, but he feels a sort of *tug*, an odd surge of curiosity.

He stops. Stares at it. Feels the world tilt a bit under his feet. It looks just like a hotel room door.

Like something you'd see on the *inside* of a hotel. He frowns, but his feet are moving in that direction, taking him towards it. Curiosity again. Confusion.

Maybe he's dreaming? Maybe his drink was laced with something after all?

He touches the handle, wondering if it's *real*, and the door opens with the slightest of pressure.

He... he can't see anything on the other side. Just vague shapes, muted colors. It feels like he woke up with blurry eyes, and he tries to rub them, but his vision doesn't clear. He finds himself stumbling through the threshold, almost as if he is being pulled inside by an unseen force.

The lights are much, much brighter all of a sudden, and the room beyond the door is gorgeous. It feels like he's walking into a dream. Or a fantasy.

This is the kind of place Damien wishes he was staying in. A luxury hotel suite. Beautiful furnishings. A huge king-sized bed that calls to him with its siren song. Fluffy pillows. Clean, probably high thread count linens. *This* is the kind of life Damien imagined for himself, when he thought about being a hotshot corporate lawyer. All-

expenses paid trips to meet with clients. A company credit line. Fine dining. Validation. *This* is what he's giving up.

He glances back at the door, but it's gone.

Goosebumps crawl up his arms, even though the room is warm. Something in the back of his mind is ringing out in alarm, but he turns towards the bed instead. He's so *tired*. It's been such a long day, such a long bus ride down here. Such a long time pretending he cared about catching up with his friend from high school, about the people at the party, about the guy at the bar. He's not sure why any of this is here. Maybe he *is* drugged, or maybe he already passed out somewhere. Or maybe he's back at his friend's apartment, and he's totally lost it. Hallucinating all of this.

He really, truly doesn't care anymore.

He throws himself onto the bed, heedless of his clothes, barely conscious enough to kick off his shoes.

He sleeps.

CHAPTER TWO

DAMIEN OPENS his eyes to find an absurdly attractive blond man glaring down at him.

“How did you get in here?” the man asks. He looks precisely like an annoyed male model out of a fashion magazine. Damien pushes himself up, head throbbing and stomach tilting. He’s in a hotel room, apparently. He... he thought there was a door. In an alleyway? But no, that can’t be right.

“Uh...” Damien supplies helpfully. The other man doesn’t seem very sympathetic. His gaze is icy.

“No seriously,” the blond says, but Damien doesn’t actually remember what happened last night very well. He feels a small thread of panic rising in him. He scans his eyes across the hotel room. He *really* thought there was another door somewhere, but everything’s muddled now.

The man’s scowl deepens, and he shakes his head. “Forget it,” he says, waving a hand as if to clear this all away. “I’m getting Melanie.”

Melanie? Damien thinks, but he doesn’t dare to reply. He falls back onto the bed as soon as the door closes. He’s thankful to be rid of the tall, blond man. The guy seemed like an asshole. And anyways, maybe he’s

dreaming, and if he closes his eyes, he'll wake up on Ethan's couch. Isn't that how this works?

The door opens again, and his eyes snap open along with it. No such luck. The ceiling is exactly the same as it was a few minutes ago. He sits up. Too quickly. This time his head is *really* spinning, and he thinks maybe laying down again wasn't such a good idea, especially since this doesn't appear to be a dream at all. He winces in pain at the brightness of the lights, but his eyes catch on the woman in the doorway.

She has long, dark brown hair and dark brown eyes. Pale olive skin. Petite, or at least much shorter than the last guy. She's wearing casual, but classy clothing, nothing like a hotel uniform. She doesn't look like hotel staff at all, in fact. Damien was half-expecting the gorgeous blond man to be bringing in some sort of manager or security person to kick him out. Instead...

"Oh my," the woman says, and she sounds... interested, but not in the way that Damien might expect. What did that grumpy guy say her name was again?

"Look what we've found," she continues, and she walks closer to the bed, not all that surprised to find a stranger in the room.

"Where am I?" he asks, because it's currently his top priority, right behind *how the hell did I get here?* But he hopes maybe the answer to the second question will follow the first. His voice comes out hoarser than he expects, and he clears his throat, suddenly terribly thirsty.

The woman smiles slowly, and it's not a nice expression but also not completely unfriendly.

"You're exactly where you're supposed to be," she says, and her eyes dance with some unspoken joke. Something he's not getting. Damien frowns.

"Why don't you get cleaned up, and we can talk

afterwards?" she suggests, and Damien stares at her for a moment, but she holds his gaze, completely unconcerned.

He nods. What else is he supposed to do? He's obviously gotten himself into some sort of weird situation, and he probably was drugged last night. Maybe it's a good idea to go take a shower and make sure he has all of his internal organs...

Plus, being clean will definitely improve the situation. He currently feels... disgusting, really. He needs some water, badly. He waits for her to leave, watching her turn to go, feeling like it would be rude to stand in her presence in his current state.

She pauses in the doorway, glancing back at him, and then she laughs, a sound like bells. "You can use whatever you find in there," she says, pointing to a doorway, which Damien can only assume is the connecting bathroom. He finds that he urgently needs to use it, actually, and his face heats as she leaves.

This whole situation is *fucked*, he thinks, but he's at least going to take advantage of this gorgeous hotel suite.

THE BATHROOM IS JUST as luxurious as the connecting suite, but he wouldn't have expected any less. Spotless, shining fixtures. Marble countertops. Fluffy towels folded neatly next to a large rainfall-style shower. A deep tub that could probably accommodate several guests. He spends maybe just a little too much time in the shower using the tasteful, yet elegant vanilla-scented bath products provided. The hot water feels amazing, and he's reluctant to leave it. He hasn't actually felt this clean since he left Seattle.

Unfortunately he ends up having to put on his clothes

from last night, since there's nothing else to wear. And weirdly enough, he can't find a hair dryer. What kind of hotel suite doesn't have a hair dryer? Especially in a place this fancy? It's perhaps the only thing missing, and it strikes him as odd. Maybe the last guest swiped it, and the staff just forgot to replace it?

After a few more moments of searching, he starts to feel bad for taking such a long time when that strange woman is probably waiting for him. Not that he necessarily *wants* to talk to her again, but it would be nice to figure out where the heck he ended up last night.

He grabs a towel, instead, rubbing it over his head and pouting a bit in the mirror. He doesn't have any of his usual styling products, so his sandy brown hair is going to dry weirdly. The hair dryer would have been the only possible way of saving it. Such is his luck today, apparently.

Damien is still toweling off his hair and isn't paying much attention as he steps back into the room. He nearly jumps out of his skin at the sight of yet another man sitting cross-legged on the bed. Damien lowers the towel cautiously. This man is also on the petite side with messy brown hair. He looks a whole lot friendlier than the blond guy from earlier. In fact, he's grinning widely at Damien.

"Hi!" he says cheerfully, and his bright blue eyes seem genuinely happy to see Damien. "Melanie told me to bring you to her when you're ready."

