

A GIRL'S BEST FRIEND

DAVID DARCY

From Tassie to the Top End, through the outback towns of Coober Pedy and Tennant Creek, to the coastal retreats of Fremantle, Cairns and Byron Bay, and taking in the capital cities along the way, author—photographer David Darcy has traversed the length and breadth of the continent in search of women who have doggy tales to share.

A Girl's Best Friend showcases a cross-section of women and their dogs, from all over the country and from all walks of life. Whether it's Nancy sitting in her humpy in the desert with her beloved Blacky, or Beccy taking time out to stroll the beach with Stevie, or Margrit with Diamond amid the hustle of Melbourne's Chapel Street, all these women have one thing in common: a loving, compassionate bond with their dogs—who are not simply dogs, but members of the family, of course!

The result is a series of wonderfully spontaneous and candid portraits of women and their canine companions—rescue dogs, family pets, working dogs or faithful guardians. Their stories are funny, powerful and heart-rending by turns, and show us how strong the ties are that bind a girl to her best friend.

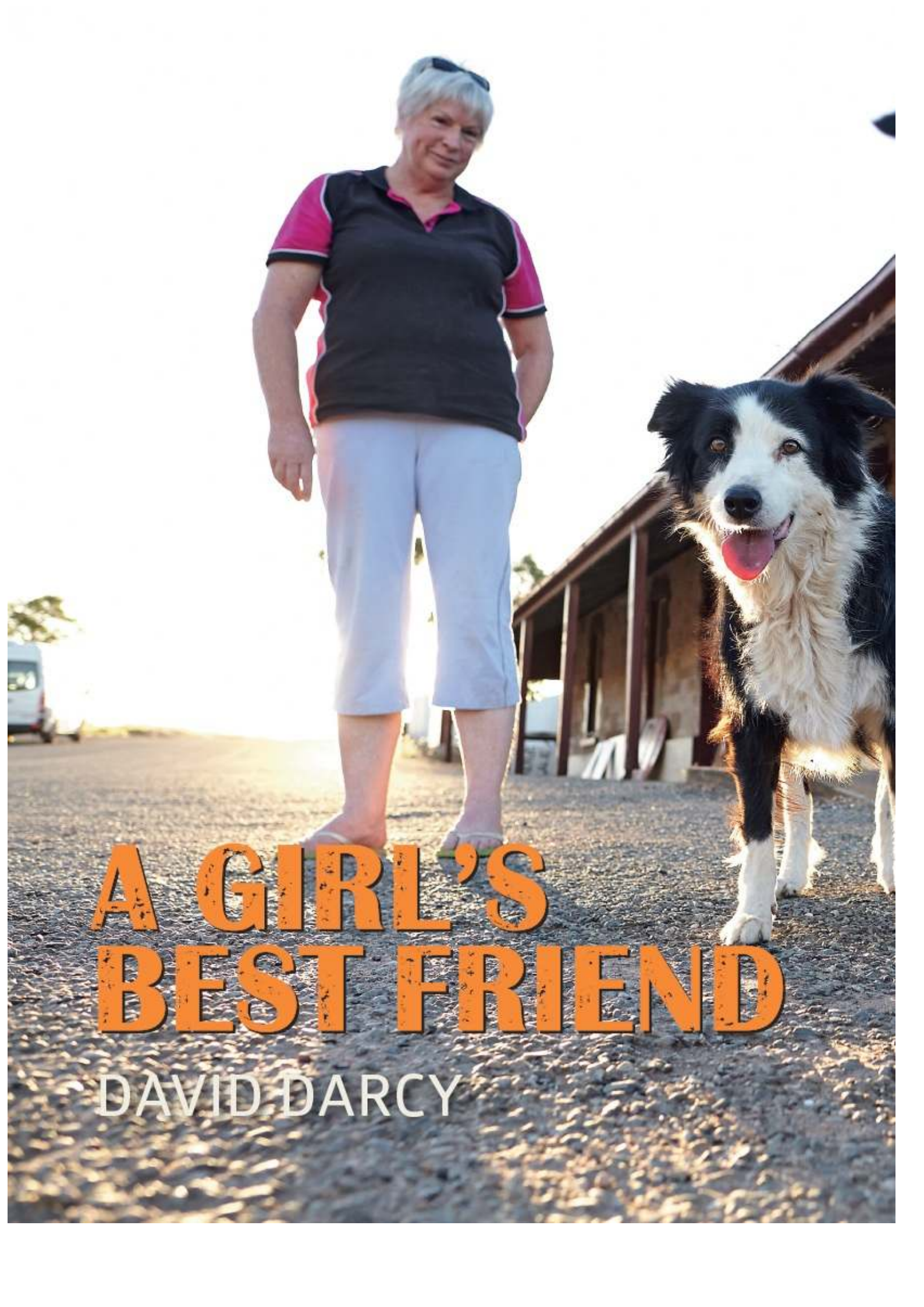
David Darcy knows the special kind of joy that comes from really, truly loving a dog. AMANDA KEENAN, West Weekend Magazine

