

RUBY INK

L.J. Wilson

Copyright © 2015 L.J. Wilson

Chapter One

Seven Years Earlier

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking it’s beautiful out here.” Ruby leaned left, her fingers paddling through the lake’s supple current. *I’m thinking I’d rather be touching you...*

“This can just be a sunset rowboat ride on Butterfield Lake. You know that, right?”

“I know.” *That’s why it’s not going to be, Aaron Clairmont... Not even close...*

Ruby Vasquez was twenty, the oldest virgin she knew. Way older than her best friend, Tandy, who’d done it back in the tenth grade. “What are you waiting for?” Tandy would ask. “You’re not even that much of a good Catholic girl.” Tandy liked to tease about this and the town’s ongoing wager: “Name one guy who hasn’t lost twenty bucks betting he’d be the first to bed Ruby Vasquez.”

The thought echoed and Ruby admired the man pulling the oars.

Tandy, we have a winner...

There were patchy sweat marks on Aaron’s snug T-shirt, the kind of fit that made you look. It was a three-mile sail to the east end of Butterfield Lake. He wouldn’t let her touch an oar. Between acts of gallantry like this, it was never *what* Ruby had been waiting for, but *who*. It began with a fluttery feeling—Ruby wanted to know more about the second eldest Clairmont brother. But the sensation also served as a warning, reminding her about the longshot odds of fairytale endings. Thanks to Tandy’s train wreck of a love life, Ruby had witnessed romantic

disaster. She'd seen it happen to her own father. Ruby's mother, Marcela, ran off when Ruby was eight, devastating Dante Vasquez, who was the good Catholic.

So Ruby had waited, wanting to see where those fluttery feelings went. Over time, the relationship had grown. It had even gotten pissed off now and again. Aaron could be aloof. Not every question about him came with a straight answer. Still, for Ruby, the feeling intensified.

Today Aaron wore a backwards ball cap and reflective sunglasses—Ruby caught a glimpse of herself in the lenses. She thought she'd hit the mark on sexy, wearing a halter top and denim shorts. A pair of thick-soled Keds grounded the look. Her gaze drifted, concentrating on the rest of Aaron. The ball cap and sunglasses framed a well-defined nose, square jaw. But it matched Aaron, all of him a hard mix of finely proportioned olive-toned man and muscle.

Clairmont wasn't quite the given family name, and his Mediterranean heritage made Aaron the *always-in-need-of-a-shave* guy, though not this day. Today he was stubble-free.

His clean-shaven face was the second thing Ruby noticed when he picked her up. The first was a nervous edge—it was so *not* Aaron. But their destination probably had something to do with that. Mayor Vasquez had been oblivious to any plan, preoccupied with Nickel Springs' matters. Ruby offered the expected peck on his cheek. Aaron said something about not getting her home too late. Dante Vasquez stopped his phone conversation long enough to say, "I trust you, Aaron."

As they got in the car, he said, "I've never lied to the Mayor when it comes to his daughter. Fine line, but I think I'm still on the side of truth."

Unlike Ruby's father, Tandy was privy to the details. Days before, the two girls sat on Tandy's bed where Ruby blurted out her secret—"I'm going to sleep with Aaron... on Friday. This Friday."

Painting her nails, Tandy froze in mid-stroke. “Aaron...” she’d said, her gaze rising. “Clairmont?” Then she smiled. “Careful, Rube, he’s not what you want. The *Tribe of Five*, they’re not the marrying kind. Something off in the DNA. Five kids and the parents never even tied the knot! But hey...” she paused to sip her rum and Coke, “I’ll be around next week when he’s not.”

Ruby had folded her arms, challenging Tandy. “And just where do you think Aaron will be?”

“In Vegas,” Tandy had said, swiping red lacquer over a pinky nail. “Fucking a showgirl and spending his virgin lottery win.”

The snarky remark wasn’t totally out of left field. Tandy was right about the Clairmont rep. But that didn’t mean she was right about Aaron. She couldn’t be. The boat moved along and so did Ruby’s thoughts.

“What are you thinking now?” Aaron asked, pulling back the oars.