Damien tilts his head. "Melanie?" he asks, thinking maybe that's the name he heard earlier. His head's clearing a bit after the shower, but he still feels a little like he's walking through a dream. Who could blame him, given the circumstances?

The man looks confused for a moment, but eventually nods. "I see," he says. "She's like that sometimes." And, again, he sounds completely genuine and even apologetic.

“The woman you met earlier,” he explains. “She’s Melanie Selinofoto, the lady of the house, and the owner of this place.” He gestures to the room around them.

Damien has a lot of questions as to why the *owner* of a hotel would personally come to greet him, but before he can ask further, the man stands up and extends a hand. “And I’m Liam O’Connell,” he says.

Damien shakes Liam’s hand, attempting to return his smile. At least he’s getting a proper introduction finally. “Damien,” he replies, realizing no one’s asked him his name since he’s been here.

Liam smiles, not even pressing for his last name or any identification. “Nice to meet you, Damien.”

Liam hooks a thumb towards the door Melanie left through earlier. “You ready?” he asks, and Damien glances remorsefully at the towel in his hand and then nods. Might as well get this over with. He has to admit he’s feeling rather uncertain about the whole situation, but there’s no use hiding in this hotel room all day.

Liam laughs, gesturing to the towel and then to Damien’s hair. “Sorry about that. We don’t usually keep hair dryers in here.” He shrugs, as if it’s not a big deal. Damien glances at the other man’s clothes. Again, casual attire. Nothing like any hotel uniform he has ever seen.

He wonders what Liam *does* here exactly, but Liam is already opening the door to the hallway, gesturing for Damien to follow. Damien throws the towel onto the bed, feeling a little lost.

The feeling only intensifies when they step out into a hallway that looks more like the inside of an apartment complex than the luxury hotel he expected. Damien looks back at the room they’d been in and a sudden shock runs through him. No windows, he realizes.

“This isn’t a hotel,” he says, almost as if to himself, and

Liam shakes his head, laughing softly.

“Nah, Melanie will explain things,” he says and leads Damien down the hallway to some sort of shared living space.

On one side of the space, there is a full kitchen with all of the latest appliances, like something out of a home and garden magazine. On the other end, there are couches, a huge television, and another hallway leading the opposite direction. Liam leads him to a side door that opens into an elevator room. Damien feels his throat constrict with fear, but he’s gone too far now. He pats his pockets, realizing his phone’s still on him and his wallet. Although, damnit, his phone died last night, if he remembers right, and he definitely didn’t charge it. He glances over at Liam, feeling nervous. Liam seems oblivious to his concern. Does this sort of thing happen regularly here?

They get into the elevator, and there are only three buttons. Liam presses the button for the third floor and shrugs. “We could have used the stairs, but thought you might still be a little unsteady on your feet,” he says, smiling.

Damien appreciates that at least. He’s not feeling the hottest still, and he doesn’t actually know what time it is since his phone is dead and there hadn’t been any clocks in the hotel suite.

The elevator opens up to another set of doors, and Liam waves a card at the little black keycard scanner on the side that beeps. The doors click audibly as they unlock, and Liam opens one, gesturing for Damien to go ahead.

The third floor is completely different from the second. It looks more like a traditional apartment building, with rows of doors on either side of a hallway. Liam leads Damien down to a door at the very end. He swipes his keycard again, and opens the door to an office, tall

bookshelves filled to the very top bracketing either side. And finally windows, floor-to-ceiling. A cautious glance outside tells him that it still *looks* like they are in Portland. Not that he'd really thought otherwise. Probably.

The woman from earlier is sitting in a chair, smiling at him in that odd way of hers.

"What is this place?" Damien asks, and Melanie waves a hand at Liam, obviously dismissing him. Liam gives Damien a comforting grin and closes the door behind him. Damien doesn't feel comforted at all.

"What's your name?" Melanie asks after Liam leaves, completely ignoring Damien's own question. Damien's fairly annoyed at that, but he's also surprised that she doesn't already know somehow.

"Damien," he answers, and she continues to watch him expectantly.

"Damien Lambert," he clarifies, suddenly feeling like he'd tell her anything just to get her to stop looking at him like that.

"Ah, Damien. Welcome," she says in reply, and the temperature in the room almost seems to warm a bit at her welcome. She glances at him carefully now, but less challenging than earlier. He waits, not sure what else she's expecting from him, but she simply gestures for him to sit down in a chair in front of her desk.

He nods, pulling the chair out.

"You found your way here through a Door?" she asks as he sits down, and he notices that she's putting an odd emphasis on the word *door*.

He tries thinking back to what *actually* happened last night, but his head feels like it might split open, trying to remember. He shrugs. "I sort of remember that," he says, and Melanie grins at him.

"I made it," she says, simply. And Damien's not sure at

first if she means the entire hotel or what, but she continues, "It brings me things. Interesting things, like you." She taps her fingers together, looking at him with a curious expression, and Damien seriously has no idea what this woman is talking about, but his head hurts too much to bother asking about the specifics.

He must pass some sort of obscure test, because she continues explaining anyways.

"I run a very specific type of business here," she says, her dark eyes watching him closely. And the realization washes over Damien like ice water. *Oh shit.* It's one of *those* types of places.

"Liam and Sebastian are hosts," she continues, and Damien can only assume Sebastian is the grumpy blond from earlier.

"They found their way to me through various means, just as you did," Melanie says. "And they work with clients at this establishment."

Damien feels a shiver of fear as his worst assumptions are flat-out confirmed. He makes a move, as if he's going to stand, suddenly realizing he's probably locked in here and doesn't know how he'd get out anyways. And his phone is still dead on top of that.

Melanie holds up her hand, laughing. "Don't flee yet," she says. "You have every choice as to whether or not you want to accept my offer. You're not a captive here." Her words echo his thoughts almost too perfectly, and his fear abates only slightly. She smiles that odd smile of hers again. "And there *will* be an offer..."

An... offer? Like... a *job* offer? He considers the idea for a moment. She mentioned hosting. He has a pretty clear picture of what that might entail. He's fit. He knows he's attractive. More importantly, he's hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt... The thought of the exact

number chokes him. He has no idea how he'll pay it back. He hasn't even considered how he'll find a job, yet. He just got here yesterday.

He meets her gaze and feels a little bit like he's in one of those old tales where someone is offering him the world, if only he'll trade his soul...

Melanie must take his silence as a signal to continue. "Sometimes the client doesn't even know what they want, but deep in their heart there is a yearning for something," she says. Her eyes gleam in a slightly unsettling way, reinforcing the unfortunate comparison of a deal with the devil. "The door provides an opportunity for them. It's not necessarily about sex," she says, outright admitting what he had assumed, "but humans being what they are, it's *often* about sex."

Damien notices, quite pointedly, that she does not appear to include herself in that group. Humans.

Perhaps the deal with the devil analogy is not so far off... He clears his throat.

"What do you get out of this?" he asks, almost afraid to hear the answer.

