

# BUTTON

THE  
HOKKIEN  
THERAPY  
DOG



FIONA FOO

**BUTTON**

# BUTTON

THE  
HOKKIEN  
THERAPY  
DOG



FIONA FOO



EPIGRAM  
SINGAPORE · LONDON

This book is dedicated to Popsicle.  
My very first dog.  
My best friend.  
My guardian.

Copyright © 2020 by Fiona Foo  
Photography by Andrew Tan, Lisa Goh, Michel Damaris and Peggy Zee.  
Used with permission.

Cover design by Priscilla Wong

All rights reserved  
Published in Singapore by Epigram Books  
[www.epigram.sg](http://www.epigram.sg)

**National Library Board, Singapore**  
**Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

Name(s): Foo, Fiona.  
Title: Button : the Hokkien therapy dog / Fiona Foo.  
Description: Singapore : Epigram, [2020]  
Identifier: OCN 1141067378  
ISBN 978-981-48-4592-2 (paperback)  
ISBN 978-981-48-4593-9 (ebook)  
Subject(s): LCSH: Psychiatric service dogs. |  
Dogs—Therapeutic use. | Dogs—Training.  
Classification: DDC 615.85158—dc23

First edition, April 2020.

# CONTENTS

---

---

Author's Note		ix
Chapter 1	Lost and Found	1
Chapter 2	My Greatest Fear	14
Chapter 3	The King and I	18
Chapter 4	Breeding Cruelty	28
Chapter 5	My Quirky Button	43
Chapter 6	My Special Bodyguard	56
Chapter 7	My Hokkien <i>Gao</i>	63
Chapter 8	Natural Healer	71
Chapter 9	Earth Angel	81
Chapter 10	Ripple Effect	87
Epilogue	My Dream	105
Tributes to Button		109
Acknowledgements		115
About Hope Dog Rescue		117

---

---

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

*Why did you choose to adopt a scruffy, unkempt dog? She was probably abandoned because she's sick. If you take her in, you'll have to pay humongous vet bills and deal with her emotional issues. Don't be stupid, just buy a puppy.*

I hear this said almost every other day and although there is some truth to it, the satisfaction and fulfillment of adopting a dog, especially a not-so-young one, definitely outweigh all those concerns.

The idea for this book came about from our scruffy, little abandoned dog whom we named Button. When my animal welfare group Hope Dog Rescue found her, she was so ill that she needed emergency surgery to save her life. That procedure was a turning point for her—she went from a life of neglect and abuse to a life filled with love, happiness and achievements. I wanted to show the world what a not-so-young rescue dog could achieve, given love and the right opportunities. And so the idea of a “Button book” was

conceptualised. And because Button was such a well-loved dog with a larger-than-life personality, I wanted our memoir to be shared with the world even after she was gone.

To many out there, it seemed that I had rescued Button and had given her a new lease of life. In fact, Button was the one who changed my life. She showed me what unconditional love and contentment were. She taught me acceptance, and opened my eyes to view the world through hers, which is beautifully untainted. She taught me to see the good in everyone. She left a priceless legacy.

It took a lot of effort to write this book because reliving the good times with her and her last days was heartbreaking. It took me back to the day my world collapsed when I lost Button. It made me wonder if I could have done more: did I do enough for this accidental angel that came into my life for such a short time? Memories of Button are still fresh in my mind, and every time I worked on this book, I wished she was still right here beside me, giving me her signature smirk. No wonder people always say that the hardest thing about having a pet is the goodbye. I agree wholeheartedly.

Nonetheless, this is a story that needed to be told, in the hopes of saving even more lives. Every adoptable four-legged furry friend deserves a second chance in life. We hope you enjoy the book and that the stories here touch your lives the way Button had touched ours.

## CHAPTER 1

# LOST AND FOUND

One afternoon in 2016, I was at home with my main man—a black-and-silver miniature schnauzer named Popsicle—when I received a string of WhatsApp messages.

*We found a Schnauzer  
AVA and SPCA have no records*

Not another one, I thought, sighing inwardly.

