

The First Chapters Writing Contest

Firstborn Daughter by J Laurel Quinn
(Winning Entry from 2019)



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Harper Chase knows three things; Sam bought her magic from her father, Harper has feelings for Sam, and Sam's father wants Harper's magic, by any means necessary. Unfortunately for her, he's not the only one.

Chapter One

Less than 24 hours remained until my dad would finally hand me the keys to my future. After over a decade of working for the family business, I was finally going to take the reins. As often as I could, I would make contact with my dad to push past the barrier in his mind to hear his private thoughts, and I'd caught more than one whisper of doubt, curling around me like plumes of black smoke. I knew I could prove myself, if only he'd let me. If only he'd see what everyone else could.

My grandpa had opened Art's in the 1960's, and despite changing hands between his sons through the years, it had been a constant, surprising success, eventually landing in my father's lap.

My dad was eagerly anticipating his early retirement party at the end of the month, so given the choices of choosing me, my unwilling younger brother, or selling out, I was ecstatic to be the successor. The responsibility was a massive undertaking, but I'd been successfully running the restaurant, kitchen, dining room, and financials, for over five years, unofficially. I depended on my brother to tend to the bar and he did so with finesse. Barely a year younger than me, Charlie had become my right hand, making it perfectly clear that he was much happier behind the bar than behind a desk.

I know you'll do great, Harps, you're the best choice. You're the only choice.

Every time I embraced my brother, he made sure to send those thoughts to me, unmistakably loud and clear. He was the only one who knew about my 'weirdo-psychic-brain,' and I preferred to keep it that way, but it definitely made the tips flow when I'd bring that side of dressing the patron would forget to ask for!

Today, however, we were each in our own space; Charlie was finishing up a count of liquor bottles and my dad was prepping the kitchen before we opened with the rest of the staff. I took a step back, surveying the dining area, and unlocking the doors as I flipped the sign to Open. I had a few minutes before Chuck and Larry would meander in, take their seats at the end of the bar, and each ask for a blackberry bourbon, tall glass of water, and chef salad. Close to five years of ordering the same thing, they were safely predictable, even without a quick mind-read. After Chuck and Larry's entrance, the patrons filtered in and out, and the doubts of my father that lingered in my mind were buried. I turned around suddenly, knowing that someone needed my attention, and hurried over to Charlie, who was waiting for me at the edge of the bar.

"You need to talk to Dad, now," he seethed, his face uncharacteristically lined with anger.

"Why? What happened?" I whispered, unnerved by the muscle twitching in his jaw.

"Just... just talk to Dad," he said, holding up a hand and silencing me. "You need to hear it from him, not from me or my thoughts."

I nodded and made a quick circuit around the tables, filling glasses and delivering tickets before I headed through the doors toward the kitchen. I found him washing produce and leaned against the wall, quietly watching him. He had always been uncomfortable with my 'uncanny knowledge' of things, and despite being in adamant denial of my ability he wasn't fond of my touch, realizing it would reveal his secrets. Glancing at the clock, I knew I had less than ten minutes before the next handful of regular patrons came through the doors.

"I suppose you're upset with me, too?" he mumbled, shaking the water from the radishes and facing me.

"I might be if I knew what was going on. Charlie's pissed. What happened?"

Shaking his head as his shoulders slumped, the weight of the situation lay heavy on his mind. He refused to look my way and I could almost feel him shying away from my hands crossed over my chest.

"You know, I brought this place back to life, and though I appreciate you kids and all of your help over the years, I just... I just feel this is the best option for us, Harper. It's nothing against you kids, it's just business. The offer is simply too good. I'd be a fool to pass up the offer."

My brain stalled. Surely I'd misheard him, or perhaps he didn't mean what I thought he meant.

"Dad, what did you do?"

"Nothing is ever set in stone, Harper, no matter what you think! It's just a meeting! I wanted to tell you all after closing tomorrow night," he snapped, throwing the handful of radishes in a bowl, "that's when Mr. Kelly's associate will arrive to discuss the terms."

"You're not... no, Dad, come on, you're not thinking of selling, are you?" I said, trying to keep the panic from seeping into my words.

My heart hammered violently as I saw the plug pulled on my future. Surely he wouldn't do this to me? To our family?

"And so what if I am?" he said, his face contorted in a frustrated anger as he broke a celery stalk in his hands, "this is my pub, Harper Jean! Not your mother's, not your brother's, and certainly not yours, but mine, and I will do with it as I see fit!"

"Why now?" I cried, completely at a loss for understanding. "We're doing great right now! The books are good! Why--"

"Enough! Mr. Kelly is offering nearly four times what I'd ever get for this place on its best day."