"Plenty of things," she replies easily. "Of course there is usually financial compensation. Some of our clients are quite wealthy."

But Damien can't help but notice her unspecifics again. He's not sure if he really wants to ask further questions... What else could she be getting out of it? Is she really collecting souls? He's heard stories about the paranormal community, but mostly that. Just stories. He's never personally interacted with anyone who belonged to it, and some people didn't even believe that it existed. Some sort of conspiracy theory. Or maybe just a bunch of eccentrics. He shivers. Sitting here, in this office with Melanie Selinofoto, he suddenly believes all of the terrible stories

he's ever heard.

But he's also curious. Perhaps more curious than scared, in fact.

Isn't this what he came to Portland for? *Change*?

What would be more of a change than *this*?

"I'm interested," he forces himself to say, even if he's still unsure. She must see it in his face. He probably looks terrified. He *feels* terrified.

"What's involved?" he asks, waiting for the other pin to drop.

She laughs again, and her smile is a little friendlier now. It seems like she's warming up a bit with each interaction. "Well, I'll give you an offer, and we'll sign a contract," she says. "But I want you to think it over first."

He nods. That sounds reasonable enough.

The offer, however, is ridiculous. All-expenses paid to live in this building. All food and clothing provided plus 90% of any money the clients offered, if money was part of the contract. "If it's not, we'll negotiate a fair price," she says, completely unconcerned with how insane all of this sounds. Damien asks about the typical rates for a client, and she smiles mysteriously at him.

"It depends on the client," she says, and her smile is sharp. "They name their own price."

Yep, insane *and* creepy. She gives him an example of a recent contract, though, and he shakes his head.

"You've got to be kidding," he says. "*That* much?"

She inclines her head in agreement. "The Door provides exactly what the client desires. Most of them will give anything to have access to their host again..."

Damien's a little glad he's going to be the host in this scenario. It sounds like the clients are the ones truly trading their souls.

"Alright," he finds himself saying. "I'll do it. Where do I

sign?”

She laughs outright at this, looking far too amused.

“My, my,” she says. “I didn’t think you’d be so easy to convince.”

His face heats at that, but this is the kind of offer you don’t turn down. A small part of him still wonders if there’s a catch somewhere, but he’s in such a desperate situation...

She shakes her head at him though. “You’ve had a long day,” she says, and he wonders how much she knows about his day, exactly, but pushes the thought away. She can’t possibly be able to read *thoughts*.

“Go home and think it over,” she says. “Let me know by the end of the week. You’re welcome to chat more with Liam, as well.”

Damien doesn’t have a home to go back to, and at this point he doesn’t even know what day of the week it *is*, but he nods, completely intending to come back here as soon as he can go pick up his stuff from Ethan’s place. He doesn’t even need to talk to Liam or the grumpy blond. Offer accepted. Let’s do this thing, he thinks, and even his headache is fading now. Everything feels crystal clear, and he sees this path set out before him. It’s nothing worse than what he’s done in bars and clubs all throughout college. Fucking strangers. But now he’ll be doing it in a luxury hotel and getting paid for it. And paying off his loans. *Sign me up.*

MELANIE LETS him leave not too long after their conversation about the contract. Damien ends up talking to Liam again briefly while he waits for a rideshare to show up. Liam gives him a quick tour of the shared living space

on the second floor and shows him the café on the first floor.

“Melanie likes us to work in the café, too,” Liam explains. “It helps keep up the image.” He has the decency to blush.

Damien wonders how someone like Liam got involved in all of this. The grumpy blond – *Sebastian* – definitely seems more like the type to do this sort of thing. More like Damien, precisely. Liam seems far too innocent to be involved in this sort of trade. Maybe he’ll ask later.. Because, of course, he’s planning on coming back tonight.

He’s not spending a single night on Ethan’s dirty couch if he can help it. Disregarding the nap he took yesterday, of course.

The rideshare pulls up in front of the café, and Liam waves goodbye to him. Damien looks back to see the sign on the front of the building. Café Seuil. What a bizarre name, he thinks, but he hops in the rideshare car, making a note to ask about that as well.

Ethan’s apartment building turns out to be not too far away from the café, but far enough that Damien couldn’t have possibly walked all the way there last night. Damien presses the buzzer to Ethan’s apartment, thankful the other man is there. Ethan had never given him a key or anything like that, and it looks like the building uses the same sort of keycard system that Café Seuil does, so Damien doubts he would have been able to get into the building regardless.

“Yo! Damien!” Ethan says, sounding happy to see him, voice tinny through the speaker. “Come on up.”

Damien rolls his eyes at Ethan’s enthusiasm, but pulls the door open as soon as he hears the click of the lock moving. Ethan’s building seems old and run-down, especially compared to the hotel suite in the café. An odd

place for a trust fund baby to live, but who is Damien to judge?

“Hey, man!” Ethan greets him with a sly grin at the door, slapping him on the back. “You get some last night?”

Damien frowns, shaking his head. “You weren’t, oh I don’t know... concerned about me or anything?” he asks.

“Nah,” Ethan says, but he looks a little unsure now, like maybe he thinks he *should* have been concerned. He scratches the back of his head. “I mean, I saw you hitting up Jeremy. Thought you guys spent the night together.” He frowns, looking honestly worried and throws himself down onto the couch, grabbing a lighter from the coffee table and flicking the starter out of habit. “Sorry about that, dude. You okay?”

“It’s fine,” Damien says, even though the whole situation is seriously *not* fine. He’s starting to feel a little nervous, in fact, especially with some time and space away from the café. He pushes forward, though. He can do this. What other choice does he have?

Damien didn’t bring much with him when he left Seattle, and he hasn’t even unpacked anything. He spots his bags on the floor next to the couch, still in the same location as they were yesterday. He feels Ethan’s eyes tracking him the whole time as he walks over to grab them.

Ethan immediately stands back up. “Woah, you going somewhere?” He’s understandably completely confused.

Damien sighs, not wanting to explain the whole thing. “I found a job, another place to stay,” he says, even though it sounds totally unbelievable. He almost expects Ethan to question him about it, but Ethan just grins, obviously relieved.

“Aw, that’s great!” Ethan says. “You really got me worried there.” He chuckles to himself. “Well, you can always crash here, again, if you need it.”

Ethan seems so earnest that Damien realizes he's being sort of an asshole about this whole thing. This guy did just offer him a place to stay, no strings attached, with no set end date, after not having seen Damien for so many years. And Damien probably did seem like he was going to go home with... Jeremy, or whoever the sleazy guy at the bar was last night.

"Hey, thanks," Damien says, and he really means it this time.

Ethan rolls the lighter in his hand in a practiced move and then slides it into his pocket. He holds out his hand. "See you around, man."

Damien honestly doesn't think he will, but he shrugs and takes the other man's hand, anyways, shaking it. "See you around," he agrees. And then he heads through the dingy apartment building back down to street level, hopping back into the rideshare that he requested to wait for him.

He hopes that he's not making the second biggest mistake of his life.