*Went back to where she was found and asked around.  
Nothing*

*Walked dog, she doesn't know how to go home  
No Lost & Found posters up  
Can you take over?*

Here we go again. It sounded like a case of an overconfident owner who had let her dog off the leash but the dog couldn't find its way back to her. Or it could be another case of pet abandonment.

For the zillionth time, I wondered why people could not be more responsible with their pets so that animal welfare groups would not have to make such unnecessary rescues and could instead focus on helping the really dire and genuine cases.

I then heard the whole story about the schnauzer. My neighbour, Kevin, had gone to a childcare centre to pick up his daughter when he saw a miniature schnauzer wandering nearby. He lived in the block opposite mine in Bishan and I'd spoken to his wife, Ashley, on a few occasions because she had two miniature schnauzers of her own (seemed we were destined to bond over schnauzers). The dog that Kevin saw had on a tattered red collar; she was sniffing the grass and seemed to be scavenging for food. Kevin looked around for the owner but did not see one, so he decided to bring her home first.

After he dropped his daughter off at home, Kevin took the dog out on a leash and went back to the same location in the hopes of bumping into someone looking for her. They walked around for hours but the dog did not seem to recognise her way home. Neither was there anyone searching for her. Over the next three days, Kevin put up "Lost Dog" posters in the vicinity and continued to bring her back to the same area, hoping to bump into the owner, but, alas, to no avail.

During those days when Kevin and Ashley had her, they noticed that the dog was peeing blood and they very kindly took her to the vet. The vet diagnosed the problem as a urinary tract infection and gave her a course of antibiotics.

After three days, Kevin and his family decided they couldn't keep the dog as they had two already, so they sought to hand the scruffy dog over to Hope Dog Rescue, an animal welfare group I started in 2011. That's when I received the flurry of messages. Ashley was the one who had texted me and asked if I could take over.

But of course; all we do is sit around and wait for scruffy dogs to rescue.



We had arranged to meet at my void deck, and I had not been waiting long when I saw Kevin approaching with his young daughter and a dirty-looking grey schnauzer. From a distance, I could see that her fur was long and tangled and she seemed to be quite old. As they came closer, the neglect became more apparent. Her fur was rough and unkempt, and she probably had not been groomed for a while. Her nails were long, dirty and unclipped, her gait was unsteady, as if she was not used to walking, and she had poor motor coordination.

I glanced at her. She had a blank expression in her eyes—eyes that had given up on life—but I sensed there was a part of her that was still hanging on, hoping for a second shot

at happiness. Feeling sorry for the poor little mutt, I bent forward to pat her and caught a whiff of the musky doggy scent. Kevin handed the leash to me. She quietly followed alongside as if she knew that she was meant to be mine.

When she got back to my place, instead of sniffing the new environment curiously, as most dogs would, she wandered around looking like a forsaken ragamuffin. She spent the rest of the afternoon humping my male dog, Popsicle, who was more than fifteen years old then. She did that until Popsicle got tired of trying to escape her clutches and I had to separate them. Then it dawned on me that perhaps she had been a breeding dog belonging to a home breeder and that humping was the only thing she knew. She might have been discarded after she had been “used”. I checked her belly and true enough, her tits were dangling, as if she had had quite a number of litters. I then checked her teeth to get a better gauge of how old she was, but her teeth were so rotten and foul smelling, there was no way to use them as a guide.

I fed her some boiled chicken that was left over from my dogs’ lunch and she wolfed everything down quickly. It seemed as if she had not had a decent meal in a long time. She did not want to drink water all day, although I tried to place the water bowl near her mouth a few times. After checking the back of her neck and noticing she was dehydrated, I fed her water with a syringe.

Many thoughts ran through my mind. What was I going to do with this dog? Foster her? Would I be able

to find a foster home on such short notice? Adopt her if no one claimed her? My other schnauzer, Snapple, had passed away slightly more than a year ago, and I had not thought of adopting another yet as I had Popsicle, who was pretty old. Caring for a senior dog is a whole different ball game; they have many needs to be catered to. They have difficulty doing simple things that we take for granted, such as standing up on their own after lying down and peeing in the right places (thus requiring more cleaning). Older dogs usually develop canine cognitive dysfunction (generally known as canine dementia), poor vision, aches and pains from arthritis—and that meant more vet visits and bills, etc.