“What makes you say I’m thinking anything different?”

“Because you looked happy when you said it was beautiful out here. Now, not so much.”

Ruby sat up tall and breathed the kind of breath that cleared cobwebs. He knew her so well. She relaxed. “I was thinking about this,” she said, nudging a blue polka dot Ked at a tarp-covered bundle. It put a chaperone-size gap between them. “I thought today, of all days, we’d be closer. Maybe even on land.”

“We’re about to fix that.” Aaron’s chin, divot included, motioned over his shoulder. Ruby leaned to get a better look. There was a cove and the boat glided in past tall reeds. Aaron jumped out into shin-deep water and pulled the vessel ashore. Then he offered Ruby his hand.

“Aaron, what is this place?” she said, taking in the view.

“Welcome to the Rose Arch Inn.” A muscular arm stretched toward the vista. “It was the honeymoon hot spot back in the 1970’s. The inn is beat, not even safe to go inside. But it’s a beautiful piece of property. I thought it was kind of... us.”

In front of them was a sandy shore that led to a grassy knoll. “Beautiful ruins,” Ruby said, surveying a gentle slope that bordered the defunct inn. Dilapidated and boarded up, she could imagine the appeal—a romantic haven in rural Chisholm County, upstate New York. “How did you know about it?”

“Years ago, my father... Pop was the overseer, even after the Rose Arch went out of business.”

Ruby took a turn around the beach and spotted a neatly mowed swatch of grass. She walked toward it. “Well, I don’t know how that happened...” She turned back. “You did this.”

Aaron’s broad shoulders shifted. “When you said... Well, when you told me *this*,” he said, arms wrapping around her from behind, “is what you want, did you really think I was going to let it happen at my house—with my brothers and sister wandering out... or worse, in?”

Damn, when Tandy hears about this...

Ruby leaned into his hard body. She felt denim jeans strain against her shorts, his pent up desire pressing into her. A nudge of guilt pushed in too, Ruby aware of how patiently Aaron had waited. “I didn’t think about *where*. I was more focused on us.”

Aaron turned her in his arms. “I never worry about *us*. So I wanted to make sure the where would be worth remembering, even years from now.”

Guilt melted into sweet expectation.

“Although I do think I’m the first person to cross Butterfield Lake with a lawn mower in their boat.”

“Sorry I missed that.” Ruby smiled, watching Aaron turn the covert setting into a romantic oasis. There were blankets and a lantern and music. Nearby, she spied a neatly stashed pile of firewood and watched as Aaron turned it into a crackling fire. He returned to the boat, and her eyes widened as comfort items continued to come ashore, including a cooler. Normally, it would be packed with beer or the fizzy wine coolers she liked. The pink ones with shiny gold labels. Tonight the cooler held a bottle of champagne. Ruby couldn’t remember if she’d ever had champagne.

Aaron caught her nervous glance. “If champagne is too over the top, your usual’s at the bottom.”

Ruby’s jaw dropped another notch.

“And no, I’m not that smooth. Honor sent the champagne.”

“Did she?” she said, seeing a brimming picnic basket.

Aaron set the basket next to the romantic vignette. He returned to Ruby, taking her hands in his. “I wanted perfect. Perfect meant my food contribution was to ask my sister. Honor came up with the whole basket. Everything. Right down to some fancy French dish she said would travel well.”

“So does she know...”

Aaron shook his head. “Just a picnic, that’s all.”

Ruby nodded, a little relieved. Aaron was tight with his brothers and sister—the *Tribe of Five*. Of course, right now, there didn’t seem to be anybody on planet Earth but the two of them. Ruby stared at his prep work, which was stunning and appreciated. Aaron held on tighter and Ruby tried to settle the flutter. Could this be as perfect as it seemed? Who gets it right on the first try—or with the first guy?

Aaron disrupted the thought, moving them toward the blankets. They kicked off their shoes and he flipped the ball cap Frisbee style. The sunglasses followed. His eyes, they always nudged that flutter toward out of control. They were like coming across shiny sea glass on a heated day, a misty sexy shade of green. The genetic fallout, she guessed, from parents at near opposite ends of the color wheel. Ruby couldn't resist kissing him hard. "I hope Honor didn't make anything that spoils."

