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Opening extract from

Ruby Red

Written by

Linzi Glass

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Chapter One

I remember the first time I heard my mother mention Julian Mambasa. 'His work is astounding. It cut right through me, made me almost gasp out aloud,' she told Father and me after her first meeting with Julian. It was at an underground art exhibit in Braamfontein, the part of town where respectable seventeen-year-old young ladies like me were never allowed to go.

My mother, Annabel, owned one of the most well-known art galleries in Johannesburg. It was also one of the most controversial. The gallery carried the works of both the famous and infamous and the serene walls were hung with paintings of both the struggling and the successful. Talent, Mother always said, knew no boundaries.

In the past Mother had helped starving artists with money and supplies, but she had been so appalled to learn that Julian painted in his dimly lit shanty in Soweto that it didn't take much for her to convince Father to let him move his meagre supplies, broken easel and tattered paintbrushes to our guest house. Airy and spacious, it had once been used entirely as a playroom for me, their only child.

On the first day that Julian arrived he was overwhelmed by what he saw.

'Madam Annabel, you shouldn't have, really you are much too kind, too kind . . .' He had lowered his head and placed his large hands across his heart.

Mother had gone out and bought him the finest brushes, a gleaming new easel and beautifully fine stretched canvases.

'Aah, but your talent deserves this,' was all she said.

Her name had been well chosen for it meant beauty and grace. She was fair haired and slight with a slender boyish figure that gave her the advantage of wearing flimsy dresses that hung perfectly on her slender hips. I had inherited none of her pale fragility. I was already taller than her with dark hair and eyes and an athletic frame that served me well on the school track team.

I had stood silently beside Mother, feeling surprisingly shy in front of Julian. Mother had not told me that he was barely in his twenties, which made him just a few years older than me.

'Ruby,' he had said when Mother had introduced us. 'Madam Annabel, you did not tell me that you hide your most valued masterpiece at home.'

I had waited to hear him laugh at his joke but saw only warm dark eyes looking down at me.

It was May 1976 and South Africa was at the height of apartheid, where the laws of segregation were strictly enforced. A harsh, unforgiving and hateful time when blacks and whites were forbidden to share the same public bench let alone share a meal together. It was on that

crisp, cold day in May that my friendship with Julian Mambasa began. Ours was a bond that could not exist beyond the gates of our hilltop home in the affluent, white suburb of Westcliff.

But friendship, much like talent, knows no boundaries.

Julian arrived each morning on a bus marked in big black letters, NON-WHITES/*NIE BLANKES*, that dropped him off at the bottom of the hill on Jan Smuts Avenue. From here he would dodge his way through busy morning traffic, stopping briefly to buy a morning copy of the *Rand Daily Mail* newspaper from the young *piccanin* with the runny nose and tattered clothes that were two sizes too big for him.

'I am a lucky one. Lucky to have met such a good woman as your mother,' Julian told me as he set up his new easel to begin his day's work of painting and sketching in the quiet of a clean bright studio.

He shook his head as he looked around the dazzling studio. 'This is nothing like my home.'

I found myself drawn to the studio every day after school. Between brush strokes I learned about his life in Soweto, how he would wake up every morning to the raspy squawking of his neighbour Phillamon's chickens. He would sneak into their yard and dig for his morning's breakfast of eggs from under their warm feathers.

'A hen is a good thing to own in Soweto. Guarantee of food. Better than some who have to go to the garbage dumps to find scraps to feed themselves and their young.'

Julian painted the view through his cracked, small window in his works: a washing line being hung by a crooked, wrinkled old woman with a basket balancing on her wobbly head, a broken bottle in the hands of a scarred young *tsotsie* outside a *shebeen,* a makeshift drinking parlour, a mother with big melancholy eyes feeding her baby in the gutter outside the one free clinic near Baragwanath Hospital, an outhouse, rust-covered pipes leaking stinking water where a ten-year-old boy slept with his head in the filth. This was the view from Julian's room in Soweto.