"Were you even going to consult us?" I asked with hopelessness choking my words.

"No."

The word was iron and I knew as he spoke that there was no changing his mind. The room fell away as my future dissolved in front of me. My throat tightened and my breath came in ragged gasps as my eyes burned. He resumed washing the produce and ignored my presence.

"This is a family business, Dad," I said quietly, my shredded heart aching as I spat the words from my wounded spirit. "Mr. Kelly can go fuck himself if he thinks he can take this from us, and you can go fuck yourself if you think you can do this to your family."

I shoved the doors open and joined my brother at the bar, thankful that for once, it was empty, as was my section of the dining room.

"He told you?" he muttered, leaning against the bar as I nodded. "You okay?"

"No. I told him to go fuck himself."

"Holy shit, did you really?" he marveled with a barking laugh.

His laugh died when I failed to laugh alongside him and he let a short breath escape from his lips.

"I'm proud of you, Harp. Stickin' up for yourself like that. All of the shit that Dad's put you through with this place, the long hours, the yelling, the constant criticism, you've taken it all in stride. I know Dad isn't the best, but you? You're the best of us all"

and you've never taken advantage of anyone. Even with your X-men shit."

"Charlie, if he sells, what do we do? Where do I go? My loft is part of the property. Not only will I be jobless, I'll be homeless. Dad has to know that, right?"

"We need to figure out why he's really selling. He nearly threw the last guy who offered through the window," Charlie growled, "what makes this bastard any different?"

"Don't know," I shrugged, "he knows that I can only know things through physical contact. He's kept me at arm's reach for years, especially when he's keeping something from me. Never really was a hugger, "

"Back to work, sister," he barked playfully as the bell above the door rang.. The grin that usually came to my face when Charlie played tough-guy failed, but I masked myself with my customer-friendly waitress face; seating my patrons and earning every penny of the tips they'd leave.

Just a few hours later, one of the waitresses called in sick, and suddenly, I was juggling twice as many tables as usual; and exceeding expectations as usual. Instead of playing hostess and waitress, the wait staff took turns seating people if we had room in our section, and I had a single two-person table left available when the bell chimed. I made my usual welcoming greeting and caught myself as my brain completely stalled. Every now and then I'd see a customer that I wouldn't mind leaving my number for, but this guy was in a league of his own.

"Just... one tonight?" I said, stammering over the words as a not-so-subtle smirk graced the lips of my newest customer.

He nodded and I led him to my last table, discreetly ravaging his fit figure as I placed a menu in front of him. I fought the urge to make contact with his skin, just a simple brush of my fingers on his in passing, just to take a quick peek in his mind. His hair was tousled in a way that made me wonder if he paid someone to do that or if he simply ran his fingers through it a few times, and I leaned toward the latter, judging by the two-days worth of dark scruff on his cheeks.

"Can I get you started with something to drink?" I asked, focusing on anything but those honey-colored flecks in his green eyes.

"Beer for now, please," he said, his voice a deep, husky tone.

"Anything in particular?"

"Anything cheap and bottled."

"I'll be right back."

Grabbing up the menu, I headed toward the bar and bent to stow the menu under

the bar top. I knew he was watching me. Turning to face him, his sharp gaze rose to mine, his smirk growing. He didn't look embarrassed to be caught checking out the rear end of his waitress, nor did he look away like anyone else would have.

"Harp?"

Charlie's voice broke my stare and I took the outstretched bottle from my brother's hand, pausing so he could twist the cap off before I started for the table. Instinctively, I doubled back to the bar, grabbed a glass, and dropped only two ice cubes in the glass, instead of filling it as we normally did, before filling it with water. I set down the beer and he held up a hand.

"Could I trouble you for-" he began, stopping short as I set the glass in front of him. "There's only two ice cubes in that glass."

"Did you want more or less?" I asked rhetorically, trusting my gut.

"No," he mumbled, his brows furrowed as he stared thoughtfully at the glass. "I prefer only a couple ice cubes instead of a full glass. It's weird, but...here it is."

Fully aware of his eyes on my backside again, I turned from the table and made a round in my area, doting on my customers as I always did. I prided myself on knowing what people wanted before they could say it, even if I didn't touch them, and it always left a good tip. I wasn't psychic, but it managed to freak out some patrons who were... unfamiliar with my instincts.

Instead of asking if he'd like another beer when he finished the bottle only moments later, I grabbed another from the bar before heading his way. I knew my father would have reprimanded me for assuming the customer wanted another drink, but he was still out of my sight, and I knew what my customers wanted. Despite wanting to hear his gravelly tone again, I wanted a decent tip better, and there was no better way of earning a tip than by providing good service.