"Tell me you're thinking about food."

No, she definitely wasn't. She was thinking about the rest of her life. Ruby read that once, how girls... women projected the future onto men, and men just projected into the moment. But that wasn't Aaron. With that in mind, Ruby tugged at Aaron's shirt, which did move fast over his head. A year ago, their relationship was no more than polite hellos, glances Ruby stole of a shirtless Aaron painting the Vasquez house. It was one of several jobs he held. He never spoke about his other jobs in detail—like his future was a secret.

Right now, Ruby was fine with future secrets. She ran her fingers over muscular shoulders and Aaron's taut stomach. As she did, Ruby remembered when touching Aaron was a fantasy. He was six-years older, making a college girl's emotions feel more like a crush. With the paint job complete, Aaron had asked Ruby to meet him by the garage. She thought he'd seen through her, and Ruby was certain he wanted to say, "I get it, kid. I'm flattered. But I'm a few light years beyond what you're offering..."

It had sounded more like "Whatever guy gets that smile every day, I hope he knows he's damn lucky. I hope he treats you damn good." Having trudged miserably out to the garage, Ruby almost asked Aaron to repeat what he'd really said. There was no everyday guy, and Ruby recovered by telling Aaron as much. When she'd told the story to Tandy, her reaction was

disbelief: “What do you plan on doing with him, Rube?” She’d stared at Tandy, who rolled her eyes. “I mean, I doubt Aaron Clairmont bowls or is willing to show up at Daddy’s house for Sunday dinner.”

Actually, he’d done both. Of course, now Aaron was doing something that came more naturally, kissing Ruby, which was familiar and intense. But even that was different. Instead of an evening’s end, it felt like a beginning. As much as Aaron’s rep said otherwise, things hadn’t progressed much past that. This had been at Aaron’s insistence. What was she comfortable with? How did she want this to work? At first Ruby didn’t know how to respond—the words, the terms, the limits—and Aaron said that was enough answer for him.

Tonight there was the same gentleness to Aaron’s touch, but the limits were gone. He unknotted the back of the halter top, his mouth moving deftly over Ruby’s neck, her shoulders. If there was hesitation, it belonged to the sun, which was taking its sweet time setting. Firelight flickered, illuminating the moment as the simple fabric fell away. Aaron’s gaze caught on the white lacy bra. Ruby felt her cheeks redden. “I figured white something was appropriate.” Her own gaze slid to his fingers, which rode the waistband of her shorts. “The panties match. Kind of silly, huh?”

“Kind of perfect.” Aaron’s mouth moved downward and so did his hands, permission granted and encouraged as the shorts came off.

While Ruby suspected “*he had this*,” the eager roar she’d come ashore with began to fade. Fears about clumsy fumbling and inexperience seeped into her head. What if he was disappointed? What if everything else worked and this... this thing that was such a fixation for the world was a total dud? The kissing went on, the touching a prelude, and Ruby’s worries began to evaporate, like raindrops on a sizzling surface. He was confident enough for both of

them, assuring Ruby that clumsy and fumbling would not happen. Aaron's hands moved fluidly over Ruby's skin, and the flutter ignited sensations she could barely describe. It was a good thing she didn't have to detail them, her mouth too busy with Aaron's. Ruby boldly reached for his belt buckle... then a button... then a zipper.

If desire could be captured in a body part, Aaron could be the poster-boy for perfected hard-ons. Moments later, he was ready for skinny dipping. But swimming wasn't on his mind. Wondering what did come next, Ruby plucked at her bra strap. "Don't you... um, want this off? I laughed when I tried it on. I figured I wore it longer in the fitting room than I would when we got to... here." Ruby's dark eyes danced around a secluded setting she couldn't have imagined—or maybe she could, which was why she'd waited for exactly this man.

Aaron kissed her again, hard. The kind of kiss that could take a girl right off her feet, and it did, the two of them sinking onto the layers of blankets. "I'm pacing myself. I, um... I hope you didn't make other plans."