CHAPTER THREE

IT'S COMPLETELY dark by the time Damien makes it back to the café, bags in hand. The café is in a trendy-looking part of Southeast Portland on a corner lot. Other cafés and restaurants line the busy street with some newer apartment buildings scattered in between.

Damien looks up at the sign again. Café Seuil. The café itself looks closed. All of the windows in the front of the building have shades pulled down over them. The café must have been closed all day today, now that he thinks about it, because there had been no patrons when he left earlier. Liam had taken Damien through the main café seating area with the front entrance, showing him where he might work if he accepted the offer, and Damien had left through the front of the building.

Damien is sure there's got to be a side door, though, especially with the residences above it. He finds himself going into a dark alley for the second time in less than twenty-four hours, and he feels a weird sense of déjà vu.

Did that really happen?

He shakes his head, as if that will clear it, unfog his memories, but he still can't quite remember. He could swear that he *did* walk through a door in an alleyway and

end up in Café Seuil. But the logistics of it don't make sense. There's no way that bar they went to was near the café. It would have been a much, much further walk. And, besides, he had somehow ended up on the *second* floor. He frowns, looking at the side of the building, almost expecting to see the unusual hotel room door from his fuzzy memories of the previous night.

Nothing. He feels disappointed. Surely there's a residential entrance somewhere.

Damien mentally rolls his eyes at himself. Why would the residential entrance be in an alley? The café is on a corner lot, so ideally it would be accessible to residents from the side street. Damien walks around to the well-lit side of the café. Just as he suspected, there is a small residential entrance towards the back of the building. He presses the buzzer, hopeful.

"Yes?" A flat voice answers, sounding bored.

"Uh," Damien says. "Is Liam there?"

The person on the other end of the line snorts. "Of course. Sure I'll get him for you."

Liam's voice comes out of the tinny speaker almost immediately. "Hello?"

"Liam!" Damien says, feeling oddly thankful to hear the cheery brunette again. "It's Damien." He hopes he doesn't have to explain himself.

"Oh! You're back!" Liam says, and the lock on the door immediately clicks open. "Well, come on up."

Damien feels an immediate sense of relief. They haven't turned him away, yet. So far, so good.

This entrance leads directly into a familiar room in the back of the building with the elevator and several other doors. Liam *had* taken him through this space earlier when he showed Damien the café. One of the doors leads to a hallway that connects to the café's kitchen, Melanie's first

floor office, and the main café. Another door leads into a spacious lounge area. He imagines the last door must be some sort of maintenance closet.

He waits at the elevator, unsure what else to do, and it's only a minute or two later that the doors slide open.

Liam waves at him. "Well, come on!" He grins. "You decide already?"

Damien nods, feeling a little unsure, but Liam's already grabbing one of his bags and pulling it into the elevator. Liam's smile is contagious so Damien hazards one of his own.

"The beds here are much nicer than where I was staying," he says.

Liam laughs at that and nods in agreement. "We have the *best* beds." Liam's grin turns a little mischievous.

"Are you sure it's okay if..." Damien asks, thinking of Melanie and her contract. He hasn't signed anything yet.

Liam shrugs. "We'll get you squared away with Melanie tomorrow," he says. "It's fine. Welcome!"

When they make it up to the second floor, Liam waves his keycard at the scanner on the door to the shared living space. Damien sees the tall blond from earlier on a couch, eyes glued to a TV screen where he's playing some sort of popular first-person shooter game. The blond's eyes dart towards Damien and then immediately back to the screen, almost too fast for Damien to catch.

The man makes a noise with his mouth that sounds less than impressed. "You," he says. "So you took the offer?"

Damien nods, even though he's not sure the other man can see him.

Liam grabs Damien's other bag straight out of his hand and laughs. "Be nice." And it's obviously directed at the blond, who rolls his eyes.

“That’s Sebastian,” Liam says, heading towards the other side of the living space. “But you met him earlier?”

Damien nods and follows Liam. They head down the other hallway – not the one that would lead to the hotel room he woke up in this morning, but the one he noticed earlier in the day. The hall is lined with more apartment-style doors, similar to the third floor of the building.

“Here, pick one,” Liam says. “Sebastian and I have these.” He points to two doors that face each other further down the hall. “We’re the only ones living here right now,” he adds, and Damien’s a little surprised about that. What kind of hosting business only has two hosts?

Liam must see the look on Damien’s face, because he shrugs, opening a door and showing Damien into a room. “Here, you want to just take this one?” he asks, and Damien pulls his eyes away from the other man to look into the room. It looks a little like a dorm room, he thinks, although he sees a door that hopefully leads to a private bathroom.

“Not as fancy as the suite,” Liam admits. “But those are for entertaining clients.”

“And these have windows,” Damien says, finding his voice.

Liam laughs at that. “I guess Melanie didn’t want the hosting rooms to have those.”

Damien nods. “This is perfect.” He truly means it. Something about the setting makes him feel immediately more comfortable. It reminds him of school, he realizes. At least before he moved out to the apartment with his roommate. He frowns, not wanting to think about that. His phone feels heavy in his pocket all of a sudden. He never charged it. He knows she’s probably left a dozen more messages by now, and he should probably answer them.

Liam seems to easily pick up on Damien’s shift in

moods, and he sets the bags down by the bed. There's a plain navy blue comforter and a few pillows on it. The room also has a small nightstand, a desk, and a closet, but nothing else.

"Well, don't let me keep you, if you're tired, but you're welcome to join us," Liam says, with a gesture back to the shared living space.

Damien nods, but then immediately shakes his head afterwards. "I think I'm going to get settled in," he admits.

Liam inclines his head, obviously understanding. "Sure thing," he says, smiling a little softer now. "Let me know if you need anything. I'm really glad you decided to join."

Damien wonders why, but then he realizes Liam must get lonely if all he has for company is *Sebastian*. He manages a smile at the thought, letting Liam close the door behind him. He finds himself staring around the room at the featureless walls.

Well, here goes nothing.

IN THE MORNING, he wakes up to the smell of coffee. He grabs his phone off the small nightstand to see the time, and instead sees 15 missed calls and a string of text messages.

The preview of one that's showing up on the notification screen says, *Just tell me you're alive*.

Damien immediately feels a punch of guilt, right through his stomach. Along with sharp hunger pangs. He hadn't eaten much of anything yesterday, he realizes. Just some crap at the bar. His stomach wasn't really up to it on the ride down... He clears the notifications off of the phone screen and decides to take pity on his roommate. *Alive*, he starts typing, but immediately deletes it and throws the

phone back on the nightstand. He... he just can't deal with this yet. He can't talk to her about this. She won't understand.

It's only 5 AM. He wonders if anyone will be up, but the smell of coffee seems to indicate that *someone* is awake. He runs a hand through his hair. He's never had a chance to fix it from yesterday. It'll have to do for now, he thinks morosely, and pulls on a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt before heading out into the shared living space.

Sebastian's sitting at the little kitchen island, a cup of coffee in his hand, scrolling through something on his phone. He glances up when he sees Damien.

