

The Secret

by E. Katie Gammill

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Renal Disease.



The Secret

April 2009 © TheDogPlace / E. Katie Gammill - The years are catching up with me. The basement steps seem steeper. I'm more cautious as I grow older. It's 5:30 P.M. and I open the crate doors of my eight Sheltie companions. While I work, they are safely tucked in the basement for their safety and comfort. They snooze in the cool darkness.

Upon return, I turn them loose and they rush up the stairs. Their joyous barks of freedom fill my heart with happiness. They dash through the garage, entering their fenced yard. I count furry bodies on my fingers. One is missing.

Closing the basement door, I notice my fifteen-year-old matriarch standing at the foot of the stairs. She responds to my call, placing her soft paws on the step. She bravely lunges forward. Tumbling backwards, her eyes hold a silent plea. She tries again, just for me. Her old bones refuse to cooperate.

Our eyes meet in silent understanding. I quietly walk back down the stairs and pick her up in my arms. Tiki turns her head and rests her muzzle on my shoulder in apology. Embracing her, I make a silent pledge. This will be our secret. She will not be embarrassed by old age. Her kennel mates will never know.

When I sit her down, Tiki shakes her glorious red coat and rushes into the yard as though nothing is amiss. My dowager's beauty is undeniable, the coat only more magnificent with age.

Tiki is alpha-bitch. I don't remember awarding her this position, but not one kennel mate denies her the honor. She must have assumed her importance when my head was turned. It's she who establishes a pecking order. Her trick of wrinkling her nose to her eyebrows and shutting off her air passage triggers a snake-like hissing. Flagging her tail like a banner, she walks stiffly, establishing hierarchy. A puppy can be knocked backwards by her invisible power.



Tiki isn't capable of enforcing this intimidation, but it's our secret. In her younger years, she never had to. Her direct eye contact said it all and covered every situation.

In a round about way, Tiki taught me to pick puppies. Strangely enough, I missed her at six weeks of age. I learned this after she returned home with a broken leg. The new owner wasn't able to keep her due to circumstances beyond her control at that time. Over the phone, it was suggested Tiki be put to sleep, but a wise vet said she could be fixed. Oh, the joys missed had he said that.

Capturing my heart upon her return, we put on a second cast on her leg due to her fast growth. With courage, she overcame her hobbling gait. Given time, the limp was gone and she finished her Championship.

Tiki is the product of an initial purchase of a lovely bitch with the sweetest face in the world. Her soft eyes and lovely natural ears and brilliant red coat have melted through generations. Tiki's mother held my heart in her paws. Tiki does no less.

She never lets me down. Invaluable for setting type in my kennel, she blends structure and movement with beauty. Through her, I learn to expect good temperaments. Her keen intelligence convinces me I would settle for nothing less.

Lying in the yard, her jaunt completed earlier than her kennel mates, she watches their activities. An occasional car brings her to her feet for a short chase. Limping back to her position under the shade tree, her youthful flash back causes pain.

We've weathered one tornado together. Even today when it storms we must cover Tike in a crate. We share miles, disappointments, thrills, admiration, friendships, and heartbreak. Tiki taught me a championship is secondary; companionship comes first.



Tiki is always there, placing her head under my hand for affection. Her soft paw touching my knee suggests it is time for attention. Being a negotiator, she usually gets her way. Always an eager breeder, my intentions were over-ruled when she arranged her own breeding at age nine. A C-section, and spay was arranged and I allowed a final fling at motherhood. The result was a masculine version of herself, who in time became as important to his people as Tiki was to me.

As years pass, I progressed to judging. Tiki changed from a busy body to a couch mouse. Subtly, she slid into the phase of "selective hearing". The easiest way to penetrate this

barrier of in-attention is to gently lift the lid off the ceramic cookie jar. Strangely enough, she springs to her feet from three rooms away, her tongue lolling and eyes full of anticipation. Pushing through the others, the gray muzzle and missing front teeth never fail to make me smile. I secretly break her pieces a little smaller.

At night she has her own sound. Shuffling across the floor, the backward toenail from an old injury makes a clicking sound. Sighing with contentment, her snores whisper throughout the house.

Breeding quality generations deep is a privilege. Finding my lovely foundation bitch so wistful and beautiful peering at me from the litter box overflows my heart with love.

Together we enjoyed the playful years. Now we have more quiet times. The weight of her body presses my leg. She places her head on weary paws and snoozes while I scratch her ears. Oftentimes I drop off myself. Tears fill my eyes as I stroke her beloved head. She peeks at me, and then snuggles deeper in the carpet. The soft carpet's warmth lessens her pain.

We live for today. Taking a final walk under the stars before bedtime, I wait as duties are completed. Fortunate to share this new phase of our lives, Tiki asks for nothing except love. I can give no less. In the morning, we will repeat our daily routing. I will once again feel the rush of pleasure as the dogs burst through into the yard. Once they are gone, I go quietly



About The Author

down to the basement and shake Tiki awake. She sleeps as only old dogs can. Time has little meaning.

Tiki's warmth and understanding will continue to surround me when she no longer walks beside me. She will never truly be gone, as I will find joy in her offspring. Our yesterday's memories will be forever found in tomorrow's sunrise as it creeps over the trees by the pond where she is buried. I can only hope when I am old, there is someone who will love me enough, to keep my secrets.

http://www.thedogplace.org/Articles/Breeder/09042-Secret_Gammill.htm