While the view from my bedroom was of lush gardens, at a tender age my parents had shown me that the world we lived in was wrong – that people shouldn't have to live in separate areas or ride in separate buses or be treated differently because of the colour of their skin. But by lifting the veil of ignorance from my young eyes they created another kind of division. They separated me from my peers, for I lived in a hidden world that existed behind our large iron gates. Here in the safety and privacy of our home, people were treated as if colour didn't matter. Underground meetings of the illegal African National Congress were held sometimes in the late hours of the night, where Father was often the only white person present. Afternoon teas were served amongst the burnished orange geraniums that lined the finely manicured lawns to Mother's liberal art-loving crowd where Xhosa and Zulu were spoken as frequently as English over just-baked crumpets and scones. The ever-present threat that a raid by police could turn our

world upside down in an instant forced me into a life of even greater secrecy at school. What happened at home was to stay at home. But we did not realize then that our iron gates could not keep out the hate.

'It's the splinters of glass in people's eyes that makes them see the world in jagged little pieces. If we could just get the glass out we could make them see clearly.'

My father often quoted from *The Snow Queen* to me. It was his favourite children's story and he had been telling it to me since I was five. I think my father, David, always the idealist, expected to represent only good people with honest problems when he became a partner in a very important law firm, but he soon discovered that there were many unsavoury characters he was made to represent. Getting the crooked rich off was not his idea of being a lawyer, so he began seeking cases to help the disenfranchised blacks. It helped him feel as if he were making a difference, that all those years of studying had not been for nothing.

My father had thick wavy black hair and a muscular frame. He had large thick-fingered hands that he used with purpose. He never spoke down to anyone. Everyone counted. He loved the story of the Snow Queen because it was a quest about setting a wrong right. He told me this tale over and over again as I sat in my fluffy bunny slippers and drank hot frothy milk in his oversized leather chair in his warm study.

Julian's favourite book was *Harold and the Purple Crayon*. He explained it all to me during one of our many

afternoons together in the crisp white studio where he painted or sketched in charcoal.

'I hear this story when I was just a small *piccanin*; it was being read by a white madam to her little boy. Me, I was there to help my mother fold up the many piles of laundry. Mama, she was working then as washerwoman for Dr and Mrs Gordon in a big house in Hyde Park three days a week.'

Between the folds of the warm sheets the words of Harold reached him. With his purple crayon in his small hand, Harold drew his world and then stepped into it. A path, an apple tree, even a whole city full of windows.

'See, Harold, he created his own truth. You understand? He made it as nice and as comfortable as he liked. He drew things that could make a problem go away, and – *puff* – no problem any more.'

I nodded even though I wasn't too sure what Julian meant.

'See, Ruby, if there was a big rock in the middle of the road, Harold, he would draw a stepladder with his purple crayon to climb over it.'

Now I understood.

'Right then, in Dr Gordon's big house, me, I decided I was going to paint my way out of my world. Draw a better life for my people, my mother and her rough washerwoman's hands and aching back that kept her up all night.'

Julian was seven when he decided that he would become an artist, like Harold with his crayon, and draw himself out of poverty in their filthy suburb, Naledi, and out of

the township of Soweto. At first he drew pictures of black faces sitting in shiny, fancy cars. A handsome father at the wheel and the children all in their finest clothes. Everyone was smiling. In another picture he even parked a car in front of a two-storied house set on rolling lawns and wrote at the top, 'This house belongs to the Mambasa family.'

'But when my mother found those pictures that I had proudly taped to our shanty wall she ripped them down, tore them into a hundred pieces and whipped me with the long, hard handle of a broom, yelling that I was never to draw such terrible things again.'

'Why was your mother so upset? I don't understand,' I said, shocked at what his mother had done to him for simply drawing.

Julian put his sketchpad down and came towards me. I was five foot six inches in stockinged feet but Julian was a towering six foot three. Dark, gleaming brow, warm, oval eyes and large, square hands that moved ever so gracefully like the wings of an eagle, stretching and reaching into the open air when he wanted to make a particular point take flight.

'Me also, Ruby, me too. I didn't understand then, but when I was done crying she rubbed a warm cloth on my stinging legs and told me that – *Hai!* – we could be arrested and put in jail for having such pictures in our home. That drawing black people like us living like white people was wrong and not allowed.'

