

## Road to the Roses

*July, Ocala, Florida and Saratoga Springs, New York*

“The Spa. There’s nothin’ like Saratoga in August.” Bob nodded his head dreamily as he and Chris watched a big shiny van pull into the driveway. “You’re lucky to have this opportunity to work for Alex MacLaren. He’s a Hall-of-Fame trainer, you know.”

*We’re going racing! It’s all we had talked about and dreamed of.*

Even Shaddy seemed excited. A tickle of anticipation made me shiver. The thick cotton shipping bandages tickled my legs. I walked and hopped, stiff-legged, for the first few steps before figuring them out.

“How’s the big horse training?” Bob’s friend, Michelle, was there for the sendoff. She smiled, turning her gaze toward me. I could feel the warm glow of her energy. Her intensity took me by surprise as her green eyes held my gaze. She blew softly on my nose in greeting. I blew back and sighed, rumbling air past my lips, then nickered.

*How can she be a person but communicate like a horse?*

Pulling a sugar cube out of her pocket, she pressed it to my lips.

*Mmmm! As good as a peppermint.*

“Like a champ, as always,” Bob replied. “He’s going to create a buzz up north, although there are a couple of nice young horses out there. Flash Jackson just paid five million dollars for a Derby prospect, Annapurna, at Keeneland. He’ll be tough to beat. Wait until they see our “secret weapon.” I think Raja will make that horse look like a Shetland pony.”

He led me into the van where Shaddy, Max and the others were waiting.

I don't remember much about the journey. Just that it was long — almost two days — and that we slept and nibbled hay nets while the van swayed under our feet.



Shadowy horses and riders and muffled sounds of breakfast — whinnying, nickering and buckets banging — wafted in and out of the cool sun-dappled morning mist. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. So many horses and people and so much activity! The charged air made me jig as I dragged Chris along while he led me on a walk, my ears pricked and head raised as I snorted at the newness of everything.

*I want to see it all. I can't wait until I'm in the center of the action, RACING!*

We walked past endless green shed row barns. Overstuffed hay nets and well-scrubbed colored plastic feed tubs perched next to stalls shaded by baskets overflowing with pink and red blossoms. Gleaming leather halters with polished brass name plates glinted and winked in the golden sunlight. Horses, everywhere, jiggling out to the track to train with their riders laughing and joking, hot walking in circles in front of barns, or standing as they were bathed, with steam swirling from their backs.

Every second I heard something new: music from barn radios, horses whinnying, tractor engines rumbling, hooves thundering on the track or clack-clack-clacking on the tarmac road that lined the backstretch. And the smells, heady and complex: shampoo, liniment, poultice, flowers, fly spray and sweet flowery smells from the ladies in colorful dresses and hats — the owners— who occasionally walked through the barns with their trainer.

The grooms gossiped as they rolled bandages and played cards in the shade of the old oak and maple trees. “Si, Annapurna, el caballo del Flash es muy lindo — mejor que los otros.” “Flash's horse, Annapurna, is very nice — better than the others.”

“Muy caro — el Flash es muy rico,” “Very expensive — Flash is very rich.”

“You must be the new crop,” a dark bay, almost brown, horse in the stall next to me drawled in a knowing, yet not unfriendly, manner. “I'm Rather Be, also bred and owned by the Sheikh. Everyone calls me 'RB'. For some reason, he still has me out here banging away, even though I've been running for years. I guess I'm good for a stakes win or two despite being an old man of six.”

“Stakes win or two!” snorted a nervous, red, “blood” bay on the other side. “RB has forgotten more about racing than most horses, or people for that matter, ever know. He's a race strategy genius. How many stakes have you won, RB? I know you ran in the Triple Crown races — the Derby, Preakness and Belmont Stakes.”

RB rolled his eyes, slightly embarrassed.

“Hey, there's Hollywood Bill.” He looked across the shed row, changing the subject. We all looked over to the next barn, where a man wearing dark glasses stood next to a very tall man while a group of photographers clicked their cameras.

“I never see him at his barn unless he's with one of his celebrity owners. He usually has his assistants do the training while he chats up the owners. I heard that he just bought Annapurna, the highest-priced horse at the Keeneland sale, for that guy. That's Flash Jackson, a famous basketball player. People give him lots of money

to chase a ball around a room. It seems silly. People are funny. But Flash wants to win the Kentucky Derby and he has the money to buy the best horses.”



*August, Saratoga Springs, New York*

“Jog him, please.” Alex MacLaren, my new trainer, ran his hand down my legs to feel them, as he did with every horse, every day. He watched me intently and nodded.

“OK, he looks good. Thank you, Chris. Bring the filly out next, please.”

