

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



No Place Like Home

Pen Farthing

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Title Page

Prologue: Just Like Old Times

1: All Change

2: One Step at a Time

3: Fish Out of Water

4: 24/7

5: F*U*B*A*R

6: A Close Shave

7: Advanced Classes

8: Out of Control

9: Operation Hilton

10: Down to Earth

11: Down on the Farm

12: The Weak Link

13: Is that a Puppy in your Pocket?

14: The Escape Artist

15: Off the Leash

16: *Char Badmashis*

17: Chilling Out

18: A Dog in the House

19: Life in a Blue Suit

20: Ground Truth

21: Broken Chains

Acknowledgements

Nowzad Dogs

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About the Book

When Pen Farthing brought two dogs home from his tour of Afghanistan, little did he know what he had begun. Twelve months later, he has left the Marines, after 20 years service, to run his charity full time. But he barely has a chance to miss life in action, as he is inundated with requests from marines and soldiers to give more rescued dogs the chance of a new life in the West.

Whether it's little Helmand, Fubar or Beardog - or the unruly litter known as the Char Badmashis or Four Hooligans - Pen does his utmost to give these dogs the chance they deserve. It is a frustrating and sometimes dangerous process, and while some dogs make it out to safety, others, tragically, do not. But a look out the window to see his own Afghan hounds, Now Zad and Tali, with bright eyes and glossy coats tells him it's all worthwhile.

Like his *Sunday Times* bestseller *One Dog at a Time, No Place Like Home* is the story of one man's courage and persistence in the face of often insurmountable odds. It will warm - and break - the hearts of dog lovers everywhere.

About the Author

A passion for the outdoors and a love of doing everything the hard way caused Pen Farthing to pop into a Royal Marine careers office one day aged 18 to take on the toughest infantry training in the world to earn the coveted Green Beret of the Commandos. His military career, which has included tours of Iraq and Afghanistan, lasted over twenty years. Since publication of the *Sunday Times* bestseller *One Dog at a Time*, Pen has left the Marines to run his charity Nowzad Dogs and - when time allows - an outdoor adventure company. Pen is married to Lisa and they share their home with five dogs. Pen Farthing has won The Dogs Trust Dog's Best Friend Award and the IFAW Pets and People Award. His dogs Nowzad and Tali were nominated for the Crufts Friends for Life Award. More details about Nowzad Dogs can be found at www.nowzaddogs.com.

No Place Like Home

A New Beginning with the
Dogs of Afghanistan

Pen Farthing



EBURY
PRESS

PROLOGUE

Just Like Old Times

AS THE BOOM of the exploding rocket echoed round the eerily silent buildings, the brilliance of the ignited gunpowder lit up the night sky.

'Here we go again,' I said to myself, as I hurried across a short patch of grass towards a lone wooden building hidden in the shadows. I moved into a shallow crouch as I ducked my head in anticipation of the low opening I could see looming. Except I didn't crouch low enough.

'Ow!' My forehead had slammed into the top of the open doorway and I fell backwards on the wet grass in shock.

'That bloody hurt,' I said to nobody in particular, desperately rubbing what I knew would be a nice bruise in the morning.

For a moment I sat, semi-stunned, letting the pain slowly ebb away, but another loud, skyward explosion soon wrenched me back to the reality of why I was out here in the first place.

I rocked forwards on to all fours, trying to ignore the sensation of the wet grass soaking my trousers, and carefully stuck my head through the doorway. From this level it was blatantly obvious that I had not been crouching low enough.

'Idiot,' a small voice in the back of my head told me. 'Any dumb-ass would have realised this hadn't been built with a human in mind.'

I crawled into the poorly lit wooden room. 'Sorry, buddy, I should have got here sooner,' I said softly.

The wide, scared eyes of one of my dogs, Nowzad, were staring back at me in the gloom. He was curled into a tight ball with just his head pointing towards me; he looked like he was shaking. His short-docked tail was pulled in tight to his behind and what was left of his ears were pulled back against the sides of his head as another loud explosion rocked the small wooden shed. It sounded very close, even though I knew it was hundreds of feet above us.

'It's okay, mate: I'm here, buddy,' I reassured him again as I put one arm round his midriff, and using my free hand to turn up the volume of the radio hanging from a single nail above my head.

I figured the sound would drown out the noise of the now more frequent explosions, but as I heard the crackly, over-excited voice leading a countdown to what I knew would be even more loud bangs, I knew it was unlikely to do much good.

'Ten, nine, eight, seven . . .'

The annoying voice wasn't helping the throbbing pain in my head either. I closed my eyes and gently ruffled the outsides of Nowzad's roughly shorn-off ears - the most obvious sign of the life he had led until only a few months ago. I smiled as he pressed his ear back into my open palm. I rubbed it with even more enthusiasm.