He has that ability—which is innate and can't be taught—to capture the heart and soul of his subjects, in all their vulnerable, honest, messy best.

SARAH HUDSON, The Weekly Times

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DEDICATED TO MY LATE STEPFATHER GERD,
WHOSE LOVE AND SUPPORT FLOWS THROUGH MY VEINS. FOREVER LOVED, GREATLY MISSED
NEVER FORGOTTEN.



INTRODUCTION

Unlike men, women don't tend to hang around town with their dogs on the back of utes. Most ladies are a little more discreet when it comes to flaunting their best friends. It took a lot of time to flush out the right women to tell their doggy tales, but I found the experience much more rewarding and surprising than I had ever expected.

It's common knowledge that dogs don't judge. They don't care about what you're wearing, your make-up, or whether your hair's out of place. It's an endearing quality that sets dogs apart. So, part of my mission was to try to capture that quality in these photos. By portraying the women as the dogs might see them, every day. This was a challenge!

Stopping women in the street or turning up at their home unannounced and asking them to pose for a photo shoot—on a hot, sweaty, summer's day—isn't an easy task. Without a mirror in sight, it may have seemed like mission impossible. Yes, quite frequently I heard, 'What, like this?' and 'Now, are you kidding!', and sometimes there was a lot of convincing involved. But remarkably—be it from love of their dogs, the power of persuasion or the constant flashing of the pearly whites—somehow these women agreed. And more astonishingly, sometimes they agreed in the most remarkable of circumstances.

Camera in hand, I was invited into their personal space to photograph their private moments, from women watering their gardens in their nighties to ladies picking up kids in their PJs. Mud, dust and dog food got splashed around, hair got messed up and dog slobber flowed freely. And through it all the women in this book continually surprised me with their loving, caring, compassionate enthusiasm for their dogs, and their willingness to smile and laugh as I captured it all.

Dogs are a great leveller. This book represents a cross-section of women from all walks of life and the one common thread is their love of dogs. Whether it's Nancy sitting in her humpy in the middle of the desert with her beloved black dog, or Rose and her Poodles in the manor they call home, all these women love their dogs. And all these women can relate to one another's love for their dog.

While shooting the men's book, *Every Man & His Dog*, I asked every bloke to sum up his relationship with his dog. The word 'mateship' or 'my best mate' came up again and again. While photographing this book I asked the women the same question. 'Mateship' certainly came up a few times, but more often than not I heard women describe their dogs like their kids. Whether they had young children of their own, or their kids had grown up and left an empty nest, the women in this book spoke about their dogs in a nurturing, endearing and loving manner.

One thing is certain: all these dogs were part of a family.

CHAPTER 1
OUT & ABOUT



I had a favourite called Candy, she was a good dog. Here we've got Choppo, Bushy, Lucy, Fred and Tooby ... oh, and a few kids. Of course I love the grandkids, but they can be a handful. At least when the dogs are all tied up you know where they are.
JULIE, KIDS & DOGS Brinkworth, South Australia

