

A sample chapter from Raisa's upcoming children's book, where Baba first emerged. Suitable for ages 9 to adult.

Rosie's Spider

by

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Chapter Ten

Rosie's hair finally stayed put under the helmet. She picked up an umber pencil and made a few practice sketches with quick strokes. She put the pad down and counted on her fingers, "Micheline, Aleisha, Brad, Peggy, Mark, Barb, Stefan, Shelley. Oh, no."

Rosie's heart lurched painfully and her breathing quickened. She obviously couldn't invite Barb and Shelley. It was hard to adjust to losing friendships that had been going strong since grade one.

Rosie shut her eyes tight and imagined the coating on her web. Next, she activated the glowing Protection Dial in her chest. She reached up and gave it a good crank to the left, so it went from reading *Wide Open* to *Guarded But Willing to Forgive. Some Day*.

She folded six sheets of textured coloured paper in half. On the front of each, she sketched a picture of the family's new house, Billie, Jessie, and the two bantam chickens. She wrote, "We're moving" across the top.

Inside, she drew a picture of Divana hanging from a thread and holding a sign saying, "Come to our housewarming party", with the date and time, two Saturdays after moving day. She was making the invitations well ahead of time, so her friends knew she wasn't going to forget about them. "Bring your grandmas to party with mine," she added at the bottom.

As Rosie drew, she thought about the day before, when her family had visited the farm again. After her several riding lessons and many practice rides, Mrs. McIvor had invited her over to ride Jessie. She trembled all the way there in the car, and Baba patted her arm. "I think, Rosie,

this Jessie be one those very special horse for you. You will have more than one, and you never forget. Is good thing to love so much.”

There were four people squished together in the back seat. Dad had installed an extra set of seat belts, just to drive Rosie and Baba's friends around. Peggy listened quietly, leaning against Rosie in the back seat. Aleisha sat erect, her keen eyes taking in every sight around her. It had taken her some time to become interested in anything since she arrived in Vancouver after evacuating New Orleans, and Rosie was glad to see the change.

Rosie gave Mrs. McIvor a drawing of Divana. “Isn't she lovely?” was her response. “I like the way you've shown her distinct markings. Is she really this hairy?”

“Is scout honour,” said Baba, holding up her hand. “She look like woolly thing.”

“She's a Wolf spider,” said Rosie proudly, “She'll probably have her babies right here on the farm. Maybe as many as three hundred. You should see the huge white egg case on her tummy. She sounds like a horse when she walks.”

“Isn't that wonderful!” replied Mrs. McIvor. “I wish her a healthy time of it, and many, many lovely babies.”

“Me too,” said Peg.

“Yes ma'am. My grandma says she's gonna have as many babies as Anansi the Spider's wife,” said Aleisha.

“Dear God. You're all in on it,” said Mom.

Mrs. McIvor led Billie and carefully supervised Rosie as she brought Jessie in from pasture. “There's a correct way to lead a horse through a gate, dear. I want to make sure you and the horses are safe.”

When they got to the barn, the little red chickens went hop! hop! hop! from floor to hay bale to the horses' backs, fluffed their feathers and nestled down. The horses were clearly used to the chickens' company, as they didn't flinch.

“Aren't they the *dearest* things,” said Mom, clasping her hands. Dad rubbed her back. “I'm glad you're getting pets, too. Personally, I think I'll give that big chestnut fella a try. He really is a lot like old Bosco.”

“No beer for horse,” Baba said firmly. “If I have to tell you again, I stop brewing.”

“Mama, I am fifty years old, and I don't need to be told to not give beer to my horse,” he replied. “I didn't even know what beer was, back then. I just thought that if Dad liked it as a treat, so would Bosco.”

“My grandma would love that story,” said Aleisha.

Rosie groomed Jessie until her coat shone like black glass, and lifted the saddle onto her back.

The black mare shuddered and tossed her head when Rosie drew the girth. Peggy and Aleisha had been stroking her neck, and they stepped away.

Rosie froze. Mrs. McIvor spoke. "You haven't done anything wrong, dear. It's just that Jessie sometimes gets unsure with sudden movements. I should have told you to give her a rub in the girth area before buckling up."

"Shhhhh girl," said Rosie as she quickly unbuckled and massaged the delicate skin behind the mare's elbows. Jessie took a huge breath, turned to look at Rosie, then exhaled and relaxed, her nostrils fluttering. Rosie drew the girth smoothly. Jessie stood like a rock.

"Beautiful!" said Mrs. McIvor.

Mom's grip on Dad's arm loosened. "Will she buck?" asked Dad.

"Never. She has no bad memories of anyone on her back, so she's perfectly confident with a rider. She only occasionally reacts to movements that remind her of babyhood mistreatment."