'Just like old times, eh, Nowzad?' I chuckled, although really there was no funny side to that particular joke.

' . . . three, two, one . . .'

I thought the flashes outside were purely down to the barrage of explosions that was now going off somewhere above us, but as I shielded my eyes from the beam of light that was shining directly into my face, I realised that someone was pointing a torch inside the shed. Before I had a chance to respond, an arm reached in, extending a silver goblet of red wine into the gloom.

'Happy New Year, you two,' giggled my wife, Lisa.

'Happy New Year to you, too, honey,' I said, as I took a mouthful of wine and held the goblet that had been a wedding present, up in a mock salute.

Swallowing, I turned to Nowzad. 'And Happy New Year to you, Nowzie,' I said into his ear, as another year was ticked off and 2008 arrived. 'I know it doesn't feel like it at the moment, but you're safe. Nobody can hurt you now.'

It was the second year in a row that I had counted down to the changing of the year in the company of Nowzad rather than Lisa.

The setting couldn't have been more different, though.

This year we were in Nowzad's kennel in the garden of Lisa's and my home in the Devon countryside. Twelve months earlier, Nowzad and I had been in a very different landscape: Afghanistan.

As a troop sergeant in the Royal Marines, I had been on a tour of duty with Kilo Company, 42 Commando. Along with the lads under my command, I had been posted to a so-called safe house in the desert town of Now Zad, deep in Helmand Province.

What had been safe about it had been a constant debate at the time. The mud-built compound (or 'forward operating base' to give it its proper title) crammed in amongst the narrow alleys and compounds of the closely built town had become our home over the freezing winter months of Christmas 2006. Our mission had been to provide security to the innocent Afghans who had wanted nothing more than to get on with their daily lives without the unwanted interference of the Taliban.

But that had meant we were often forced to spend hours manning our sentry positions in the freezing winter rain while the Taliban launched their mortars in our direction, which, inexplicably to most who had not served in the

military I would imagine, provided some kind of distraction from the dull routine of life in the 'safe house'. In the run up to Christmas Day we were receiving incoming mortars on a daily basis although bizarrely the Taliban left us alone to enjoy the turkey and fresh potatoes that had been parachuted in by the RAF along with a much-needed ammo resupply.

It had proved to be an unreal experience in many ways: at no time had I ever thought I would be fighting in a country I had only ever seen portrayed in a Rambo film.

But we soon discovered that there was only so much 53 marines could do in holding the territory surrounding Now Zad from the Taliban, and that our lack of numbers meant we weren't really able to provide the security that the people so desperately craved.

I had found that incredibly frustrating.

But by a chance encounter in a dusty alley, I had ended up providing shelter and security for a select few of the town's stray dogs instead. Slowly, strangely and totally accidentally, I had become the Dog Warden of Now Zad.

A dog we had named Nowzad had been the first to be taken under my wing. I had encountered him during a routine clearance patrol in the alleyways outside the Marine compound, when I had come across a dogfight.

More than three years on from that fateful day, I can still vividly recall the sight and sound of the clash of snapping teeth and I still hear the ferociousness of Nowzad as he and another, larger dog did battle. Most of all, I can still hear the jeering Afghan Police egging the dogs on to attack each other.

I will never forget how angry I was, seeing two dogs attempting to rip each other to pieces in the name of entertainment, and I was determined to stop the people who had orchestrated it. It hadn't been the most sensible thing I had ever done, but I had barged into the centre of

the action to break up the fight; besides we had the bigger guns.

The image of a scruffy, unwashed Afghan policeman tripping over his feet and landing squarely on his arse on the dusty ground as I pushed my way into the middle of the crowd still brings a smile to my face. And Nowzad had taken my intervention as his cue to make a run for it: as soon as a gap had appeared in the ring of frenzied spectators, both he and the other dog had charged away to the relative safety of the surrounding empty alleys and deserted, mud-walled buildings. The Afghan Police had been angry but there was little they could do seeing as they should never have left the security of our compound in the first place without permission. They had trudged off wearily while we watched over them, just in case the Taliban had decided to use that moment to attack, but thankfully it had never happened.

I had imagined that would be the last I would ever see of that Afghan fighting dog, but a few days later I had discovered Nowzad hiding in one of the empty buildings towards the western end of our compound. At first he hadn't been too receptive to me, to say the least. When I had approached him, he had let out a scary, nasty-sounding growl from a mouth of broken teeth; a sound that had sent me flinching backwards so fast it had been my turn to end up in a heap on the dust-covered ground.