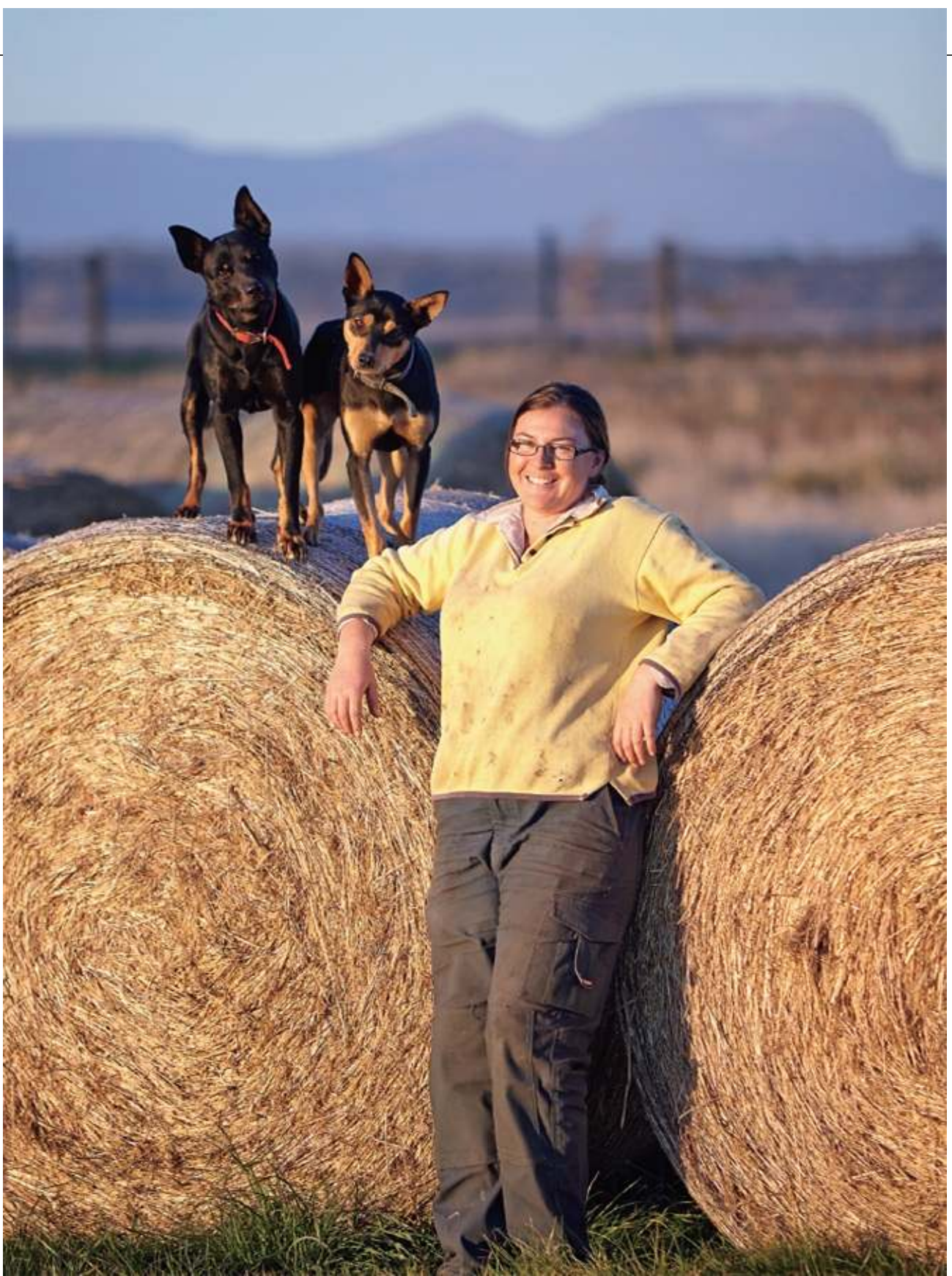
Australia is a bloody big country. I should know: I've driven around it a few times over the past 15 years. And as I look down the barrel of travelling maybe 30,000 kilometres in search of dog stories, I'm always surprised by my willingness to jump in the ute and tackle those kilometres all over again.

Travelling around the country can be a long slog at times, but it's all about the adventure. At the start of any new escapade there is always an excitement and anticipation of what lies ahead. What will you see, who will you meet, what will you discover? As a photographer it's easy to let your imagination run wild with the possibilities and opportunities, and sometimes it's hard to contain the enthusiasm.

So, as with all my earlier adventures, I started out by saying goodbye to the Blue Mountains and heading off. Only this time I didn't have my own dogs with me—I was going solo.

The plan was simple: travel around the country and capture women hanging out with their four-legged friends. Of course I had shots and scenarios in mind, but, as always, you have to adapt to the opportunities that present themselves.