Bottle down, cap twisted, and gone. This became my silent signature every time the empty bottle hit the table, and the entire time, his gaze was locked on me.

By the time the dining room had begun to empty the other waitresses were begging for a break. Covering only five tables over the dining room would be a nice change in routine for me, so as the girls ducked out back for their much-needed smoke break, I rang up tickets and brought the pot of decaf along with the water pitcher.

"Anytime you're ready, folks," I said to each of the remaining tables as I laid the bill face-down on the table, refilling coffee and water where needed.

Passing by the table, I noticed his brow furrowed as he peeled the labels from the

bottle. I knew he was hungry, I could practically hear his stomach growl from here.

"Need something to soak up all that beer?" I asked, resting a menu in front of him once more.

"Might be a good idea," he murmured, "I'll let you know when I decide."

"Just give a holler," I said, lifting a shoulder.

"What should I holler?" he asked, wearing a sly smirk that dripped with a seduction he was fluent in. "I'd hate to just yell out and get someone else by mistake."

"I'm Harper."

"Sam."

He held out his hand and I shook it. His handshake was firm and utterly masculine as his calloused palms met mine briefly. Strong tingles radiated into my fingers and settled deep in my belly as I refocused my mind to him, and despite being curious, I didn't hear a word, not a single sound, from his mind. I slipped my hand from his and curled it into a soft fist as the tingles dissipated, a completely new sensation.

"Like I said, give a holler."

He gave a small nod as I turned away, headed to the table that I knew was ready to go. I passed Charlie and pointed a finger at him.

"Not even a sound, Charlie, I don't want to hear it," I said before he could open his mouth to give his commentary on the lone customer, filling a tall glass with beer as he chuckled.

I rolled my eyes as I took a stack of plates from a table, balancing them through the doors to the kitchen as the waitresses returned.

"Table 2 is on their way out, tip's on the table," I said, pushing Sam from my mind, for the moment, at least. "Table 6 is taking their dear sweet time but they've got their bill, and the guy from Table 7 is pulling out his wallet now, so go bat those lashes and get a good tip, Whitney."

The girls returned to the floor as I leaned against the bar, catching my breath as I surveyed the room. One customer remained in my section and his eyes were still on me.

"This guy weirding you out yet?" Charlie muttered in my ear, "he hasn't looked anywhere but you, Harper, and I don't like it."

"He's had five beers," I sighed, "he'll order something to eat now, have another beer, and be gone."

"Need me to call a cab for this guy?" Charlie offered quietly. "Five is kind of pushing it."

"No, he didn't drive," I said slowly, once again trusting my gut. "Besides, he's made up his mind on what he wants."

"Okay, Harp, I know better than to argue with you," Charlie grinned as I headed toward Sam.

"So, what are you hungry for tonight?" I asked, notepad in-hand as my mind dwelled on how nicely my hand fit in his.

"Burger and fries sound good," he said, closing the menu and extending it to my outstretched hand.

"With pickles, lettuce," I said as I wrote, watching his eyes grow in surprise, "and... steak sauce?"

"Now, how did you know that?"

"I'm just good at my job," I said, adding a wink for good measure and a good tip as I turned toward the kitchen.

I put the ticket in and glanced at the clock before seeing Sam pull his phone from his pocket. His thumbs rushed across the screen, and just as quickly as it had appeared, the phone was stowed. Only an hour left until close and I wanted nothing more than a hot shower and sleep. I grabbed the prepared plate, making sure I had a bottle of steak sauce handy, and stopped by the bar to get Sam another beer before I set the plate in front of him, followed by the beer and steak sauce.

"Thank you," he mumbled, watching me with a new expression I couldn't quite figure out.

"Let me know if you need anything else, otherwise, I'll bring the bill when you're ready for it."

"How will you know-you know what? Never mind, I don't want to know how you know," he said, stuffing a fry in his mouth as he sprinkled steak sauce on the beef patty.

I hid my smirk and started wiping down tables, fully aware that Sam was watching me from the corner of my eye, and that Charlie was keeping a close eye on Sam. The funny feeling I'd grown to trust crept up my spine. It climbed up each vertebrae in my spine and I shivered as it made my head fuzzy and strange. I groaned and straightened my back, stretching backwards. An intuitive gut-check, it was just as reliable as my mental gifts, and I trusted both.

"Charlie, make sure the beer's fully stocked in the cooler," I muttered.

I began pushing a few tables together and Charlie cocked his head.