Alex looked me in the eye with approval and patted my neck, his manner professional, yet personal, at the same time. Tidy, contained, never without his blue baseball cap covering his short brown hair and penetrating eyes, Alex was constantly in motion, attentive and focused, coffee in one hand and cell phone in the other, noticing and remembering every detail.

“The filly isn’t finishing her feed. Try adding Gatorade powder. She did this last year when it got hot. Make sure it’s orange, not lime — she only likes orange.”

Then Willie, my exercise rider, appeared, and it was time to train! The track was where the action was, the center of everything. Horses jogged next to the outside rail, or galloped in the middle of the track, while owners and railbirds, coffee and racing newspapers in hand, chatted and watched. On the track we always had to have our eyes open for horses spooking or running off with, even dumping, their riders. Alex said that “traffic” got us used to all of the action of a race day.

*I still hadn’t seen a race, but I couldn’t wait.*



RB shook his head as we watched the vet use a machine to look at the leg of another horse from Alex’s barn who had limped painfully back to the barn after his race.

“Racehorses are athletes and athletes get sports injuries. It sounds as if he’s torn his suspensory ligament. He might race again after time off or maybe he’ll go to stud. What a shame; he was running well.”

“What happens if a horse can’t race or gets old?” Max asked.

“Retirement?” RB answered, “I’m not so far away from it myself, you know.”

The chatter died down as Max and Shaddy and the others stopped to listen.

*What happens to a racehorse after racing?*

“Well,” RB thought for a while, munching a mouthful of hay, “you know, we’re the lucky ones. Most of us are very well bred and will go to stud. The Sheikh is really good about finding homes for his horses that don’t go to stud but can do other things. A lot of his horses go back to live in the big retirement field at the farm.”

The nervous bay horse next to RB interrupted, excitedly, “It’s being sold to a bad owner or trainer that you have to worry about. The ones who think you’re an investment that needs to make money.”

RB nodded sadly, in agreement. “If you’re useful but not especially well bred, you might be sold. Then you keep racing, just easier and cheaper races, and hope that you stay sound enough for another career afterward or that your owners will make sure that you are taken care of.” He paused to take a sip of water. “But I hear stories — we all do — racehorses abandoned, even killed for meat.”

*Meat? That couldn’t possibly be true.*



“Annapurna won wire to wire and I was second,” Max glowed after his first race a week later, his eyes sparkling, words pouring out and running away with him. “Oh Raja, you’ll LOVE it. It was so much fun, so different than I expected. Shad, did you see that grey, parrot-mouthed pain in the neck, Sanchez, trying to come up my inside? Dumb idea — I shut him down quick. No one gets up my inside.”

Even Shaddy was abuzz from his fifth place finish.

“Raja’s entered in the maiden race tomorrow,” I heard Alex tell Chris.



A crisp breeze blew in a glorious morning, all blue and green and red and white, the colors of Saratoga. Sparrows perched on the rafters, darting in and out of the shed row, watching for spilled grain as we ate breakfast. Even the little routines of the morning seemed grand and filled with significance.

*Today is race day!*

It was a week after Max and Shaddy’s race and now it was my turn.

“Knock ‘em dead, buddy,” Max called as I left to go to the pre-race barn.

“Good luck, my friend,” Shaddy echoed. RB smiled and nodded.

From the pre-race barn I heard the announcer rapidly calling each race and saw the runners returning, steam whirling and wisping off their glistening bodies as they jiggled and danced. Walking around my stall, I shivered in anticipation, pawing the ground until I had dug a hole

through the straw in the dirt floor. Every triumphant note of the buglers’ “Call to the Post” before each race stirred my hammering heart:

Da da da dum diggety dum diggety dum, dum dum daa.

Chris led me along a narrow path through a blur of people and colors and food smells until we reached an enclosure shaded by big maple trees.

*Let’s go, go go! It’s time for RACING!*

I was so excited, I thought I would explode. I stepped out with my fancy walk, knowing that everyone was looking at me. Alex, now in a suit, wearing a yellow tie, was speaking with a tall woman wearing a yellow scarf and large sunglasses. The curve of her stance seemed familiar.

