

## A Special Bond - Marta Finlay - Texas

As the sun rose, my bedroom lightened and I knew I had to get up and get ready to go. The drive began with the radio blaring a song I knew well and I enthusiastically sang along. Before long, Susan and I passed the familiar house with the white picket fence. The turn off to the barn was coming up, so I slowed the car, not wanting to miss the dusty dirt road. As we drove, I glanced in the rear view mirror watching the red dust settle over our tire tracks. The road leads us to excitement and anticipation of the day.

In the pasture beside us, young colts were ready to race me to the barn. They were moving to the pace of the car with effortless grace and the confidence of winning, which I knew they would because I let them. Approaching the barn, the familiar scents became wildflowers, hay and leather. Gathering our things from the car, I reminded Susan not to forget the large bag of peppermints in the trunk, but before I could finish, she was already sprinting down the long hall to Champ's stall. He knew the sound of Susan's footsteps and had his head poked out of the stall's window waiting for her. She opened the door to his stall and threw her arms around his massive neck and asked him how he was. I've always said, "Champ is Susan's four-legged boyfriend!"

Susan gently placed the halter around his face and led him out of the stall. He was an enormous Warmblood bay in great physical condition. Despite his size, he was a gentle giant, nuzzling her shoulder searching for his usual peppermint treat before saddling him up. As I walked him toward the ring to meet Susan, I whispered to him, "Watch over Susan for me."

The time had come for them to enter the ring. I took my seat in the stands, butterflies in my stomach. Susan's eyes met mine and I gave her our usual signal, a wave. It was my way of reminding her that I believed in her and cheered her on, regardless of the outcome.

I held my breath as Champ launched off his hindquarters, tucking his front legs under his chest. He soared over the rails with grace, his movements smooth and effortless. I watched with a mix of amazement and fear when they approached each jump. Susan remained focused, her eyes looking at the next jump while Champ was concentrating on the jump in front of him. Together they moved as one, a perfect team built on an undeniable trust.

They were approaching the seventh jump when a mother's worst nightmare occurred. Susan was leaning too far forward in the saddle and though Champ tried to steady her, she tumbled to the ground. I stood up quickly gasping for air. I wanted to go to her to make sure she was okay, but I knew I couldn't. Champ lowered his head and gently nudged Susan's shoulder as if to say, "You're okay." Susan knew what had to be done. She climbed back in the saddle and completed the course. Afterwards, they walked out of the ring together with their heads held high having accomplished their goal, finishing the course.

The drive home was quiet. I could tell Susan was replaying the fall in her mind. I knew she had gained something far greater than a perfect round, the strength to rise again. This had taught her resilience and courage. As we pulled up to the ice cream shop, smiles returned.