"Big group coming in soon," I said quietly, aware that I still had a paying customer

in-house as I stuck my head in the kitchen.

I didn't see my dad anywhere, just Seth, a long-time employee, who gave a cheerful smile as he held a hand up in greeting.

"Keep everything on, Seth, especially the fryers. We've got a big group of guys coming in anytime and I want to be ready for them. I don't know about you, but I don't want to be here long after close."

"Roger that, boss," he said with a salute.

Seth, along with the other staff members that had seen my mind in action, had long since grown to trust my commands. The stranger the better, in his opinion. I returned to the dining area, where Sam was soaking up steak sauce with his few remaining fries. I tore his ticket from my notepad, tallying up the six bottles of beer with the food, and set the bill face-down as I always did.

"You're good, I'll give you that," he said with the smirk I knew was trademarked and well-used.

"Thank you, whenever you're ready, let me know, I'm in no hurry tonight," I said, jumping slightly when my name was angrily shouted from the kitchen.

As I paused a step away from the kitchen doors, they burst open, revealing my dad, red-faced, frustrated, and angry.

"You called?" I asked, preparing myself for an onslaught and hoping Sam wouldn't overhear.

A quick glance over my shoulder and I knew he was getting a front-row seat to the 'Humiliation of Harper, Volume III.'

"I must have missed the part where Harper got put in charge!" he bellowed, the vein in his forehead bulging as it usually did. "Because there's no way she would have told my staff, in my pub, to leave all of the grills in my kitchen on with an empty dining room! Those bills are in my name, and it's my bank account they come out of!"

I opened my mouth to speak and he held a finger in my face. For the first time in my life, I wasn't sure what was going to happen and it scared me.

"You're not in charge, Harper and you never will be. This is the last straw," he scolded, his face still beet-red, "I sent everyone else home and I've shut down the kitchen. You're going to scrub it floor-to-ceiling until I can see my face in the stainless. Do you understand me? Now, put those tables back where they belong!"

I couldn't speak and barely managed to nod. He'd never, ever been this furious with me and I didn't understand why now he chose to blow his top. I'd never been wrong and I'd never doubted my instincts. Was I sometimes cocky about it? Sure, but

never wrong.

"Start cleaning up out here, you have a long night ahead of you."

The doors closed as he pushed through them and I steadied myself on a tabletop as I felt Charlie's arm around me.

It's okay, Harp. We'll do it together.

Casting a glance behind me, I realized the dining area was vacant. Sam had left his money on the table and had disappeared, probably when my father had begun berating me. I grabbed a basin, began loading the dishes into it, and grabbed the cash on top of the bill. My lip trembled and I bit it hard to stop any tears. I left the basin beside the register, rang in the \$24.42 bill, and as I placed the twenty and five in the till, I pulled out the fifty-eight cents in change and dropped it into the tiny, mostly-empty, 'take a penny' jar.

"I'm going to run this into the kitchen for you, okay?" Charlie said, suddenly at my side with the basin already in hand.

I nodded closing my eyes as the still, small shiver crept upwards.

"Come back quickly, okay?" I asked quietly, "that group that Dad didn't believe were coming? Well, they'll be here anytime."

The bell above the door chimed a moment later, and with five minutes until close, a group of fifteen entered. I could have turned them away, it was closing time and the kitchen was already shut down, but I wasn't going to let my dad's pride stop me from serving. Not to mention I desperately needed the money after Sam's bitter tip.

"Harper?" Charlie's voice broke me from my thoughts and I turned to him. "I can tell them we're closed."

"No, we're going to serve them," I breathed. "I knew they were coming and Dad wouldn't even listen. We need to give them really good service right now, they're going to be really good patrons tonight. It's only me and you, but we've got this."

"Okay, let's do this."

Charlie had never doubted me and had always believed me when I had said something completely off-the-wall like that and god, I loved him for it.

"Turn the grills and fryers on first, get everything running again, then get Dad to help," I instructed, "I'll start them off with beers. I'm going to need you in the kitchen, can you do that?"

"Absolutely I can, sister," he said, kissing my cheek and bounding behind the doors. I took a breath and faced the men, greeting the latecomers as I did everyone else. Three hours after the restaurant normally closed, my massive cleaning duties were

finished, and I locked up the back door, making sure the alarm was activated. Climbing the metal flight of stairs at the side of the building, I unlocked the door to my loft and groaned as the lingering scent of the steaks Charlie had grilled for the latecomers wafted toward me. Ignoring my growling stomach, I kicked my shoes off and headed toward the shower, eager to wash off the day's frustrations and disappointments.