"Melanie will want to see you," Sebastian says in lieu of a greeting, and Damien supposes that makes sense. Damien did just sort of show up on her doorstep. Twice.

"Can I?" he asks, gesturing to the coffee. Sebastian shrugs, and it seems like assent, so Damien grabs a cup. His stomach growls loudly, and his face heats in embarrassment, but Sebastian doesn't even look up from his phone.

"Anything in the fridge that isn't labeled is up for grabs," Sebastian says. Damien nods, immediately thankful.

He opens the fridge to find it completely stocked. The opposite of Ethan's, really. *All-expenses paid*. Melanie really meant it, he thinks, wondering. He grabs a carton of eggs and some butter, along with a box of pre-washed spinach. He finds some bread in a cabinet. Might as well go easy on his stomach.

"Do you get up this early every morning?" Damien asks as he starts making eggs.

Sebastian glances up at him and shrugs. "Pretty much," he says. So.... not very talkative. Gotcha. Damien wishes Liam was awake.

Sebastian eventually drains the rest of his coffee and

slides off the stool he's sitting in. He rinses the mug out in the sink, putting it directly into the top rack of the dishwasher.

"Come down to the first floor when you're ready," Sebastian says.

WHEN DAMIEN SHOWS up at Melanie's first floor office later that morning, Melanie seems less surprised than she should have been. This office is much less flashy than her third floor office and more cluttered, besides. There are papers stacked on top of each other, covering nearly every visible surface and even some on a pile next to the floor. A few of the stacks of papers on her desk have empty coffee cups balanced on them. Damien hands her a fresh cup of coffee as a sort of peace offering, and she gives him a small half-smile in appreciation.

"So," she says, setting the cup down on yet another pile. Damien winces in fear of the inevitable spill. "I guess there's no making you wait until the end of the week?" she asks, and Damien shakes his head.

"I don't really have anywhere else to go," he admits, which is only half true. She gives him a considering look, and then nods.

"Alright," she says, simply. "Well, why don't you try a day working in the café with Liam and see what you think. If you still want to stay, we'll take care of the contract later tonight."

That seems reasonable enough, so Damien nods. Melanie waves a hand at him, dismissing him, but before he leaves he reaches out towards one of the empty coffee cups.

She watches his hand carefully, and Damien feels a

little bit like a mouse being watched by a curious predator.

“Uh, can I take this?” he asks, and she nods, looking oddly pleased.

Damien decides not to worry about it too much and grabs as many of the empty cups as he can reasonably carry before he heads back into the hall.

The café’s kitchen is right next to Melanie’s first floor office, and the café itself is just down the hall from that. Damien stops off in the kitchen to put the mugs in one of the big industrial sinks. Sebastian has headphones in and is working on some dough. He slides a glance over towards Damien and then back to his dough, obviously uninterested in Damien’s presence in the kitchen.

Damien figures he’s not going to get much out of Sebastian, so he might as well make himself useful. He finds an apron in a supply closet and then washes his hands. Whatever they want him to do here, he’ll do it, he decides. This is the chance he wanted. This is the chance he *needs*. He’ll figure out everything else as he goes.

CHAPTER FOUR

MELANIE DOES *NOT* TAKE care of the contract later that night.

In fact, she makes Damien wait two *months* before signing the damn thing. Well, to be more precise, she *avoids* Damien for two months until he finally *demands* for her to let him sign his contract. Who knew this would be so difficult?

That first evening after he finishes working in the café with Liam, Damien looks for Melanie in the office next to the café kitchen and also the one on the third floor, but she is nowhere to be found. He doesn't dare try any of the other closed doors on the third floor, even though one of them has to be her personal residence. Liam had mentioned that most of the rooms on that floor are empty studios, but Damien doesn't feel comfortable snooping around up there.

Damien asks Liam about his contract later that night when they are all hanging out in the shared living space. Sebastian is playing the same FPS game from the previous night, and Damien is half-heartedly watching the events unfold on the huge TV screen as Liam explains more about life at the café.

Liam shrugs when Damien brings up the contract, though. "It doesn't mean anything," he says. "If she offered you a contract, she'll show up with it eventually." He stuffs a handful of popcorn into his mouth and then offers Damien the bowl.

Damien accepts the bowl, staring down at it. He wonders what Liam means by *show up with it*, but he doesn't think it's wise to press too much. Obviously there is more to Melanie than meets the eye.

Sebastian snorts from the other end of the couch, but doesn't make any further comment, and Liam goes back to talking about a client he had last week. Damien's left holding the popcorn, wondering how he's going to fit into all of this, until Liam grabs it back from him without even letting Damien take a handful. Damien doesn't think Liam even noticed.

The next day, Damien tries to make a point to track Melanie down to talk about the contract again with no luck. He needs to know what his role at the café will be. He's starting to get a little concerned that she is going to rescind the offer, no matter what Liam says.

Liam asks for his help taking customer orders, though, and starts training him on the espresso machine. Melanie manages to make herself scarce the entire day. It's like every time he sees her, she's on her way to go somewhere else, or when she seems like she is probably free, he's in the middle of juggling several orders. The way she is able to avoid him is almost... magic, Damien thinks ruefully. And it probably is. If the woman can make doors that appear and disappear at will, Damien wouldn't put anything past her.

In fact, Damien goes straight to her office every morning that entire week only to find papers moved around, new papers added, and a growing collection of

colorful coffee cups (grabbed when they were busy with customers and Damien couldn't take a moment to catch her, naturally). At the end of the week, he finds a credit card with his name on it on the desk, along with a note. *Buy anything you need*, it says. Damien flips the card over and over in his hand, thinking of the featureless room upstairs, thinking of all of the stuff he left in Seattle.

He pulls Liam aside when they have a slow moment and shows the card to him.

"Seriously, it's yours," Liam says, with a sympathetic smile. "We all have one. Don't think too hard about this. It's just how she is."

Somehow having the credit card makes it feel official, even though it's not, yet. Damien doesn't think Melanie would have given him that if she was planning on rescinding her offer. But Damien has a really hard time figuring out what Melanie gets out of *any* of this. She's not even making that much profit off of the hosts, if any.

Damien decides he might as well use the card since she gave it to him though, and he starts making purchases here and there, just to test the waters. A few plants for his room. Black slacks and black button ups for working in the café, so he matches Liam. Some more plants for the living area, to brighten it up a bit. Sebastian rolls his eyes at that, but it's not like *he* has to take care of them.

Damien also buys a comforter that reminds him of the one he left in Seattle. It's covered in cute cartoon cats and much more appealing than the plain navy one he's using now. When it arrives, it hits him with a wave of nostalgia, and even though it's only been a few weeks, he wonders what his roommate did with all of his old stuff. She had stopped messaging him. Her last message just says, *Whatever, Damien. I hope you have a good life*. And he had never responded. He deleted the entire series of

messages out of the app on his phone so he didn't have to look at them, but he kept her number.