When you're Out & About you meet some very interesting people. And some of them leave a lasting impression. From the moment I walked into the Leap Hotel, I wanted to know more about Jude. Christine also had an amazing story to share. And you'll never, ever, meet anyone like Gloria.



I'm a third-generation farmer. I've spent a lot of time around dogs and sheep, so I know their movements fairly well. The year before last, I won the state yard-dog championships. I then went to the nationals in Queensland, where I could have won, but I made one silly mistake. Next year the nationals are in Tassie, so I'm hoping I'll have a home-ground advantage.

VIRGINIA, SAM & TESS Epping Forest, Tasmania

CHRISTINE, HARRY, MIM & BILL

As far as rescue stories go, Bill's is hard to top. This furry little beast has survived a natural disaster and the chaos that ensued: a flood, disease, ongoing infections, epilepsy, memory loss, and more. From a flooded city on one continent, to the arid outback of another, Bill has been around. He's been up and down and to and fro. From pillar to post, and back again. This little white fluff-ball has got an awesome tale to tell—and awesome parents to share it with.

CHRISTINE: Bill, he's a nine-year-old rescue dog. I was in the United States volunteering for a Buddhist organisation, when Hurricane Katrina hit. There was a call for volunteers to help rescue dogs from New Orleans, so a group of us—who knew nothing about New Orleans, apart from what we'd seen on TV—headed off. When we got there we linked in with an organisation called Best Friends. Most of the dogs we were pulling out of the soup were Pitbulls, Akitas ... mainly guard dogs.

The Best Friends organisation had lots of boats. They were able to go around and find dogs in the worst-affected areas. We heard they found Bill on the roof of a car. That was his little island. But in the heat, the metal roof had burned his feet. It was just over a week after the hurricane had hit when they found him. He was so scared they had to net him to get him into the boat.

Best Friends rescued hundreds of dogs. When we finished we went back over to Arizona, where we were based, with 40-odd animals. We began setting up a sanctuary. There was a lot of confusion about all the dogs that had been rescued and where they were going to go.

Anyway, this Texan millionaire chartered several planes to start shipping animals out of Louisiana, because they were going to be euthanased. We put our hands up to take 110 dogs and cats into this makeshift shelter. Bill happened to be on one of these planes. I actually met Bill for the first time a couple of days later, when Sonia and I were going around assessing all the dogs, checking their general health and condition.

He was in a pen with another hairy fella and they were both in a really bad state. We actually thought Bill had given up the will to live. It turned out his feet were so infected he could not walk. He had ulcers between all his toes—he was a total mess. So we did our best to clean his feet and dress them. We realised Bill was not going to get the care he needed at the makeshift shelter because there weren't enough volunteers. So Sonia and I took him back to our place to look after him there.

We didn't plan on keeping him. We tried to get him re-homed. He got adopted out three times but people soon realised how bad his feet were and the huge responsibility of dressing his wounds. People meant well, but the reality was Bill was a difficult case.

Eventually one of our friends said she would take him. By this time Bill had been with us for about a month and his feet were beginning to heal. So he was going to go to a new home—but when it came time for him to be collected, I realised I couldn't let him go.



It was love ... like, who needs another dog when you're living in America and you know you've got to bring them all back to Australia ... through quarantining and the whole nine yards ... I didn't need another dog. But I was in love! Anyway he came. And he stayed. And he is the sweetest guy. Rescue dogs and cats seem to appreciate their second chance. They are so faithful and so loving—you can't get a better beast than a dog you rescue. No way.

Bill has gone on to have endless health issues. The vet said that's probably associated with the amount of toxins he took in, during his time in the soup of New Orleans. His skin took years to recover. Then a few years ago he developed epilepsy. He had 12 fits in two days, when we were travelling from New South Wales back to Alice.

The last fit he had completely wiped his memory. He didn't know his name. He didn't know who anybody was. We took him to the vet's and they weren't sure he'd recover. We put him in a dark room and over a few weeks he slowly came back. We just spent a lot of time with him patting him and saying 'Good boy Billy', 'Love you Billy'. Today he's fine.



JUDE & FRINKIE

As rain buckets down at the Leap Hotel, 20 clicks north of Mackay, Queensland, Jude kicks off her thongs, puts up her dukes and does a little Muhammad Ali shuffle. She's ready to spar. Ominous onlookers slowly back away, before her dog Frinkie steps up and begins to joust with his mum. Jude reckons she's too old to spar professionally anymore, but admits Frinkie's not a bad substitute.