"Not a one," she said, her fingers stroking the ropey muscle of his arm. His bare chest against her body—it made Ruby wonder who the hell invented clothes. She didn't want this moment, or any other with him, to end.

Aaron's actions mirrored Ruby's thoughts as his hand moved to a tattoo, an Asian symbol that marked her left thigh. It stood for love and it matched the one branded on Aaron's right thigh. They'd gotten them together—months before this night. "Maybe I didn't understand at the time," he said. "But I get the tats now."

"Do you?"

"Yeah," he said, reaching for the clasp on the bra. It fell away from her body, and his mouth seemed to move automatically to her breasts. Ruby gasped. Something more primal than

planned. His warm hand drifted back to her tattoo, and Ruby hoped that one day they'd each have the full set of three. Their actions didn't fit the norm. Ruby got it. Who gets matching tattoos before having sex? They did. The exotic symbols stood for love, happiness and peace. Somewhat skeptical, Aaron had agreed to earn the ink with her, one tattoo at a time.

At the moment, Aaron's ideas about pacing seemed to have eased up, and he murmured softly, "Damn... well, we can do it more than once..." He skimmed the silky white panties away, two bodies making one indentation in the sand. After getting the first tattoos, maybe in topsy-turvy celebration, this had halfway happened. Ruby had been wearing a skirt, and Aaron took things a step farther. Admittedly, she hadn't wanted him to stop, and Aaron made her come right there in the front seat of his vintage Dodge Challenger—a car name that Ruby found ironically appropriate. "In case you're wondering," he'd said, "there's plenty more where that came from." She'd said nothing, panting deep breaths, and struggling to determine up from down.

I'm done wondering, Aaron... I want to know... everything. His mouth made unprecedented progress, Ruby realizing the benefit of nakedness and private stretch of beach. His entire body continued on a downward path, and Ruby had a fine inkling about where he was going. She wasn't that naïve—she read Cosmo. She'd listened to enough Tandy talk: "*Well, if actual sex is so off limits, what about... you know... I swear, it's hotter than it sounds, Rube, especially if you're on the receiving end...*" Like the scene in the car, melting into what Aaron offered would have been easy. God knew it was tempting. But Ruby didn't like easy. She rarely fell to temptation. She pushed up on her elbows. "Wait... Don't."

From his thigh-level point of view, Aaron looked up. He looked confused. "Ruby, I promise... You're gonna love it."

She smiled, a touch of shyness nudging in between them. “I know. Well, I imagine I will. But next time... okay?”

“Why?” Ruby wiggled away and rose to her knees, Aaron followed. Their fingers tangled together, the way they did when walking down the street. Of course, there was a tad more intimacy in their clothes-less state. Aaron grinned, which was less than full, a story about a tire-iron to his jaw leaving the left side of his face numb. “Let me guess,” he said. “It’s not how you pictured this happening.”

“No. It’s more about me thinking half of this should be about you. I made you wait in ways you never imagined.”

His brow knotted. “Ruby, with any other girl, I wouldn’t have cared. I might have called her a cock tease. I don’t know. It’s been a long time since I thought about other girls.”

It was such an honest Aaron remark. “So all this waiting, it’s been just fine with you?”

“You know the answer to that. But what you might not realize is that if you wanted this to play out like we were living in the last century that would be fine too.” Aaron leaned and Ruby’s gaze traveled the slope of rigid arm muscle. Discarded silky white lingerie hooked around his fingers. “If you had told me it needed to be a white dress... and a church... and a priest before we got to here, I’d be good with that.”

Oh my, take that, Tandy...

Ruby smiled at the potential promise. Aaron let go of the lingerie. His hands burrowed through her dark hair, her bare body pressing into his. He laid them down on the blanket where instinct and tradition took over. The intimate nature of things unfolded, Ruby answering every movement with a knowledge she did not know she possessed. Her fingers dug into his strong back. Her breath got away as Aaron skillfully repeated the moment in his car, and this time

Ruby's hand cupped hard over his, Aaron whispering, "You are so fucking hot, Ruby... so ready for this..."