After a few more weeks, he is getting used to life at the café, though. Sebastian doesn't really warm up to him exactly, but Damien would like to think they are still getting to know each other. Anyways, Damien is pretty sure Sebastian doesn't warm up to anyone except his lanky friend who spends way too much time in the café's lounge. Damien mostly talks with Liam. Liam spends a lot of their down time narrating stories about various clients he's had over the years, and Damien is a little impressed at the sheer number of them. He tries to get more information out of Liam about the mysterious doors and how those work, but it seems like even Liam doesn't know anything about the mechanics behind them.

Apparently they just *appear*. Magically. They show up on a blank wall in the room when you are taking a client. Damien had somehow walked through one, even though no one had been in that hosting room accepting clients. Not impossible, given the fact that the doors are quite literally *magic* doors, but unusual nonetheless. Liam and Sebastian had apparently found the café through different means, although neither of them seemed very willing to talk about that.

Damien will get it out of them, eventually, though.

Damien also meets the handsome doctor, Elijah Hayes, who stops by the café to run some tests on all of them. Eli seems a little surprised to meet Damien, but tests Damien all the same. Damien comes back clean, which is somewhat of a relief, but not too surprising since it's been a few months. He's pronounced ready to take clients, but he doesn't have a contract. It's starting to get annoying, really.

After nearly two months of working in the café without

any sort of formal contract or any direction from Melanie, Damien has had enough. He is starting to wonder how Liam and Sebastian managed by themselves without him. Melanie seems to be barely keeping the café business running. He's not sure if she's really just this busy all of the time or if she's actually avoiding him.

One morning, he decides to stake out her office on the first floor. He is determined not to leave until he can get the contract signed. Even after the café's been open for a few hours, however, she still hasn't shown up.

Damien can't stand to sit in here and do nothing, so he finds himself looking through all of the papers on Melanie's desk. A few weeks ago, he would have felt too nervous to do this, but he's gotten over that quickly after living and working here. Most of the papers are invoices or bills for the building (hopefully paid), but there is also tons of unopened junk mail that should have just been tossed. He starts organizing it all, because if he's not out helping Liam, he might as well be doing something.

Liam brings Damien coffee every once in a while when the front area is slow. Damien skips lunch, determined that Melanie *has* to show up sometime and continues cleaning. Liam brings him in a plate from the staff lunch Sebastian made and seems impressed at Damien's progress, whistling lowly at the state of Melanie's office.

By the time Melanie shows up, late in the afternoon, her office is spotless. Her desk is completely cleared off. The piles of papers and empty coffee cups are nowhere to be seen. All of the files are organized in logical groups in filing cabinets, and Damien is convinced that what Melanie *really* needs is an office manager more than another host.

"So you're not leaving?" Melanie says when she opens the door, somehow unsurprised to see Damien in her office. She probably has the thing bugged, he guesses.

Damien crosses his arms, frowning at her. "We had a deal," he says. "I'm supposed to sign a contract."

Melanie gives him a long look. "You are still certain you want to do that?"

Damien thinks about it, considering his options. Which, really, there is nothing to think about. He nods. "Yes."

He's all in. He supposes the past two months have given him more time to think about it, and he doesn't feel so desperate any more, but he also knows that this is his best shot to work towards a fresh start for himself.

Something that doesn't involve all of his parents' expectations. Something that can be just for *him*.

"Alright, alright," Melanie says, relenting. She looks around her office for the first time since she stepped in, and she presses her lips together in a very thin line.

"You know," she says. "I don't know what you did in here, but I'm not even going to ask." She pulls open a drawer of a filing cabinet and glances through a few of the folders, and then she throws her hands up. "I'm never going to find anything now!" She points at him. "You did this. You're in charge of keeping it like this."

Damien nods, smothering a laugh. He somehow doubts she was *ever* able to find anything in the mess that it used to be anyways, and he also doubts it will stay this spotless for long, but he'll help as much as he's able.

He follows her up to her third floor office. Somehow, he thinks, this is where the *actual* business is run. If anything else, it is a little less chaotic up here.

"Did Liam tell you what this involves?" Melanie asks, as she sits down at her desk, pulling open a drawer. Damien nods. He had asked Liam tons of questions over the last two months, and Liam had voluntarily offered information about things Damien would have never thought to consider.

“Blood,” he confirms. It’s a blood contract.

She nods. “I need it for the magic,” she explains. “The Door will be tied to you and will bring you clients that are looking for what you can provide them.”

He shivers, almost excited about the prospect. It can’t be any worse than picking up strangers in a club, he thinks. Liam assured him that he’s never had a bad experience. Sebastian didn’t say much, but Sebastian doesn’t seem like the type of guy who would stick around if it was truly terrible.

He holds out his hand. This is it, he thinks.

This is the beginning.

CHAPTER FIVE

DAMIEN SEES a variety of different clients over the years. Some hold longer contracts than others. Some he sees for only a night, never to see them again. Damien has been at the café for a little over three years before he meets *him*.

It's a Thursday like any other Thursday. Damien is so close to finally paying off his loans from law school. He thinks it will happen this year, in fact. He hasn't planned anything out beyond that. What he might do when that huge weight is off his shoulders. What his life might be like when he doesn't have to take clients to pay the loans down.

Not that he minds taking clients. He also has fun working at the café, and he doesn't need to think too hard about the future while he's working here. He manages nearly everything for the legitimate café side of the business, leaving Melanie to handle the hosting contracts and all of the coordination with clients. Liam and even Sebastian seem more than happy to let Damien take care of all of the operational duties around the café. Sebastian sticks to making pastries and other baked goods, and Liam mostly works as a barista, with Damien helping him out

during peak hours.

At the end of another day, a fairly normal Thursday as far as café life goes, Damien is helping Liam clean the main seating area after closing. He is flipping up the chairs onto the tables so they can sweep under them, while Liam wipes down the counter by the espresso machine.

“Big night tonight?” Liam ribs him lightly, and Damien smiles to himself, shaking his head.

“Not necessarily...” Damien replies, and Liam grins at him, understanding immediately.

A few of Damien’s contracts ended recently, so he doesn’t actually have anyone in particular lined up for tonight. He thinks he’ll probably be getting some new clients soon. He half-wonders if he should cut back a little, since he’s so close to paying off his debt. He’ll cross that bridge when he gets there, he thinks. No use worrying about it now.

“We’ll see if anyone interesting shows up,” Damien adds.

Liam laughs and winks at him. “Someone always does.”

Liam’s not wrong. Damien plans on waiting in his favorite hosting room tonight, seeing if the magic of the Door will bring someone to him. Even after all of these years, he’s still not *quite* sure how the magic doors work. Melanie has never given any of them any sort of proper explanation. But he knows that if he waits in the room without a pre-arranged client, a door will bring someone to him if it’s a good match. And the surprise of it is part of the fun.

Much later that evening, Damien showers in the private bathroom connected to his room, now understanding why there wasn’t a hair dryer stocked in the hotel suite. The showers in their personal rooms are almost as nice as the

ones in the suite-style rooms, if a little less spacious and definitely not as luxurious. It's just easier for Damien to get ready in his own space, though, and he imagines it's the same for the other guys.

