

*After years apart, the only thing Aaron and Ruby have left—or in common—is the matching ruby ink they branded their relationship with seven years earlier. In this Ruyb Ink excerpt, read as Aaron attempts to turn failed body art into a romantic reunion. Is it enough...?*

Ruby could tell he was fighting words and actions, everything from calling her a liar to throwing her onto the bed and succumbing to the heat they both felt. She needed to drive her point home. Ruby didn't know how much longer she could be here. Gently she clasped her hands together—the way you might in church. That was good. She could use a prayer. “What we had,” she said, glancing fast at the bed, “it was once in a lifetime. But it's not the kind of thing you make a lifetime out of. We're not right for each other for so many reasons. You should think about that. I have.”

“Changed that much in seven years, have you? Changed enough to want some slick suit who kisses your ass—publically anyway. Why Ruby? When did money and power become such turn-ons for you? The girl I knew didn't give a shit about any of that. She was a nurse—she helped people. She stayed late after her shift to play with the kids on the peds floor who didn't have families who gave a damn. She wanted a family something like mine. Did Stefan so easily do away with all that?”

Ruby pursed her lips and summoned the words. “No,” she said, brushing past him and toward the exit. “You did that.”

The door opened a few inches, and Aaron's hand came from behind, slamming it shut. “You're that determined. Stefan is so what you want, prove it to me. Stay in this room and prove to me that our relationship is nothing but sex.”

Her back was to him. Aaron wasn't touching her, but she could feel how close he was—his breathing, his body. "I just told you what I had to. I acknowledge a twisted physical addiction between us—probably the kind that would benefit from counseling. Clearly, it survived the past, and it survived prison. Other than words, Aaron, how, exactly, would you like me to make the point?" Ruby closed her eyes once more, and this time she did pray. She prayed for the kind of self-control she knew was in short supply with Aaron. She prayed for the ability to focus on the end game, the plague-like prophecies that would befall Aaron and his family. She needed to be stronger than the tug between them. This was too important. Determined to keep things under control, slowly, Ruby turned.

Aaron looked equally determined. "Undo the dress."

"What?"

"The dress," he said, glancing at the sash set to the waist of her wraparound dress.

"Untie it." He shook his head. "Don't worry. I have respect. I'm not going to touch you."

"Then—"

"Just do it, Ruby. I swear, what I'm after, it has nothing to do with sex."

Aside from hot and funny and clever, Aaron was also wickedly smart. She'd have to surpass the challenge in order to win the argument. Ruby shrugged as if he'd asked her the time. The cleavage of the dress rose as she breathed deep and followed the instruction. The silky fabric slid lazily to the sides. She stood before him in pale-pink underwear, a matching bra. She felt her stomach muscles clench, nipples growing hard at the exposure.

Regardless of his claim, the stirring between her legs was automatic. Aaron's mouth opened slightly, and then it closed. He took his own deep breath. "There," he said, pointing toward her bare thigh. "I want you to explain to me how those two pieces of body art got there, especially the first one."

Instinctively, Ruby's hand covered the unique tattoos. "You know how they got there."

"You bet your ass I do. But the way you're talking, it seems you don't. In our sex-crazed relationship, explain to me the reason they exist. Here, let's make this even. That way I can make myself perfectly clear." Aaron shucked off the dress shirt and pants, and Ruby was forced to take in a less-dressed Aaron.

She went for the safety of a medical route, imagining this was the way he'd present himself for a physical exam. But it was a weak front. She'd never looked at any man from this perspective, not in that situation. Ruby was confronted by tense, muscular forearms that met with defined biceps and broad shoulders. She wanted to rip the damn undershirt off him. Aaron read her mind, obliging and removing it. There was no safety zone. Ruby's gaze traveled downward—a hard-on strained the fabric of his briefs. It was Aaron's turn to shrug. "Like you said, that kind of reaction is just a given between us. Ignore it."

She snorted a laugh and worked like hell to stay within the boundaries of the current conundrum. She did her best not remember how it felt when Aaron was inside her. She forced her focus away from yesterday, when his tongue touched her in that shattering way. Ruby struggled in vain, not envisioning his mouth on hers, or how he'd

fucked her more than once against the very wall where they now stood. A tremulous breath sucked in. She'd underestimated the power of facing him in this room.

But Aaron remained true to his word. He didn't touch her. His talk wasn't about the steamy memories pounding at her brain. "Tell me, Ruby—about the ink... our ink. How did the tats get there—and you can skip the literal translation, Al's Body Art on Third Street."

There was a slight nod. It was the only body part she dared move. "We, um... we earned them."

"That's right. And how did we do that?"

"By, um... by not having sex."

"For how long?"

"I don't remember."

"Yes you do."

"A while, a few months."

Aaron's arms braced on either side of her head. "A few?"

"Fine. Eight. More like eight."

Aaron stood with his legs slightly parted. "And do you remember which one came first—because it sure as hell wasn't me."

Ruby didn't know why, but she didn't have control of her own actions. Her hand moved forward, placing her palm on Aaron's leg, covering the symbol for love. "This one...we got this one first," she said as if he didn't know. The muscle tensed under her touch. He inched closer. There was little left between her argument and Aaron's besides his rock-hard cock.

But Aaron didn't deviate from his verbal point. He didn't touch her in any way. "And even after we got the first tat, it took more time, didn't it? We were in this thing months before we had sex. And it wasn't a celebration. In this relationship, you had to work hard for Ruby ink."

"Aaron, I..." Was he so close that she could feel his hardness make contact with her body? Or was she just wishing it would? A heavy swallow rolled through her throat, recalling the rules of Ruby ink.

"And the second tat, did we get that one right away? Did we run right out and paint ourselves with happiness ink?"

Ruby shook her head, no longer able to look at him. Finally, he did touch her, Aaron's hand wrapping gently over her thigh. It made her body stir in some dizzy way that bordered on out of control.

"No, we didn't. After we got around to the sex part—the thing you claim owns this relationship, we earned happiness." Aaron's hands drew to her face, cupping it from either side. She could hear bitter and angry in his voice. "We may never get to peace, Ruby. But don't you stand here and tell me that you're marrying that bastard because sex is all we're about. You make me understand, sweetheart, because you're not leaving this room until I do."