JUDE: I ran into a very good girlfriend who I hadn't seen for a while. I asked her what she got for Mother's Day and she said nine puppies. Then her daughter produced a phone and showed me the pictures. In one of the photos, one dog in particular stood out—his picture looked straight at me. I said, 'I'll have that pup!' Then a few days later, after I'd had a bit of a think about it, I thought, 'I've got a full-time job! I can't really have a puppy ...'

Then a very good friend who is also a dog-lover said, 'You should get that puppy. Go on, get it and I'll help you look after it.' He offered to take the puppy and look after it for me until I was ready. So before I knew it, I'd gone around and picked up the pup and we were all in the car together.

Her name is Frinkie, which is short for Frinkleweed. My friend, who was rather ill at the time we've been friends for many years—he used to call me his 'honeybunch of frinkleweed'. Apparently 'frinkleweed' is a German wildflower. Anyway a few days after we brought her home, he asked me what I was going to call her, and I said Frinkleweed. Which made him really happy. Of course over time, 'Frinkie' stuck.

I'd been without a dog for 18 months before I got her. Like I said, I wasn't planning on getting a dog, because of work and the responsibility involved. But I live by myself and my life was just so ... I live a lonely, sad life. Because of a marriage break-up.

Sometimes I used to dread going home, knowing that I had to spend 12 or 24 hours there by myself. But now when I go home and I see Frinkie waiting at the gate, as soon as I see her I have a smile on my face. That's what life is about. Dogs are my favourite people.

I had two dogs before Frinkie. I had Manning for 13 years, and Timmy for 14 years. Unfortunately Tim just disappeared. I guess that's one of the hazards of living in the bush, 'cos Dingoes and snakes are always around. It was sad not knowing what happened. I was pretty cut up.

I think dogs play a big part in people's lives, especially lonely people. In situations where it's just one-on-one, you do become terribly close to your dogs and they end up meaning so much to you. I really like dogs because they don't get mad at you. You don't get in trouble for things. You can sit up and have too many beers with them and they won't hassle you out in the morning.

Even though most people might think she's a bit of a scatterbrain, Frinkie is one of the most intelligent dogs I've had. She has a few faults, for sure. When she was younger she had a habit of chewing up my thongs. She went through about ten pairs. And so I started hanging my thongs up out of reach. She caught me out one day. I thought she'd grown out of the habit and I left a pair on the ground. I came out and went to put them on the next morning and realised she'd chewed the plugs off and then flipped the thongs back over, to make them look like nothing was wrong.



It depends what time of the day I come home, but if I come home at eight or nine o'clock at night, she's usually off doing a border patrol. And I don't worry. She's very lucky because she lives free-range at my place, so if she's not there at that time of the night I'm usually not too concerned. But if I come home at any other time of the day and she's not there, it really gives me a scare.

Frinkie entertains me. She keeps me company and she keeps me sane, 'cos she's devoted to me. If I'm sick or sad, she's always there for me. Always.



Tharros is Greek for 'courage'. I got him for nothing, but he's cost me a bit lately. About a month ago he tore a gash in his penis. That set me back \$1250. It's funny because when he was 12 weeks old I took him to the vet and they thought he was a Jack Russell. Which he's obviously not. And Bailey's a really great dog, she's really protective of me. And she's great around children. Nah, yeah, they're good dogs, bloody good dogs.

EMMA, BAILEY & THARROS, Herbert, Northern Territory

GLORIA & THE MOB

Gloria has saved the lives of hundreds of community dogs over the past ten years, and also bridged a cultural divide through communication and respect. This Chilean-born migrant, who lived in Canberra—without a dog—for nine years, before moving to the remote Indigenous community of Yuendumu in Central Australia, is one highly remarkable and tolerant woman. Gloria doesn't see the chaos associated with 30-odd mongrels living in her house; she just sees her beautiful, wonderful, marvellous dogs.

GLORIA: Freddy, Sina, Finn, Morta Boy, Tinkerbelle, Silly Billy, Annie, Gregory, Mama, Barbie, Kim, Pappa, Don, Derrik, Tess and there's a few more. Of course, Long Grass, who's always outside.