Thankfully - for both of us - all it had taken to win him over were a few cardboard-flavoured military-issue biscuits. One of my young marines came up with the idea of naming Nowzad after the battle-scarred town we were fighting over. It fitted perfectly. The deep scars down the right side of his face and under his chin were a continuous reminder of the harsh life he had already led.

In the days that had followed, I had put together a makeshift refuge for him, and in the space of a couple of

months, it had somehow become a shelter-cum-sanctuary for five adult dogs and 14 puppies.

Nowzad had somehow spread the news of his good fortune, which included twice-daily meals of leftover military rations and a homemade shelter from the harsh Afghan winter nights, to some of his other four-legged friends.

There was RPG who was a scrawny youngster who tripped over his own legs as he madly challenged the grumpy Nowzad to play. Jena was an affectionate darkly tanned dog with piercing yellow eyes that we discovered tied with wire around her neck to a wooden stake by the local Afghan Police. The aim we assumed was that she would be mated by the hordes of stray dogs that roamed as a pack constantly around the outside of our compound scavenging for scraps or looking for a gap in the reinforced fence. The Afghan Police's plan was simple - the frightened dog tied to the post would produce more puppies and the stronger ones could be used for future dogfights.

We had not untied her soon enough and I had watched fascinated as Jena gave birth to eight pups on a freezing New Year's Eve several weeks later.

There was AK, who we had found lying injured near our makeshift dog pen, the telltale deep puncture wounds of a snake clearly visible on the back of her neck. Antibiotics and some TLC from the lads soon had her back on the road to recovery.

In complete amazement we had witnessed a scrawny unfed dog carry her pups in under the back gate, one pup at a time, to the safety of our compound. Without a second thought the white dirt-covered mum and her six pups had been added to our growing dog pound. It had been easy to come up with her name: Tali - short for Taliban, as who else but the Taliban would attempt to crawl in under our rear gate?

In many ways, Nowzad got me through my time in Afghanistan: he helped me every bit as much as I helped him. Being able to spend a few moments a day sitting and chilling with him in his homemade dog run had kept me sane through the rough times. He had been my five minutes of peace, the pilot of the magic carpet that had transported me to my life back home and a world where I could watch my dogs Fizz Dog and Beamer Boy running free on the beach, charging after each other into the surf as Lisa and I wandered along hand in hand. And I had made the cardinal sin. I had given Nowzad a trust in humans that we had no right to give. If I could not get him to safety when I left how could I just leave him to return to what I assumed would be a very short and harsh existence before he either died of starvation or from wounds suffered during a fight?

With the world seemingly falling to pieces around me, Nowzad had been the one constant I could count on. His stumpy tail would always wag like mad as I approached his DIY run at all hours of the day and night depending on my watch routine. He was always happy to see me - especially around feeding time when I would put a bowl of leftover military dumplings inside his run.

For a dog that had been beaten, bombed and starved, Nowzad could forgive very easily: he had never judged me if I was late or in a rush.

As he'd proven again, tonight.

The fireworks were gaining in intensity outside, but the loud pop music that was now blaring out of the radio was doing a grand job of drowning out the noise. There was something bizarre and slightly surreal about the frequent bursts of brilliant light from each explosion that danced through the open doorway. As Lisa and I sat in the dog run with Nowzad, we felt like we were sitting on the edge of the stage during a psychedelic illegal rave party.

‘Even last year was quiet compared to this!’ I yelled to Lisa above the loud bang of another firework, a shivering and still frightened Nowzad tucked firmly up against me.

‘How many bloody fireworks are there?’ I said.

‘Some people have just got far too much money to burn,’ Lisa replied, jokingly.

I had loved fireworks as a kid, even going as far as to make my own. I would carefully break down the ingredients from inside the rockets I bought from the local shop, separating them into the different piles of coloured gunpowder before redesigning my own, more powerful explosives. Probably not the most intelligent of ideas if I think about it, and there had been some close calls. Now, however, I really don’t care for fireworks; I would much rather spend my money on a few beers or a decent meal out. And there is also the far from minor detail that they scare the living daylights out of my growing pack of dogs.

‘How are the others coping?’ I shouted to Lisa as the next round of sky rockets shattered into dazzling fragments above us.

‘Fizz Dog and Beamer Boy don’t mind them,’ she yelled back.

That didn’t surprise me. Fizz Dog, our own Rottweiler, and Beamer Boy, our UK-rescued Springer Spaniel, had been part of our lives for six years. Sudden loud noises had never really bothered them, which was helpful given that they had started their lives with us living near the end of the runway of the Royal Naval Air Station at Yeovilton. Without much fuss, both dogs had adapted easily to the noise of the Harrier Jump Jets as they screamed overhead, and the booming of the military firing range nearby. Together, we had all just grown used to it.