*Is it?*

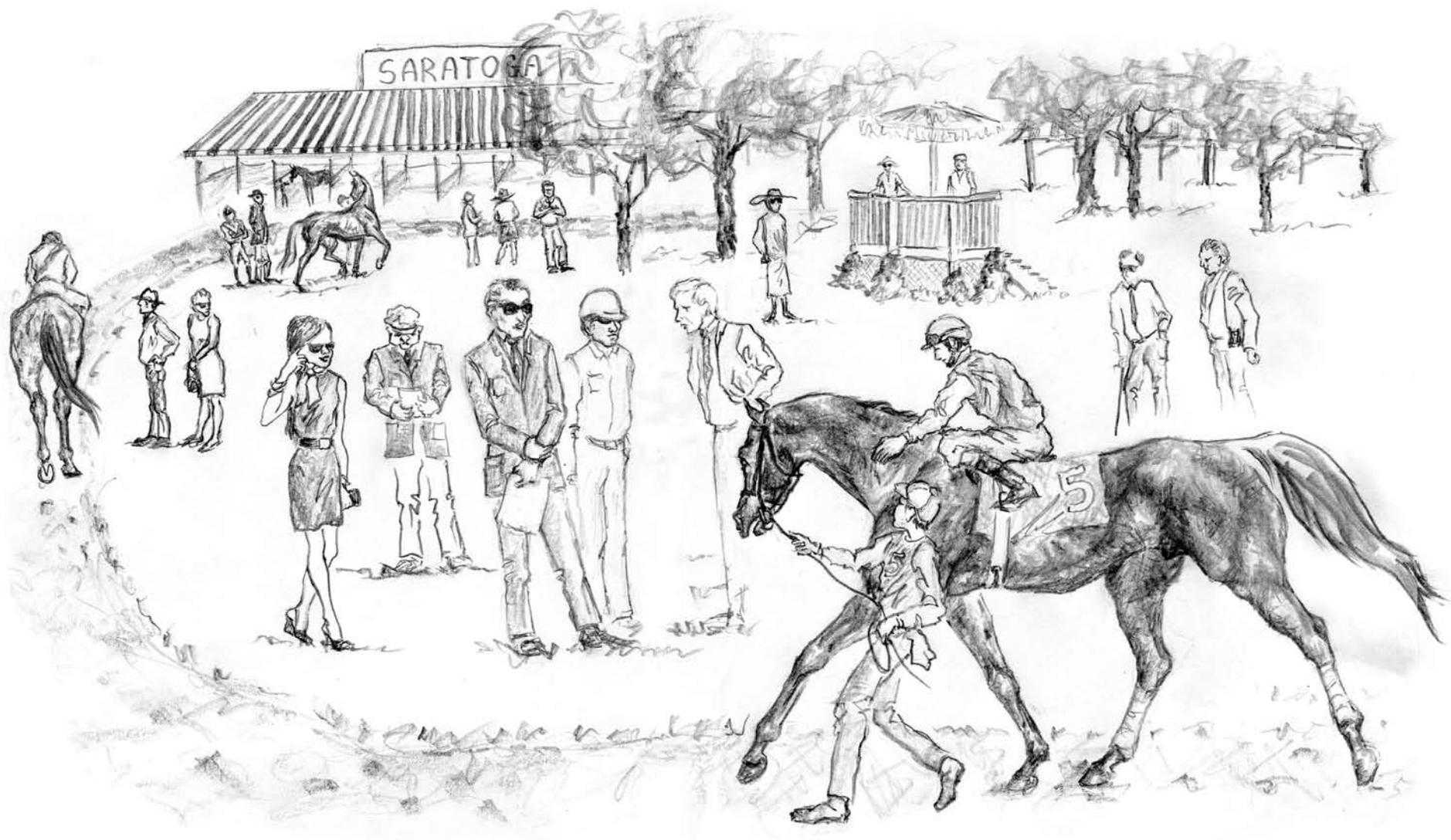
Then I smelled it.

*Gardenias and peppermint!*

My heart skipped a beat. She reached to tuck her hair behind her ear, a row of colored bangles catching the sunlight in a familiar gesture. As she turned and caught my eye, Princess Ayesha ran to me, trailing photographers. She smiled and patted me, her smoky eyes shining. She seemed so mature, more dignified. I hadn’t seen her for two years. She whispered in my ear as her warm hands traced the length of my neck,

“Raja, I missed you so much. I’m so happy to be back in the United States and especially to see you. You look wonderful — all grown up! You can do it, I know it.” She looked me in the eye. “You are the most perfect thing in the universe and I love you.”

I barely noticed the tiny saddle, tight girth and even tighter overgirth when Alex saddled me. All I could think of was how I was going to make Princess Ayesha proud.



*I am Raja! Destined for glory.*

“Riders up,” came the call from an official-looking man. Willie, my jockey, jumped lightly up, with a helping hand under his ankle from Alex, then settled easily onto my back. Then he stood up in his stirrups to test the girths and tied a knot in his reins. Chris led us around and around the paddock, whispering words of encouragement to me, while snippets of conversation floated over to us. I knew that people were admiring me.

“Look at number five, Raja. He’s stunning.”

“He’s my pick. Breeding’s impeccable. Class all the way.”

We followed the outriders onto the track, past the big stands filled with people cheering and shouting and the announcer calling our names one by one.

Da da da dum diggety dum diggety dum, dum dum daa.