Everything plunged into a rolling wave of hot light, Ruby gasping as the feeling seemed to spill over to Aaron. His cock pulsed harder against her. Conversely, his hand eased between her legs. She could feel a pounding in his chest that matched hers. His breaths were intense, different than the ones that went with the five-mile runs that started Aaron's days. And while they were clearly at the precipice, and sex could very well happen this way—the way it did in lovely romances and sweet ending movies—Ruby felt Aaron had earned more. That and maybe she wanted a taste of the bad-boy she'd heard tell of. "I want to know something," she whispered. "And I want the truth."

"Always," he said.

"Does this, um... *position*, meet your wildest expectations?" Ruby's hand was around the aching length of him now, feeling a little sticky wetness on her fingers.

Aaron pushed into the pressure she provided. He stared willfully into her eyes and swallowed hard. He looked a little dizzy. "Position? I don't... Yeah, this will work fine."

"Work, yes. Sounds like the diagram model the Church passes out to first-timers ten minutes before the honeymoon... sure. But is *this way*... is it what you want?"

His fingers, tangling in a whorl of hair, found just the right spot again.

Ruby tensed. She forced herself to focus, concentrate, to keep from spiraling to a place to which he knew the way. "You did all this for me," she said, her gaze leaving Aaron's to note the thoughtful setting. "I want to do something for you. I want this to be something you'll remember. So confess. Tell me how this Aaron Clairmont first-timer fantasy goes."

He half smiled, which really was his whole smile, and kissed her. “You mean like did I purposely leave my blindfold and handcuffs at home?”

She shrugged.

“Not my style.”

“I didn’t think so. But surely you’ve envisioned something more than what maybe I’d *mapped out*.”

“Ah,” he said, nodding. “I get it. Something between the Church approved version and my sex-crazed rep.”

She nodded back.

“No,” he said. “Us, right here...” But Aaron stopped talking because he knew that Ruby knew he was lying. His fingers glided over her bare skin, more aggressively over a taut nipple.

“I want to know. I want the piece of Aaron that you’ve been keeping from me.”

“That piece, huh?”

She nodded again.

“Are you sure?” His abruptness gave the flutter a jolt.

The jolt radiated through her body as he slid a finger inside her. Ruby’s teeth sunk into her bottom lip, enticed by the preview. “I’m sure. I trust you, Aaron... completely. So,” she said, her mouth moving to his earlobe, nipping at it, “how does it go? I don’t know what it is, but I bet something more than a lame missionary position has kept you up nights.”

“Kept me up nights?” His arms slid beneath her, cocooning her safely before coming clean. His breath was warm in her ear. “Baby, you’ve no idea. More like got me through. Know that you make for one hot fantasy. But I’m still not sure...”

“Be sure,” she said, inviting Aaron Clairmont’s imagination into their new personal space. “Take a chance. I took a while to get here, but now that I am...” And Ruby knew this was true. Months ago, sex wouldn’t have been this freeing and trust-filled.

He hesitated, still using the caution that had ruled their world. Ruby put an end to that, applying a tad more pressure. She allowed instinct and Tandy notes to steer, pushing against Aaron’s body until she looked down over him. She kissed him, starting with the divot on his chin and progressing to his broad chest. She kept moving, onto his stomach, finding faint scents of aftershave fading as she went. The rawer, saltier taste of skin dominated, the smell of simple soap—a splash of wicked desire. But when she got to the trail of hair, the one that usually disappeared into his jeans, Aaron grabbed her by the shoulders. “Good guess. But that’s more fantasy B. Not meant for this exact moment. I guess we’re on the same page there.”

“Why not you?” Ruby said, popping back up.

He looked confused, like maybe the answer wasn’t so obvious. Then he recovered. “For the same reasons you passed.”

“So then give me an instruction,” she said, a shiver of curiosity rushing through her. “Tell me what you want.”

“An instruction. Really?” It wasn’t like Ruby to take instruction. “Okay... Before, you were on your knees, facing me.”