Ten years ago I arrived here in Yuendumu to work as the assistant art manager, and I discovered that the dogs in the community were in really bad condition. There was no vet coming here, no animal welfare people. Most people in the community didn't realise that if you had a sick dog, you could do something about it—like if you take medication for yourself you're going to get better. If you do it for the dogs, they are going to get better also.

The community didn't have any resources to do anything. And some families used to have more than 40 dogs. It's impossible to even feed that many dogs properly when you don't have resources. I wanted to be here for a long time, but I wasn't going to be able to live in a place where people close their eyes to the problem, with an attitude that nothing can be done. I was going to do something.

So, in November 2003 I went around and began counting just how many dogs were living in the community. I counted more than 700 dogs. At first I started to feed the dogs, just with my money. Then I started to talk to the council, because I wanted to help rid the dogs of mange and ticks and other health problems.

Little by little I was able to get a vet to come out here in 2007. It was going to be impossible to de-sex all the dogs, so we started by implanting the dogs to make them sterile for one year. It was quite expensive, but it was going to be very quick. And we managed to slow down the breeding process. That gave us some breathing space.

So many of the dogs were unwanted, but it was very difficult for the people to say that, because the police would come round and shoot the unwanted dogs. The locals didn't want to see the dogs shot, so the vet showed them how she could put them to sleep, in a very comfortable manner. Without any screaming, fighting or bloodshed. When the community saw this option they surrendered 174 dogs for euthanasia. It was very sad, but it was also amazing—because these people were being educated and were able to manage an animal health problem for the first time.

Sometimes, families would wait until the dogs were under anaesthetic—getting the sterilising drug—before they would say, 'I don't really want this dog.' This was really interesting, because they didn't want the dog to hear them say that. That showed me that they really did respect the dogs, because they didn't want the dog to know it wasn't wanted.

Also in 2007 I started asking community members if they'd like to surrender any dogs to me, so I could find new homes for them. I teamed up with a friend in Alice Springs and we started putting dogs up for adoption. At first we adopted them out to places in New South Wales. I think we adopted out about 250, maybe 300, over three or four years—through the Desert Dogs

program. Now there are Yuendumu dogs all around Australia.



Over the ten years I've been here, I've probably had more than 1000 dogs living here. At the moment I have 32 dogs. They are all different and they all have their quirky behaviours. People always ask if I have a favourite, but I love them all. Some people might look at me and think I'm crazy, because the situation might look overwhelming. Many people ask me about the smell, but as you can see it doesn't actually smell in the house. I think it's because they are very healthy. They have very healthy skin and when the dog has healthy skin it doesn't smell.

It's very difficult to go away or on holidays. I have a friend in Melbourne and he's not tied up with a job or anything, so he's very flexible. I let him know what my plans are for the next year and when I'd like to go away and he comes up and looks after them. Two weeks is my maximum time of being away from them. I just cannot enjoy the holiday anymore, thinking about what's going on at home.

Some people get frustrated with kids and some get frustrated with animals, but the other day I was thinking just how lucky I am to have all these dogs. I really love my life. How many people are as lucky as me: I have the freedom to choose whether or not I want to have a dog, 10 dogs or 50 dogs.

Last year I lost three of my dogs. It's very difficult when I lose a dog. People say, 'It's just one

dog out of the 30,' but they don't understand. A little while ago I lost a dog that was mentally and physically disabled. When he died it felt like ten dogs had gone missing, because he was occupying such a huge part of my life. It was very difficult losing him.

One Aboriginal family brought me a dog to look after as it was dying. There was nothing I could do, so I gave him painkillers at the end. When I told the family that he'd passed away, I asked if they wanted me to bury him. They said, 'No, no, we would like to bury him.' So next day they got the body and we collected everybody in the car. They had already dug a hole for him, in a particular spot, in a certain way, so his head would be looking back at the house—towards their country. We buried him and all the family held hands and prayed. That was really special, to see what they were doing for the dog, that he was their family.

When I arrived here, people told me that these Aboriginals don't care about the dogs. That was bullshit! To see a complete funeral for a dog with prayers and everything was amazing. Understanding communities is about knowledge, education, communication. Proper communication. And it's about respect.

What I gave these people was the respect that they needed. I think that helps me, being accepted in the community. Now they know I wouldn't do anything that is hurting an animal. They know me, they know this.

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