Julian dug his hands into his paint-smeared overall pockets. He looked deeply at me before he spoke again. He smelled of old, worn leather and sweet musk.

'I never draw like that again, but, me, I keep sketching whenever I can, then painting. When my schoolteachers at Orlando West High see I have talent, they get me an old easel and some used oil paints. My mother, she was proud when I won the most-promising-artist award when I was fourteen, but she always check to make sure I am not painting anything that might get our family in trouble.'

Julian turned to look at a large charcoal drawing he had finished only a few days before that still sat on an easel.

'You are only one child, Ruby, but me, there were six of us living in two rooms, well seven really, but my father, he get home from the mines so late and leave so very early.' Julian sighed softly. 'It was like he was not even there.'

The picture was of an iron bed raised high on bricks, a single bed, but somehow Julian had managed to draw five sets of large sad eyes, attached to five long and scrawny bodies that were somehow all squeezed on to its tiny mattress, limbs across limbs, gangly feet flopping over the sides.

'Is it your . . .?'

'Yes. Me and my brothers and sisters,' he said. 'That is how we slept. But you cannot feel the cold. Hear the pipes hissing and leaking. A painting cannot give you that.' He sat down again at his easel and faced the painting, then he reached his hand out and gently traced the faces of the children in the picture.

'This is what white people want to see. Not happy black people in fancy cars.'

'You should be able to paint whatever you want. Surely?'

'No, it is not so. At least for now. Now I paint my people's pain. I must pretend, you see, that nothing will ever change for us.'

When Julian spoke these words it was as if he had climbed inside my very soul. Pretending was something that had become a part of me. No one at school could possibly know that I spent a great deal of time creating the appearance that I was like everyone else, that my life was normal in every way. I knew I would be shunned and an outcast if my fellow schoolmates found out that blacks were people I actually spoke to and not just when I wanted extra mashed potato or lemonade served to me. In truth, my parents were probably some of the only whites in South Africa who did not have black servants living on our property and meeting our every need. You did not have to be rich to have a black nanny who worked six days a week and late into the nights before collapsing exhausted in her small ill-lit room on the family grounds. Thirty rand a month and food bought you her loyalty. My parents did not believe in having servants. Black people sat at our dining-room table as guests and ate dinner with us while Mother and I cleared their plates away at the end of the meal.

To make certain that I appeared to be 'normal', I worked hard and got straight As. I was a school prefect and popular with loads of friends and a drawer full of ribbons from winning athletic events. But my shameful truth was that I, Ruby Winters, felt like a fraud and it was just a matter of time before I was found out.

Chapter Two

It was about two miles from the top of Westcliff Ridge to school, which was in the tree-lined suburb of Saxonwold. As with most private schools in Johannesburg, the grounds were expansive, the rugby field immaculate and the swimming pool crystal clear and skimmed daily for fallen leaves. Only the offspring of the richest and most prestigious families of the area went to Barnard High School. The golden ones, as it were, of the golden city, as Johannesburg was sometimes called. The school, formerly called Theason High, had recently been renamed in honour of the famous Cape Town heart surgeon, Christiaan Barnard, who had performed the world's first open heart transplant. It pleased me that our school was now named after someone who understood the workings of the heart.

On most days I rode my bike to school, weather permitting. My gym shoes on, my school dress tucked carefully under my legs to stop it from blowing up and embarrassing me. I would pull my long dark hair into a tight, high ponytail that I instantly took down once I'd jumped off my bike on to school property. I would wind my way down the wide avenues, taking the street's bends and

curves in my stride and enjoying the quiet of 6.30 a.m., for school began at seven. These were the moments of the day I relished almost as much as my afternoon time with Julian, when my mind was opened by the crisp winds that filled my head with blissful emptiness, before maths formulas and history dates and literature quotes would claim that space from it.