I already had my hands full with one little old dog and I was also fostering Harper, a special needs dog who was paralysed in the lower half of her body and incontinent. I lived with my eighty-three-year-old mother, but she could only help with her “eye power”, keeping watch at times when I could not be at two places at once. At her age, I could not expect her to help physically. My mother helped out in her own way, like calling me frantically when I was out and yelling into the phone, “Hurry! COME BACK NOW! Harper pooped and it leaked out from her diaper! Come back before she crawls all over the place and leaves poo marks everywhere!” That sentence was enough to send chills down my spine!

Back then I was working as a private hire driver so my hours were flexible, but as an only child, with one senior

human, one senior dog and one special needs dog, would I be biting off more than I could chew?

There were days when I felt under the weather or had back pain, and had trouble lifting all seventeen kilogrammes of Harper. Those were the days when I felt I needed to practise greater self-control and not adopt any more dogs.

I have been rescuing dogs for the past decade and have always had a soft spot for old female dogs and special needs dogs. My reason? I feel sorry for the female dogs who are constantly being forced to mate and have to go through the pain of giving birth almost on a regular basis. How sad and horrible, not to mention damaging to their souls and degrading to their self-worth.

I live in a small HDB flat and if I took in another dog, would there be enough space if I temporarily needed to foster rescues? What if neighbours complained? So many what-ifs. Was it worth the hassle to take her in?

I told myself not to jump the gun and don't think so much. Perhaps her owner might make an appearance the next day.

The next day came and Kevin informed me that a man who identified himself as her owner had called to claim the little scruffy dog, but he had no proof of ownership. He did not know her microchip number or have her licence from the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA). All he had was a blurred photo of a schnauzer that did not really resemble her.

Kevin requested that I bring the dog to their home.

Feeling strangely disappointed, I patted the dog's head and assured her that she would be fine. Why was I feeling disappointed that she might be reunited with her owner? Was I subconsciously hoping that she would be unclaimed so I could keep her? Was it because she was a schnauzer and I absolutely adore schnauzers? Over the past years of rescuing dogs, I had fostered countless of them and had sent them off to their permanent homes, and although I missed them initially when they left, I never felt sad because I knew my home was just a transit point for them. So why did my heart feel so heavy?

Later that day, we made arrangements to take the dog to her owner. When Kevin texted me the address, I realised they also lived in Bishan, just a couple of lanes down from me. What a weird coincidence this was. I had walked my dogs for years in this area but had never seen this dog; was she new in the estate or had she been kept in a cage away from civilisation? As the dog and I walked to her block where her owner lived, I felt a sense of foreboding. I silently willed her to have a better life in the future. God knows how true that was.

As we approached the ground-floor unit, three adults and three children were waiting outside. Their chairs and tables were strewn haphazardly in the corridor, a bit like a pasar malam. Seated at the table was a shirtless man who reminded me of Porky Pig. He was probably the uncle. The three children were probably five to twelve years old and their parents might have been in their early forties.

The mother looked like a typical “Ah Soh” in her forties and spoke to me in a strong Mandarin Chinese accent. Fortunately, despite my hopeless Chinese, I managed to get my points across.

“Is this your dog?” I called out as we approached them. The two men did not even acknowledge our presence. The China Ah Soh peered at the creature curiously and waved us off irritably. “No, not ours!” she answered. The children ran up to us excitedly and shouted, “It is, Mummy, it is! It’s our dog! Angel!”

I rolled my eyes so much I almost lost my footing. Gosh, the woman could not even recognise her own dog.

“Your dog is very sick,” I said. “She needs to go to the vet soon.” I attempted to convey the urgency to the China Ah Soh, but she only replied, “She is always like that, she is fine, no sick, no sick.”

Sensing that the dog would not be receiving the urgent medical treatment she required, I began to think that returning her to these people was not a good idea. I had to think on my feet there and then, to buy time and delay returning the dog to someone who not only did not recognise her own dog, but also was not likely to provide her with the necessary medical care.

“We need to go to the police station for you to take back your dog officially,” I told them, lying through my teeth but trying to sound like I had done this before. I bent down to pick the dog up, somehow feeling protective of her. I then turned and walked away, holding on tightly to the dog.