The three girls went into the tack room, where it took Peggy and Aleisha a good five minutes, giggling and whispering, to tuck Rosie's new hair under a velvet hard hat.

"Your hair looks awesome, Rosie," said Aleisha, "But it's not exactly convenient for an athlete. I'm going to give you hairstyling lessons. You're gonna have a real cool do."

"That would be amazing," Rosie replied.

"In exchange for drawing lessons," added Aleisha.

"That's an easy price," said Rosie.

"The helmet buckle was stiff," Peg said to the group when they finally emerged.

They walked to the grassy ring beside the barn. Rosie mounted expertly, and asked for a walk. She squeezed her calves a little with each stride, as the coach had shown her. She thrilled at the sight of Jessie's long, dark mane rippling as she moved. This was better than Rosie's wildest fantasies.

"Good," said Mrs. McIvor. "You know how to make a horse step out. Now hold the reins like they're silk threads. Softly, softly. You should be able to feel the horse's mouth."

Rosie focused intently on the feel of the supple leather in her hands. She breathed deeply. As she did, it suddenly felt as if the reins really *were* threads, flowing from the ends of her fingers. She could feel Jessie's mouth quivering along the strands. "Oh!" she said, "I know what you mean. It's like the way Divana's web moves just slightly when she walks on it."

"Yes, Rosie! That's exactly it. You have the feel of a real horsewoman. It's called 'soft hands.'"

"I'm going to close my eyes for a while" Rosie said. "That's what works when I plan my next move on my bike."

“I've never heard anyone say that before, but that's fine. Stay at a slow walk along the long line of the fence. I'll tell you to open them when you're four steps from the corner.”

Rosie closed her eyes, and Jessie kept moving forward, her back swinging. The web inside spun outwards again, and Rosie saw herself join the ranks of horsewomen before her. First hundreds, then thousands of women with sure seats and soft hands, riding the spiral strands of the web. They sat astride blacks, bays and chestnuts, and all shades in between. All sizes, too, from the smallest Caspian ponies to the largest draft horses. Joan of Arc was there, defending France in shining armour on her mighty war horse. So was Lady Godiva, who rode naked and brave through the streets of Coventry to protest her husband's cruelty.

Their horses pranced with knees high and cantered with thunderous majesty. Baba and her Misha were there, too, galloping joyfully along a glowing thread, before the Soviets cast suspicion on women's healing powers and stole the white mare away.

Rosie felt Jessie's soft mouth in her hands, and they talked to each other through the reins. She suddenly knew it had been this way between people and horses since her Ukrainian ancestors, the Scythians and Amazons, first tamed them and rode side by side with their men. There may have been thousands of years between, but on the spokes of Rosie's web, they all existed at once. Riders and horses, each pair deep in private conversation.

Rosie sighed, and felt Jessie's skin quiver beneath her.

“Corner!” called Mrs. McIvor.

Rosie snapped to attention and guided the mare into the curve with legs and hands. She trotted in circles, then cantered in both directions. It was like riding a cloud.

“Very nice, dear,” said Mrs. McIvor after Rosie halted in the centre of the ring. She patted her leg. “I feel confident leaving Jessie and Billie in your care. Don't be afraid to ask your coach questions, or to give me a call in Ontario, either.”

“Is Jessie so sensitive to ride because of her background?” asked Rosie.

“Partly, dear. But mainly, she's an exceptional mare. She has repaid me many times over in the years since I rescued her.”

“Is trade off, Rosie,” Baba added. “Just like immigrant from bad situation. He have trouble, but also deeper and more feeling inside.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. McIvor. “Where would our country be without immigrants?”

Aleisha looked down at her hands, her forehead wrinkling. “What if we don't really want to be here?” she mumbled.

“What if I told you how much we want you here?” Rosie replied.

The group sat down to tea in the living room. Mrs. McIvor had prepared a piping hot pot with

real tea leaves, as well as homemade scones and raspberry preserves.

She stood up, cup in hand, and pointed out the side window. "Over to the west is the Stewart farm. They're organic gardeners, and will be happy to exchange information and plants with you anytime."

"Behind us, to the north, is the Didichuk place," the lady continued. "The gentleman of the family is also very good with tools."

"I already met Mr. D at the Co-op Store," said Dad. "He offered to help me set up my tool shed."

Baba said, "Didichuk. This Ukrainian name. Good! I go meet as soon we move. I bet they have decent dill weed for my borshch. Last time I have to use some dry nonsense from shaker because too much rain kill our real thing. It taste like straw. Pah! I spit on it."

"I know what you mean," said Mrs. McIvor. "I can't bear herbs from the store, either. I'm sorry, I have no dill, but you'll find some beautiful rosemary, mint and lemon balm out in the garden."

Aleisha piped up. "My grandma says the same kinds of things about bland food on the West Coast, compared to Louisiana."

