



Romeo has not one, but three swooning soul mates who love him.  
CAROLINA CANINES

## Love in the Ruins

Three names, several helpers, and one sharp-eyed e-mailer later, a Katrina dog is heading home

BY JENNIFER ROTHACKER

**E**vacuations after Hurricane Katrina separated hundreds of owners from their pets in New Orleans and other Gulf Coast areas. Many people impacted by the storm worked for months to find their animals. Some never did. And while others were lucky enough to find them in the mass destruction and chaos, some went on to face legal custody battles with rescuers.

But in the midst of the madness, there were many stories of compassion—one of those being the love triangle that has formed between three strangers, all of whom fell in love with a big, dopey black Lab named Romeo.

### Lenniece Morrell

When the rain hit New Orleans, Morrell thought it best to ride out the storm at home. Eventually, however, the levees broke, and she had to evacuate by boat. Her three dogs were left behind, seeking refuge on beds, and swimming to the bowls of food she had left for them.

Upon her return, Morrell found her chow mix, Mocha, and rat terrier, Marty, dead. Romeo's I.D. tags were snagged on a fence, but there was no sign of the dog. Grieving, living out of her office, and hoping for one piece of good news, Morrell posted a lost ad on Petfinder.com, pleading: "Wherefore art thou, Romeo?"

### Debra Ross

An animal lover who runs her own pet sitting business outside of Reno, Nev., Ross had felt compelled to help the hurricane victims. She volunteered and was dis-

patched through United Animal Nations to work at their emergency shelter in Monroe, La.

Once on site, she worked in a huge barn full of rescued pets. A big black dog, nicknamed Goliath by the other volunteers, caught her attention. "There's something about his eyes," she says. "I'd felt he'd been my dog for years."

Ross renamed him John Coffey, after the huge, gentle character played by Michael Clarke Duncan in the movie *The Green Mile*. She hand fed him and bought a cushion for his kennel, wondering if—like herself—his owner was a large woman. He seemed to take to her so easily!

Ross wanted to take John Coffey home, but Louisiana officials would only allow animals to leave with authorized groups. It was Carolina Canines, based in Wilmington, N.C., that wound up taking the big guy. Ross immediately e-mailed the organization to check up on her buddy.

### Pat Nowak

Carolina Canines' executive assistant Pat Nowak got the e-mail and answered Ross. The two sparked a friendship over the dog, who required extensive treatment. John Coffey had lost over 30 pounds and suffered from gastrointestinal issues. On top of that, he underwent a frightening round of heartworm treatments.

Nowak took him home to be with her three dogs. She too had fallen for him and his eyes.

She and Ross worked out the details for Ross to foster him. The morning Nowak was to drive him to the airport, however, she received an e-mail message

from Tina Lewis, a woman in Australia who'd been working on reunions online. Lewis had discovered Morrell's Romeo ad and matched it with Carolina Canine's Katrina listings.

It was a perfect fit.

### Love Connection

It was only 6:30 a.m., but Nowak immediately called Morrell. At first, Morrell didn't believe Romeo could still be alive. She and Nowak compared notes, delighting when they realized the dog could walk backwards and had the same distinguishing marks. They even heard his big "woof" when Nowak called out his real name—Romeo.

Unfortunately, Morrell's home hadn't been rebuilt yet, and her temporary housing didn't allow pets. So Nowak continued to keep Romeo. Ross dipped into her savings to fly herself and Morrell to Wilmington to visit him for his ninth birthday.

The three women connected instantly, cooing over Romeo and laughing all week.

"I call them my sisters," Ross says. "They're just incredible women."

Morrell is still rebuilding, and more than two years after Katrina, Nowak is still taking care of the newly fat and happy pooch. They hope that the dog—now formally called Sir John Romeo, an amalgam of the names given by his fans—will be able to go home for good this spring, once Morrell's home is complete.

"You never think you're going to run into somebody who feels the same way as you do about your pet," Morrell says. "My heart is just so at ease." **AS**