The lady came after me and asked me to take the dog back to her house. I followed reluctantly, my heart sinking that this dog’s fate now lay in my hands. I put the dog down and she lay on the ground quietly while the kids patted her.

Should I return her or take her with me? My mind raced and my heart thumped so loudly that I could hardly hear myself think. I glanced down at the dog, our eyes met and I saw a soul I needed to save. Or was it mine that needed saving?

That was it! Was I going to return a seriously ill dog to a negligent family? The condition she was found in spoke volumes of what kind of care she was given at their home. Would I be able to live with that, knowing that I could have done something that could profoundly change the dog’s life? It took me only a mere second to make up my mind.

I informed the China Ah Soh firmly that this dog needed to be returned to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) or AVA to ascertain the ownership and check for the microchip. Inwardly, I was desperately racking my brain to plan my escape route with the dog. One of the men said he would call his friend, the one who had supposedly given the dog to them. I reckoned that his friend could have been a home breeder and after she was done with this dog, she gave it to him.

As soon as the man turned to make that call, I bent down, grabbed the dog and hightailed it back to the car park as quickly as I could before they could protest. I clutched the dog as if her life depended on how fast I could pump my legs. I did not dare to turn back to see if anyone

was chasing me, but I also did not hear running footsteps behind me. Nor did anyone call out “stop” or “come back” or “don’t take Angel”. Were they too shocked to react? Or were they happy that this silly woman had taken off with their sick dog and they needn’t foot any vet bills?

Heart thumping wildly and panting from the sprint, I quickly opened my car door and gently placed the dog on the front passenger seat. I slipped in and locked all the doors and sped out of the car park, all within eight seconds. On hindsight I could have auditioned for *The Fast and the Furious* and probably would have landed a meaty role.

Every few seconds I glanced in my rearview mirror to check if the woman and her husband were giving chase. My heart rate had accelerated in the last few minutes, either from the sudden sprint or from the gravity of what I just did. I drove around for what seemed like an eternity as I did not dare go home. I was paranoid that they were following me to attempt to take Angel back. Strangely, whenever I glanced at the dog beside me, I knew deep down that this was the best thing I had ever done. At that moment, I felt I had the power to create dreams. Ours.

And that was how I stole an Angel. She became the amazing rescue dog who changed my life. She would learn to understand the Hokkien dialect and train to become a certified therapy dog, bringing cheer to end-of-life patients and spreading comfort and joy to those around her.



As soon as I arrived home, I scanned her for her microchip number and immediately applied for her AVA licence. Ah yes, as a rescuer, I had my very own microchip scanner. No one had claimed her, and AVA and SPCA had no records of this dog. I wanted to be sure that she would be safe with me and that no one would take her away. After what I had witnessed, I was certain that her life had been rough and it made me more determined to give her a happier life.

How quickly things had changed. I had gone from coming up with reasons not to take on another dog to risking the law to protect her—all within a day. Besides, she seemed so *gong gong* (“behaving like a dumbbo” in Hokkien); I honestly did not think anyone would have the patience to care for her. Most people want a cute, affectionate and cuddly dog to play with, and she was none of that.

The next morning, she started dripping blood. I first thought she was in heat, but then remembered that she had been diagnosed with a urinary tract infection. I didn’t have her medication with me as I had left it at the so-called owner’s house when I frantically ran for our lives.

By afternoon she seemed listless and from my past experience of rescuing dogs, I knew that if she had been a breeding dog, chances were she probably was not sterilised. Breeders only want one thing: moolah. Which breeder in their right mind would spend their ill-gotten gains to sterilise a female dog? If she wasn’t sterilised, there would be

a high chance that the dripping of blood meant that she had pyometra, and not a urinary tract infection as diagnosed by the vet two days back. Pyometra is the infection of the uterus and occurs in female dogs that have not been sterilised. It is also life threatening. I immediately rushed her to our regular vet, Dr Carmen, who after listening to my details, suspected that the dog did probably have pyometra, and so more blood samples were drawn for tests.