"Never mind. I cook your grandma food, blow top her head off," said Baba.

"She'll probably say the same thing about her own cooking to you," said Aleisha in a teasing tone. "Wait till you taste her homemade hot sauce. She makes one *mean* gumbo." She fanned herself.

"Rosie, why all your friend so big mouth?" asked Baba, taking a second spoonful of raspberry preserves.

Rosie bit her tongue. "Any neighbours with kids?" she asked.

"Yes, dear, the Zastres across the road have twins about your age." She gestured at the plate glass window with a scone that dripped butter. "A boy and a girl. They also love horses, and are quite good with them."

"What kind of horses?" asked Rosie.

"Let's see. Christopher has a bay Quarter Horse, and Leanne, a Thoroughbred/Paint cross. She looks something like Jessie, if you threw a bucket of white paint over her."

"Great! We can go riding together," she said through a mouthful of crumbs.

Rosie looked at Aleisha and Peggy hopefully. "Are you guys going to learn to ride?"

"Uh, noooooo," Aleisha replied. "Horses are pretty and everything, but I like solid ground."

Peggy shook her head 'No.' "But I can show you some moves I learned on the 'horse' in gymnastics club," she said, positioning her arms above her head.

"That's cool," Rosie replied. Maybe I'll learn flying dismounts, too. Then Michie and I can...oh." She swallowed and turned to Mrs. McIvor. "Are Chris and Leanne in 4-H or Pony Club, so they can show me the ropes?"

"I believe Chris is in 4-H, because he prefers to ride Western, and Leanne rode in Pony Club with my grandchildren. It's up to you Rosie, because Jessie and Billie are trained both ways."

"They trained like *kozak* horse?" asked Baba, lifting her chin.

"That would be amazing," said Rosie.

"Well, I don't know if any horses in Canada are trained *that* well," replied Mrs. McIvor. "After all, the Cossacks' horses are expected to keep a rider safe in battle, just like the Lippizzaners."

"Is true!" said Baba. "Army of kozak defeat Nazi soldier in tank regiment during war. I see this. Those horse fearless." She leaned forward and gestured as if she were following a horse's surging head with the reins. Tea sloshed onto the lap of her skirt. Rosie quickly sponged the fabric with her napkin, spilling crumbs on both Baba and the rug. Peggy gently dabbed the old woman's socks.

Mom put her head in her hands.

"Hmmm," said Mrs. McIvor, acting as if she didn't notice. "I don't think you'd see that in Canada. But I can tell you that Jessie doesn't mind my granddaughter standing straight up on his back at a canter!"

"I'm going to do that," said Rosie. "By the end of this summer."

"I'm sure you will, dear. And who do you think showed my granddaughter how?" The old lady's eyes twinkled.

"Too bad you not staying in BC," Baba said to Mrs. McIvor, shaking her head. "You and me, we could make old age pension riding show. Take to *National Exhibition Pacific* and make lots money. I wear red satin pant and beautiful embroider blouse, braid ribbon in horse mane."

Mrs. McIvor nodded. "Yes, we could. I'd wear my clan tartan, and the same for my horse's saddle blanket."

Baba said, "We could have old age women from all country in their good clothes, all ride together! Why should musical ride RCMP have all fun? Every time I see them, I yell," she put down her tea and cupped her hands around her mouth. "Put down those spear and fight with bare hand, like real man!"

"She also wolf whistles through her fingers at them," said Rosie. She demonstrated. Everyone in the room clapped their hands over their ears at the shrill sound.

“Rosie...” Dad began.

“Hee hee,” went Aleisha.

Rosie ignored them. “Then we go back to the stables, and Baba tells the officers how handsome they are.”

“Oh oh oh,” said Aleisha, clutching her stomach. “It hurts.” She squinched her eyes shut.

Baba flashed her a filthy look.

Peggy studied her hands. Mrs. McIvor gazed seriously at Rosie. Mom just sat quietly.

Rosie continued, enjoying the effect she was having. “Once, one of them said,” she stood up, placed hands on hips, her feet wide apart, and put on a deep, authoritative voice, “Ma'am, if you weren't so obviously harmless, we'd consider you a security risk.”

“Who harmless?” Baba asked indignantly, leaning forward.

“Not you, Mama,” said Dad.

“Oh no, not you, dear,” said the Scottish lady. “He was flirting.”

“Yes Baba, he was flirting. He was admiring a woman with a real personality,” Rosie added.

“That's right,” said Mom.

Baba sat back, hands folded snugly across her belly. “I think so. Was right after I make fluffy hair at salon.”

Aleisha stumbled to the bathroom, thighs pressed tightly together. “Oh oh OH,” echoed down the hall.

The family bid a fond farewell to Mrs. McIvor, promising to write or call if they had any questions about the farm. She'd given Rosie a warm hug and pressed something into her hand.

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