“Go number five!”

“Bring it home, baby.”

I couldn’t help but jig all the way to the start.

*It’s time!*

My heart was pounding so hard I could hardly hear the crowd. Into the gate, then click as the door was secured. Willie’s blood was up, too. I could feel it as he took a deep breath. I looked at the track, poised to go.

*Let’s go. Let’s go.*

A reassuring pat from Willie as he gathered the reins into his hold. I took a deep breath.

BRRING! We’re off.

Quickly away from the gate, I established myself on the inside rail, sitting fourth.

Ta-da-da-dum, ta-da-da-dum, ta-da-da-dum.

The sound of thundering hooves and jockeys yelling

at each other was deafening. As we passed the stands the first time, fragments of sound from the announcer excitedly calling the race drifted into my ears.

“It’s Ice Bullet in front by five, Shimmer Shimmer second, with Natty Boh third.”

Thwack, thwack. Clods of hard dirt thrown up by the horse in front of me flew into my face as we ran as a pack, careening around the turn, trying to save ground, bumping and jostling, inches away from each other.

The scrappy, physical, closeness of it all surprised me. Hindquarters in front of me, rising and falling, sharp hooves inches from my legs; and the horse next to me, running head and head, stride for stride, pushing me closer and closer to the rail. We were a moving bubble of churning hooves, clods of dirt, and flying manes, with motionless jockeys hovering atop straining muscles, opening and closing strides as one.

The pace was quicker than our daily gallops, but I felt good and kept an even rhythm to my strides. It all went by so fast, the turns were coming up quickly, the red-and-white striped quarter-mile poles flashed by in a blur; there was hardly time to think.

Coming around the final turn toward the homestretch, the race suddenly turned frantic. Everyone was bumping and jostling, trying to get to the lead. Jockeys urged their horses on, suddenly riding harder and going to the whip. Willie took a shorter hold and started to ask me to go, his hands and legs in rhythm with my longer and longer strides. I knew what to do.

I started to run.

The roar of the crowd filled my ears. I could hear the announcer’s excited call, “And it’s Shimmer Shimmer by

two lengths, Ice Bullet on the outside. Here comes Raja. Raja is making up ground!”

Willie steered me to a gap that had opened up in the pack and asked me again.

“Let’s go. Let’s go. It’s time to go,” his hands and body cried. We burst through. I passed the third horse, then the second horse, Ice Bullet. Coming head and head with the leader, Shimmer Shimmer, I looked him in the eye. Then I turned on “the afterburners.”

Everything except the track ahead of us disappeared.

“Here comes Raja. Raja moving up on the outside to take the lead. Raja! Raja, followed by Ice Bullet, Shimmer Shimmer, and Natty Boh in fourth. Raja, by one, now two. Raja wins today!”

We passed under the wire with eight lengths between us and the next horse.

“Good boy, Raja!”

Willie stood up in his stirrups to slow me down and gave me a big pat on the neck. The roar of the crowd overwhelmed me as we jogged back to the stands. Princess Ayesha thanked Willie and hugged me again and again. “Raja, I knew you could do it. What a good boy!”

*Victory! What a glorious feeling. I am Raja, destined for glory!*

Winning was the best feeling imaginable. I jiggled all the way back to the barn.

“I knew you could do it,” Max confided in me that night. “Of all of us, you’re the one who will really make a mark. I know that you can beat Annapurna.”



When the Saratoga meet ended and horses began to leave, the electricity in the air faded, leaving us feeling a little sleepy. The crisp September wind whispered of the coming winter as it rattled the yellow-tinged maple leaves. A group of Canada geese came in for a few days, circling the pond in the center of the track with a loud, a-hink-a-honk, a-hink-a-honk, then claiming it with a dramatic, feet first splash landing.

“Go south. Hurry, winter’s coming,” they seemed to cry.



### *September, Belmont Park, New York*

Grey, that’s Belmont for you. No flower baskets, shade trees, or ladies with colorful dresses walking around the stable yard. Grey skies, grey backstretch, grey people, even the other horses looked a little grey after Saratoga.

“You and Max are entered in the Champagne Stakes, a Grade 1 Stakes race,” RB told me. “It’s a big step up from a maiden race, but Alex thinks you’re up to it. You know, you’re the favorite. It’s because of your win at Saratoga.”

Early in the morning the day of the race, I was eating my hay and resting in my stall trying to stay calm, when I smelled it.

*Gardenias and peppermint!*

I quickly popped my head over my stall door, as a deep nicker escaped me.

“Raja, there you are, my beautiful.” Princess Ayesha walked to my stall, gently kissed my nose and scratched the tickly spot above my eyes, feeding me a peppermint as I stretched toward her. She flicked her long black hair out