In those solitary early morning hours I would ride peacefully for most of the way, but in the final minutes, as I pedalled up the last hill with my breath coming in faster and faster gasps, I felt suspended between my solitude and the noise of active life. Below me was the bustling clamour of students, now racing in grey-and-blue uniforms to make it through the prominent stone gateposts that marked the entrance into the school quadrangle.

In less than a minute I would be carried in on the wave of other student cyclists and satchel-carrying teenagers rushing to the first morning class. On some days I would backpedal furiously and hold myself still on the top of the rise for once I freewheeled down the hill I became Ruby, popular girl at school. The longing to really be known by someone would fill me with a sickening dizziness that would cause me to almost topple to the ground.

'You can't run your life only on emotions,' were my father's concerned words to me when I told him that I sometimes felt overwhelmed with the difficulty of keeping our lives at home a secret. 'To have control in our lives we have to take control of our emotions. Keep them close by, but never let them run the show.'

I tried to take his words in, tried to stop my thoughts and fears from taking over, but I was not enough like my father. I suppose that was why he could represent a murderer and an innocent abused black man all in one week. His feelings didn't impair his legal mind, didn't cause him to buckle under his personal convictions.

'Stay calm, stay clear, don't show yourself,' I told myself firmly as I lifted my foot from the brake and sailed down the hill, joining the throng.

'Hey, Ruby!'

'See you in fourth period.'

'Catch me at the tuck shop later.'

The words of my friends whizzed by me.

I smiled back.

Now I was one of them.

Chapter Three

Halfway through geography class, Desmond's hands began to stroke my hair. Smooth, even stokes that I knew were his signal to have me turn round. I never did. After a few unsuccessful minutes he would lean forward on his desk and try to get as close as he could to my ear.

'C'mon, Ruby, turn round. I wanna show you something . . .'

His breath felt warm and smelled like spicy cinnamon. Telltale wrappers of gum always filled his ink well. He reeked of good breath and old money, but not necessarily of good breeding.

Our desks were miniature oak antiques, purchased when the school was first built after World War I. We never had enough room on the desktop for our large textbooks and I often wondered if perhaps students had been smaller back then. I tried to imagine them racing through the same gates and quadrangle. I wondered too if there were annoying rich boys like Desmond Granger who thought that everyone and everything was his right to claim.

'I have something for you, Red Jewel . . .' Desmond pressed his fingers into my shoulder.

I shrugged his hand off and let out a sigh of annoyance. 'Des . . . stop!' I hissed back.

'Can someone tell me what the three main exports of Ecuador are?' Miss Radcliffe turned and faced the blackboard and wrote in big letters 'EXPORT?'.

'Rubies!' Desmond shouted out.

The class tittered and I felt my cheeks grow hot. I kicked back at Desmond's chair.

Miss Radcliffe spun round and shot Desmond and me a marble-eyed glare with her beady eyes. 'You two need to stop playing footsie and . . .'

'We're not!' I blurted out.

The class tittered again.

My best friend, Monica, rolled her eyes at me and gave me that here-we-go-again look. She tossed her long blonde mane in Desmond's direction and shook her head at him. A combination of a flirt and a scold.

Monica and I were opposites. She was light while I was dark, both in hair colour and personality. This was probably why we were drawn to each other on the first day of kindergarten. I had cried while she had smiled and blown her mother a kiss as our parents made a hasty exit from the cheerful classroom. With tearstained cheeks I had followed Monica into the sandpit where we spent the entire year playing together. We did not see each other again once we started at separate 'big schools' but found each other again on the first day of high school. We picked up where we had left off, minus the buckets and spades.

Miss Radcliffe straightened the glasses on her nose and bobbed in her crane-like fashion over to my desk. She had

a long, wiry, coat-hanger-shaped frame that hunched forward, her head hanging lower than her shoulders, her long nose pointing towards the ground.

'Ruby Winters,' she tapped her long finger on my desk. 'Desmond Granger, you are both school prefects, kindly behave as such!' She turned on her spindly ankles and returned to the blackboard. 'Now then, class . . . someone . . . the main exports of Ecuador!'