Damien prepares his body in advance, as well, stretching himself out with careful fingers and sliding in a lubed plug. On nights like this when he doesn't have a particular client lined up, he likes to be ready for anything. It's hard to say what the client will want when he walks through the door. Some of them are a little confused, but they usually get into the swing of things pretty quickly when they figure out what's going on.

He waits to change until he gets into the luxurious hotel suite that he prefers to host clients in. There are actually several other types of rooms available, but Damien generally sticks with this one. It makes him feel like a high-end hooker in a delicious way. He supposes that's really not too far from the truth.

When he gets to the hosting room, he slips out of his clothes, folding them neatly and sliding them into a drawer. He's only wearing a pair of black silk boxers, now, and he's already half-hard. His dick is pushing at the fabric and leaving a damp spot. The consistent pressure of the plug keeping him stretched open is tantalizing, and he's excited just thinking about the possibility of the new client. Who could walk through the door tonight? What will he look like? Damien slides a matching silk robe over his shoulders from the closet and then spreads himself over the huge, king-sized bed, fantasizing as he waits.

The door only appears when the client is ready. Some nights it might not appear at all, and those nights are disappointing to say the least. Damien has a *really* good feeling about tonight though.

He's not disappointed.

A door appears within a few minutes of him laying down on the bed. It appears in between breaths, as if it had always existed on the previously blank wall. Damien's cock starts swelling even further with the excitement of the moment, his anticipation building to a heady point. He has to restrain himself from stroking his hard length. Best to wait. He wants to savor the moment.

What will this man look like?

The door opens.

Damien sits up immediately to get a better look at the man who walks through. The client is dressed like a typical businessman, Damien thinks at first. Dress slacks, loafers, a button down shirt. Maybe on his way home from work after a late night at the office.

The client's dark grey eyes immediately land on Damien, and his interest is apparent. He doesn't seem as confused as most clients are when they walk through the door, just curious. His hair is trimmed short, nearly too short to tell the color but it looks like it's dark brown, maybe running closer to black. He's probably a few inches shorter than Damien, but he is *built*. Quite a bit more muscular than Damien might expect for a businessman, in fact. His strong arms are clearly defined under the material of his shirt. Damien licks his lips.

The client is Damien's *exact* type. To an excruciating degree, in fact. Damien's cock is ready to pop out of his silk boxers, just thinking about that man's hands on his skin. The client's hot gaze takes in Damien's entire body, leaving shivers in its wake.

Damien smiles. Time to get to work. So to speak, at least. *Nothing* about this is going to feel like work. He can already tell.

"A new face," Damien says, pleased. The client's lips quirk up into a hint of a smile, but it's gone almost

immediately. The man doesn't make a move to step further into the room. *Stubborn*, Damien thinks. Stubborn he can work with.

Damien pushes himself off of the bed slowly, making a bit of a show out of it, the silk of his robe gliding against his skin in a teasing way. He walks closer to the other man, conscious of the growing damp spot in his boxers. He's never had this immediate, visceral reaction to a client before, and it's too delicious to ignore.

"Damien," he says, offering his hand out to the other man.

The client doesn't take it, though. He shakes his head, and Damien withdraws his hand, tilting his head in curiosity. Clients aren't *required* to share their names with the hosts, but most of them do. Or at least a pseudonym, some more obviously fake than others. This client's reaction is unusual, but not unprecedented. Damien shrugs, slightly disappointed. This will probably be a one night deal, he thinks, feeling oddly sour about that, even though this is the first time he's ever seen the man. He smiles brightly to hide his thoughts.

"Well, I suppose we don't need to do much talking anyways, do we?" he asks, and *finally* the man cracks a smile, melting those dark grey eyes into something warm and liquid. Damien's stomach drops in a hot way, and he shivers.

"You'll have to use protection," Damien continues. "But we can do whatever you want, as long as it doesn't leave a mark." Might as well get the ground rules laid out and get to work. Even if this is a one time deal, Damien can already tell it's going to be *fun*.

The client still hasn't said anything, but he obviously can't keep his eyes off of Damien. Damien starts sliding the silk robe down his shoulders, and the man reaches out

to run a rough thumb across Damien's skin. A noise, almost like a growl, comes from deep within the client's chest, and then the man's huge hand is grabbing Damien's arm, pulling him in for a searing kiss. Damien melts against him, even with his slight height difference. Some clients don't do *this* either, but he's oh, so glad this client does.

The client's mouth is hot against his, and Damien can feel the man's thick cock pressing against Damien's thigh through the material of the business slacks. Damien slides his hands over the client's sides and down to his belt, finding the buckle. The man knocks Damien's hand away, though, stepping back and unbuckling himself, letting his slacks hang open before raising his hands to the button up shirt.

"Get on the bed," the man says, voice just as gruff as Damien had expected somehow, and Damien can't stop himself from grinning. The client is practically tearing his own clothes off, and Damien's surprised he doesn't lose a button on his shirt.

"Mmm, how do you want me then?" Damien asks, excited that his client is finally talking. He wishes they could go a bit slower, savor this more, but he has a feeling that's not what this is about. This is going to be fast and hard, and Damien's going to fucking *love* it.

The client doesn't answer, so Damien crawls onto the bed on his hands and knees, stretching out dramatically to show off his toned thighs. His robe is still sliding halfway down his shoulders. His silk boxers are still covering his ass and obscuring the plug he has holding his hole open and ready, and he's excited to see the client's reaction to *that*.

The man's large hands are on his back then, pushing the robe up to Damien's shoulders and pressing down hard enough that Damien's elbows buckle and his head

ends up on his crossed arms.

Clients so rarely take initiative like this. It's... refreshing. It's almost like *Damien* is the client, but Damien has no real illusions about that. None of this is about *him* specifically. It's about something the client needs. And that something just happens to come in the package of Damien's body. It's part of the whole deal. Damien may never see this man again after tonight, though, so he's going to let himself enjoy it.

The client's hands stroke down Damien's back, massaging into the meat of his ass through Damien's boxers. The man's thumb strokes across Damien's crack, catching on the plug there, and the man *groans*.

"You're –" the man says, but doesn't finish the thought. He pulls Damien's boxers down roughly, leaving them pooled around Damien's knees on the bed and pushes Damien's thighs open so his legs are half-trapped in the fabric. Damien's cock is rock hard now, bouncing against his stomach occasionally with the movements, smearing precum on the skin there.

And then the man *bites* him. Right on his ass.

"Hey!" Damien half yelps, indignant. He just told the man not to leave any marks!

The client *chuckles*, though, obviously somehow amused by Damien's protest. "Be still, brat," he says, running his thumb over the plug again and pushing on it slightly. Damien holds back a groan of his own at that. The client's tone is light and teasing, and Damien immediately forgives him. He doubts the bite was hard enough to leave a mark anyways.