The dog was to be immediately warded for emergency surgery and I needed to give her a name. Much as I loved having an Angel in my life, I have always believed that when one rescues a dog, one should also change their name, symbolising a change of their fate and the beginning of a new journey. From that moment, she became Button. She was cute as a button, so why not? I know, it was not a very creative or adventurous name but I did not have much time to think—and it was cute, nonetheless.

The vet immediately took her in for an abdomen ultrasound scan and I saw her lying belly-up, her eyes trustingly looking at the nurses and vet without a clue about what was happening to her. There was no struggle, no protest and no fear. Placed in a foreign environment with strange people, she seemed to have total trust and an unflinching sense of calm. I thought to myself, what a sweet dog to be so trusting despite what she had gone through with humans. She had only known me for two days but she had complete faith in me. At that moment, I knew that our bond was meant to be.

The ultrasound revealed that her uterus was enlarged, and there would be a high chance of losing her if surgery was further delayed! I was so relieved that I had recognised the symptoms, which ended up saving her life.

After the surgery, the vet informed me that Button's uterus was swollen to more than twice the normal size and if left untreated, she would have died in the next few days. Her teeth were also rotten and six had to be extracted from the left side. This teeth extraction was how she got her ever-famous smirk: because she had no teeth to support her mouth, she looked like she had a permanent smirk.

The following evening when I went to discharge Button, the nurses told me how sweet she was. They also mentioned that she did not know how to eat or drink from a bowl and had to be fed by hand.

As I drove home with Button sitting beside me, I stifled a grin. It was obvious she had never been in a car. She sat facing the back rest, her back to the windshield. An air of purity surrounded her, an innocence that was so endearing. Believe it or not, I grew up with a great fear of dogs, but I found it so easy to love this little angel, my dog, my Button.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My heartfelt gratitude to Button, who chose me as her guardian and partner and set me on an amazing journey of pet therapy, new discoveries and overcoming my fear of public speaking. Button helped fulfil my dream of having a pet therapy dog and together, we achieved unimaginable greatness.

My mom, Annie Chew, and my late dad, Raymond Foo, for being extremely supportive in whatever path I chose to take, never questioning, never doubting me, always believing that I would reach for my own stars.

Special thanks to my fellow volunteers Jamie Lim, Michel Damaris and Vanessa Tai for their patience and tolerance and for keeping me on track to meet the deadlines. Without them, this book may have taken a decade to complete.

And thank you to everyone who invested and believed that this book would materialise.

Last but not least, Epigram, for their leap of faith.

## **ABOUT HOPE DOG RESCUE**

Hope Dog Rescue was founded in July 2011 and rescues mainly injured street dogs. We are a collective group of people from all walks of life dedicated to a singular purpose of delivering hope and love to the ones who need it most—our street dogs. Run wholly on the kindness and goodwill of our volunteers and contributors, we endeavour to do our best to help animals who are abused, neglected and abandoned.

If you wish to volunteer with us or support us, please find us at [hopedogrescue.blogspot.com](http://hopedogrescue.blogspot.com) or email us at [hopedogrescue@signet.com.sg](mailto:hopedogrescue@signet.com.sg). Follow us on Facebook and Instagram: HOPE Dog Rescue and HokkienButton.

# TEACHING A DOG HOKKIEN ISN'T AS EASY AS

*JI, NNG, SA.*  
(ONE, TWO, THREE)



THIS IS THE INSPIRING STORY OF BUTTON,  
A RESCUE DOG WITH A PERPETUAL SMIRK  
WHO LIVED A HARD-KNOCK LIFE.

SHE BECAME SINGAPORE'S FIRST CERTIFIED  
HOKKIEN THERAPY DOG, AND BROUGHT JOY AND  
COMFORT TO DYING PATIENTS.

THIS IS ALSO THE UNEXPECTED STORY OF FIONA, WHO  
TRAINED BUTTON BUT USED TO BE AFRAID OF DOGS.  
HOW DID BUTTON AND FIONA COME TO TRANSFORM  
EACH OTHER'S LIVES?

Author **Fiona Foo** is the founder of Hope Dog Rescue. She is passionate about saving stray and abandoned dogs, fostering them and working to find forever homes for them.

NON-FICTION

ISBN-13: 978-981-48-4592-2



9 789814 845922

[www.epigrambooks.sg](http://www.epigrambooks.sg)