I scraped my undersized chair as far forward as it would go, away from Desmond's insistent fingers. Since we were eleven years old he had been trying to get me to meet him alone, after school, for an afternoon boat ride on Zoo Lake or even an ice cream at Butterworth's Sweet Shoppe. Although Desmond was strikingly handsome and one of the most popular boys in the school, his rich-boy, overly confident air made him unattractive to me. But Desmond, who was always used to getting what he wanted, refused to give up.

It had become the betting-joke of our matric class. 'Would Des get Ruby to go on a date with him before our final school year was over?'

A note flew over my head and landed with a whoosh on my desk. I quickly grabbed it and hid it on my knees out of Miss Radcliffe's sight.

'"Cocoa and coffee." Very good, Stacey. You must have done your homework.' The chalk scraped painfully across the board as she wrote the words next to 'EXPORT?'.

I felt the hair rise like porcupine quills on the back of my neck.

I'm coming over to your house tonight. No questions asked.

Kisses

Des

PS Hey, come to think of it, does anyone ever get to come over to your house?

I crumpled the note in my fist slowly so that it wouldn't make any noise and draw attention. Without turning round I shook my head vigorously, hoping Desmond would get my fervent response.

'Uh uh,' he whispered, just loud enough for me to hear. 'I'm coming . . . over.' He snickered at his innuendo, then let out a loud snort-laugh.

'Desmond!' Miss Radcliffe squeaked, her head launching into a rat-tat-tat barrage of bobbing motion. 'What in heaven's name is the matter with you? Enough!'

Desmond stood and pulled his tall frame to its full upright position. He straightened his blue-and-maroon school tie, then raised one eyebrow and stared with penetrating green eyes at Miss Radcliffe, now almost eye-to-eye with him as she stood inches from his desk, one hand placed firmly on her non-existent hip.

'I do so apologize to you and the class –' his voice as smooth and creamy-sounding as vanilla pudding – 'but it's Ruby's fault, you see . . . she's such a distraction. And I'm just a growing boy who can't contain myself.' His hand patted his crotch.

Miss Radcliffe took a horrified leap back from him.

The class burst into a din of raucous laughter. Some of

the boys clapped and whooped as Desmond was led by a beet-red Miss Radcliffe to the principal's office.

As he was ushered past me I heard his voice through the din, 'You owe me, Ruby. All this punishment I take for you . . . Later, beauty.' He turned to me and winked as he passed by.

I looked away from his gaze and jolted my head to stare out of the window, forcing the jeers and laughter of my classmates to fade into the background. Our row of desks was closest to the large windows that faced a small side garden off the main quadrangle. I focused my eyes on a gardener in faded blue overalls as he bent to grasp the handles of a wheelbarrow that he had filled with weeds. He wore a wide-brimmed straw hat that looked like it must have once belonged to a fine lady, for there was still a cluster of wilted silk flowers in its centre. He stopped after a few seconds and pushed the feminine hat off his forehead and wiped his brow with the back of his hand, giving me a quick vision of his lined, dark face. He reached for his back and rubbed it slowly with his free hand.

The old gardener must have felt my gaze because suddenly he looked up. He shielded his eyes from the sun's rays and spotted me through the classroom window. I raised my hand ever so tentatively and waved at him just as Miss Radcliffe returned, minus Desmond, slamming the classroom door with a loud smack.

The old man lifted his wrinkled hand and waved back. Then he smiled and tipped his straw hat towards me before grasping the wheelbarrow in both hands and moving slowly across the green expanse of lawn.

I wanted to bolt from my seat and run to catch up with him. I longed to flee the screeching teacher and the tittering friends and the insistent boy who would not leave me alone.

Perhaps, once I reached him, I would ask the old man how many years he had worked as a gardener for our school and what kind of flowers were his favourite. I was certain no one had ever asked him that question or even cared to know. He was an invisible black man working in the world of affluent whites. It occurred to me how strange that was. Black was such a strong noticeable colour and white closer to transparent. Or maybe through the eyes of others, black was a dark abyss. A infinite hole of nothingness.

But, of course, I never got up the nerve to leave the classroom and catch up with him. Ruby Winters, school prefect, had to set an example. And right then Ecuador was waiting.