"Just look at you," the client breathes, obviously enjoying what he's seeing. "Like a pretty present, all ready for me."

Damien finds himself nodding against his arms, his

indignation over the bite completely forgotten now. They haven't even really *done* anything yet, and Damien feels like begging.

The man uses his large hands to spread Damien even wider, and Damien nearly yelps again when he feels a hot, wet tongue run along the edge of his hole. His protests quickly turn into moans, however as the client works his tongue in alongside the plug. Damien pushes shamelessly back against him, his cock throbbing and his face absolutely scorching.

Even after several years of this job, some clients still surprise him.

Damien does end up begging after a few long moments of sweet torture. He clutches at the coverlet helplessly, pushing his ass back into the client's face, against that talented mouth.

"Please," Damien says, burying his face even further into his arms, embarrassed at how much he wants this. With a client, no less.

The client sits back and chuckles again. The low sexy noise goes straight to Damien's cock, but let's be honest, what wouldn't right now? Damien finally feels the plug slide out from his hole, tossed aside for now. He tries to push himself up on his arms again, but the man pushes him back down.

"Hold a sec," the man says, and Damien hears the tear of a foil packet, the wet noises of the man sliding the condom over his cock. Damien wanted to see. He wanted to lick. He wanted...

The man's thick cockhead is at his hole now though, and all of the breath leaves his body in one long groan. His thighs are burning with the effort of being in this position for such a long time, but he's a pro, and he's been in worse positions for longer. This... this is worth it.

He feels tears prick his eyes as the man slides into him. The plug only held him so open, and the man's cock is so thick...

Exquisite pain-pleasure, and Damien could swear he hears the low rumble of a growl again, but he's pretty sure that it's not even *possible* for a man to make that sort of sound.

The client fucks him slowly, too slowly, Damien thinks, but then he's rubbing Damien in all the right places, and Damien's crying out at every thrust. The man wraps his hand around Damien's cock, fingers ghosting over Damien's balls as he tugs. Damien cries out when he comes, falling forward even further, his chest supporting nearly all of his weight now as the man's pace increases to something nearly brutal momentarily before he groans, coming deep inside Damien. For once, some part of Damien regrets the condom. In his post orgasm haze, he has this wild desire to have this man fill him up. He nearly laughs at the idea, but catches himself before he can truly lose his composure.

It's never been like *this*.

Damien didn't even know it could *be* like this. The man slides out of his body, patting Damien's ass almost fondly. Damien hears the snap of the latex as the man ties off the condom.

Damien rolls over finally, feeling completely and utterly wrecked. He sees something inexplicable cross the man's face, but it's gone before Damien can think too hard about it. The man's mouth quirks up in a smile.

"You're something else," the client says, and it feels like the highest praise.

Damien can't even speak. He's supposed to be the host here, and he has absolutely no idea what he could possibly say to this man. How is the guy even *standing*

after that, Damien wonders.

The man turns to grab his clothes, though, and Damien sits up, feeling panicked all of the sudden. The client can't just leave, can he? After that?

But, no, of course he can. The client doesn't have to stay. It's just usually that most of them do for a while, to recoup a bit, maybe take a shower. But no, this man will go back through the Door, and Damien will probably never see him again. The Door is already there again for him, if it ever left. Melanie or one of the others will deal with the payment. Damien will –

"We should do this again," he says, forcing himself to speak up, hating the hopeful tone in his voice.

The client looks back at him, really staring at him for a second while he finishes up his buttons, and then he nods. Relief washes over Damien.

"See you around," the client says, and walks back through the door as if the entire world hadn't shifted on its axis.

Damien falls back against the bed.

What the fuck was that?

BY THE NEXT MORNING, Damien has convinced himself that last night was a dream. Or if it wasn't a dream, that he'll never see the other man again anyways, so he should just forget about the whole thing.

He wakes up early, just as he always does, and gets ready for his day. It's a Friday, and he needs to help open up the café. He makes his way downstairs, not even bothering with breakfast this morning. He pulls some espresso for Melanie, instead, making her an Americano and bringing it into her first floor office. A little habit that's

grown into a ritual over the years.

Melanie has an odd expression on her face this morning, though, when he walks through the door.

Damien tilts his head at her with an unspoken question as he sets the coffee cup down on her desk, avoiding a few new paper piles. She always somehow manages to accumulate more, even when he tries to keep it organized for her.

"Is everything okay?" he asks when she doesn't say what's on her mind.

Melanie holds his gaze for a moment longer, before gesturing for him to sit down. He feels a streak of fear at that. This is different. *Unusual*. He pulls out the chair in front of her desk and sits down, unease creeping its way up through his throat to sit there, tightly.

"You have a new regular," she says, and the words run through him like an electric current..

"No way," he breathes, and she raises her eyebrow at the reply, but pushes a piece of paper towards him. A contract. Melanie rarely ever brings up client-related business in *this* office, and a contract is even more surprising. His eyes nearly fall out of his head when he sees the amount of money being offered.

"What. The. Fuck?" he asks, glancing back up at her. She shrugs as if it's no big deal, but then her face breaks out into a grin.

"I don't know what the hell you did in there, Damien, but good job," she says. She doesn't add that it's a record contract, but Damien's pretty sure it is. He thinks even *Sebastian* would have told him about a contract like this, and Liam is pretty open about all of his clients and contracts.

"Weekly?" he asks, reading over the terms.

Melanie nods. "On Thursdays."

“Thursdays.” Damien can’t help but smile. This is the *best* outcome. He notices that there is no name on the contract anywhere, but that’s okay. He’s sure the client will open up eventually. Melanie, of course, would know the client’s name, but as much as he organizes everything that goes on in the café, Melanie is much more secretive about this side of the business. With good cause, Damien has to admit. Even if it can be annoying on occasions.

Well, it looks like his loans will *definitely* be paid off this year. And even better, Damien has something to look forward to on Thursdays from now on. Something very interesting, indeed.

The client might not have given Damien his name last night, but Damien will figure it out. He smiles to himself and runs his fingers across the paper, almost fondly.

A challenge. Damien *likes* a challenge.

THE END

DAMIEN’S STORY with his intriguing new client continues in the full-length novel, [The Problem Client](#).

THANKS FOR READING!

The First Door is part of a series of Café Seuil Short Stories that relate to my main [Men of Café Seuil series](#).

For more of Damien's story, pick up [The Problem Client](#) (Book 1 of the Men of Café Seuil series).

If you'd like to be notified of updates, sneak peeks, free short stories, and other bonus content, please join me on my newsletter: <https://kpmaxwell.com/newsletter>. I'd love to see you there! :)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KP Maxwell grew up watching too many soap operas. She loves writing sexy stories with silly or absurd premises and a touch of magic. Despite all the soap operas, her novels are typically low angst and low drama with happy endings.

KP lives in the Pacific Northwest with several fluffy creatures and an ever-tolerant life partner. She drinks too much coffee and enjoys cooking and gardening. She loves romances of all kinds, but M/M romances hold a special place in her heart.