“Right,” she said, scrambling back to that position. He rose to meet her, his cock pulsing against her body. At the same time, Ruby felt herself mirroring the desire he physically displayed. But hers was all internal, a hollow of longing. His hands reached around, cupping her ass. He’d done that in the car too, the first time there wasn’t fabric between Aaron and what he wanted.

“In any good fantasy—and there were plenty—I’d get out of bed and climb into a fucking ice-cold shower, where I ended up... Well, never mind, that’s just embarrassing.”

“Okay, but now I’m here... play it out. No stopping, no shower, no more fantasy.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed, his head shook a bit as if someone had stolen his reserved Ruby. “You continue to amaze me, Ruby Vasquez. Know that.”

She smiled.

He didn’t. “But if you’re sure you want this...” He swallowed again, though it seemed as if she should be the one displaying nerves. “Turn around,” he said, his deep voice commanding.

She did.

Aaron’s hands, a stiff cock, and his fantasy overtook everything. Another shiver rushed Ruby, but it was all expectation and satisfaction. She’d surprised him with more than what he’d politely anticipated.

While she got the gist of where this was going, she loved it when Aaron continued on, his body dominating hers until she felt her knees sink farther into the soft sand. She sensed Aaron’s restraint as he made a steady progression. At first his hands made the most impact, wrapped around her lower back, his mouth moving over the bump of her spine. She felt him retreat slightly before kisses made contact with places Ruby had not considered, his teeth nipping invitingly into the flesh on a different cheek. Then things started to change. Aaron was closer again, completely in control. His body moved over Ruby’s until her position had become—*submissive*. His hands were no longer the most penetrating part, and Ruby felt only a moment of discomfort. His voice was right there, demanding to know, as he entered her, if it was okay. She couldn’t find words, the feeling explosive and poignant.

“Yes,” she managed in a husky whisper. “God, yes...”

And the piece of Aaron she'd demanded showed up on cue. The rhythm grew more forceful, the moment electric. "Ruby," he said, the thrusting picking up pace. "You're... It's beyond any fantasy. This is..." But he didn't finish the sentence. A sense of touch reassured Ruby. His hands caressed her body, contrasting the forcefulness with which he took her. It went on like this—like music that built and crescendoed—Aaron reaching around to touch that intimate spot of flesh. Ruby's hand pressed hard over his. Natural sounds rose from that span of private beach, a breathless Aaron coming first, Ruby quickly following.

Sometime later, stars showed up and the earth went back to its regular rotation. As they lay on the blankets, Aaron's hand trailed along Ruby's collarbone and the delicate angle of her jaw. He kissed her and Ruby wanted to say, *"To hell with white dresses and marriage."*

It was Aaron who seemed to recover reality, suggesting something else. "Damn, Ruby. Tell me we haven't earned happiness in permanent ink?"

So months later, it was something more than the world spinning off its axis or turning inside out. It was the opposite of orgasmic. It was utter devastation, the truth hitting Ruby like a hellish branding iron. This would be her forever tattoo, her last vivid image of Aaron as she watched his body slam, face first, into the hood of his beloved Dodge Challenger. It took four officers from the Nickel Springs police force to get him into that position. Damn, it had only taken some smooth courting for Aaron to get Ruby into the position he'd wanted. Watching, a grimace that sounded like a dying animal erupted from her throat. You could hear the dent being made as they repeatedly smashed Aaron's head into the hood.

Ruby stepped forward, but Dante held her back. This couldn't be happening. This couldn't be real. And yet whirling lights, big-lunged orders about not moving, an officer

aggressively kicking Aaron's legs apart as they searched for other weapons assured her that it was. Reporters were already on the scene, recording the heinous reality. From the trunk of Aaron's car, an officer held up two tightly packaged clear plastic bags of white powder. They kept smashing his hand hard and Ruby thought she heard the bones crumble. She wondered if it hurt as much as everything crumbling inside her. Finally, a gun dislodged, skidding forward. It bounced across the car hood and onto the lawn. It was the gun Aaron Clairmont had brought there. The gun he'd fired—mercifully missing—determined to carry out the hit on Dante Vasquez.