‘And what about Tali?’ I asked, guilty that for a moment I had forgotten all about the other dog, that I had met on the far side of the world in Helmand Province and now lived with us.

Half the size of Nowzad, Tali was a white, hairy ball of constant energy.

Tali was a survivor, of that I had no doubt. And on arrival in the UK, she had also proved better behaved in the house than her fellow refugee, Nowzad. So as the darkness had fallen this New Year's Eve, I had assumed that she would be happier indoors, and I had actually been more worried about Nowzad sitting in a dark kennel at the bottom of the garden while all hell broke loose around him. Now, however, I was having second thoughts.

'Where is she?' I asked Lisa, picking myself up from the cold floor.

'I left her under the coffee table with the TV turned up full blast on some quiz show,' Lisa replied as she reversed out of the kennel into the early-morning dampness. 'She was okay,' she added, but sounding now a little unsure.

Nowzad was, at that time, barred from entering the house in normal circumstances. But these weren't normal circumstances. As another rocket went off I looked at him shivering nervously. I couldn't watch him cower like this any more: I hadn't rescued him and brought him halfway across the world for this.

'Right, that's it,' I said, summoning all the authority I could muster: 'Lisa, Nowzad is scared stupid. I'm bringing him in to be with Tali. At least they can be scared together.'

'But he'll wee everywhere,' Lisa protested.

'Come on, honey,' I pleaded. 'We'll just watch him like a hawk.'

Lisa was stern-faced. 'It was you who thought it was a great idea to bring him all the way back from Afghanistan,' she said, before a giggly, wine-induced little smile broke out. '*You'll* have to watch him like a hawk.'

CHAPTER ONE

All Change

THE NEW YEAR arrived eight days after we collected Nowzad and Tali from the quarantine centre where they'd spent the compulsory six months in isolation since arriving in England from Afghanistan.

To say it had been an eventful time was the understatement of the century. In the space of those eight days, it felt like our lives had been turned upside down.

We had slowly counted down the six months on our calendar, although we didn't need to pencil in any reminder as their release date was engraved on our minds. When the due date finally arrived there was no official letter, just a confirmation phone call to say that the vet had given the dogs the final all-clear and that was it: quarantine for our Afghan four-legged friends was over.

After months of making the long drive from the West Country up to the quarantine centre on the outskirts of London, it was great to have Nowzad and Tali released. The facilities inside the centre were basic, but the staff couldn't have done more to make both dogs feel at home. However, it had been frustrating not being able to take the pair of them out for a long, lung-busting walk or chuck a ball around in the park; not that Nowzad or Tali were the ball-fetching type.

Above all, I had wanted them living at home with Lisa, me and the other two dogs: I was looking forward to them

becoming part of our pack. We had our favourite walks round our neighbourhood that we were planning on introducing the pair of them to, and the longer outings on Dartmoor when time allowed.

As we'd begun counting down the days to the end of the quarantine period, Lisa and I had both become quite nervous, as well as excited. Once the Afghan Two were out, that was it. Whatever happened we would have to make things work; I couldn't just take them back.

But then, as always, our employers put a spanner in the works. Lisa was, like me at that time, a member of the Forces: she was a WREN in the Royal Navy. As members of the Armed Services, both of us knew we were liable to be asked to move home at any time. Sure enough, with unbelievably bad timing, Sod's Law came into effect just as we were getting ready to collect the dogs.

I had been promoted: nearly a year after returning from Afghanistan my performance had finally been assessed and my commanding officers had, apparently, approved of the way I had led the lads through our time in Helmand Province. The report my old boss had given me had persuaded the powers-that-be that after seven long years as a sergeant it was time for a promotion. So I now held the rank of Colour Sergeant.

But it also meant I needed to be living closer to work, on the south coast near Exmouth. We'd be moving around 50 miles from our current quarters to a house on an estate linked to the base.

It was good news in the long term, but bad news in the very short term. Until then we'd been treating the dogs' release on December 24th as the perfect early Christmas present. But now our plans to accommodate them at our old home fell by the wayside in an instant.

Although nobody else had been counting I had, in nearly 20 years of serving as a marine, moved 14 times. Both Lisa and I longed to finally call somewhere home but it wasn't

going to happen yet, that was for sure. We had to move to our new house in Devon on the day before, December 23rd, which gave us precisely 24 hours to not just move all our belongings, but also to prepare our new home for the arrival of two new dogs, as well as our existing pair. It had been a pretty hectic time, one way or another.

The quarters we'd been moved to were comfortable enough and, most importantly, had a fair-sized garden at the back. From the new house one could just about see the coast and on a good day, you could certainly smell the salty tang of the sea on the winds blowing in from the estuary.

Deciding where everything went in the new house was down to just one person. And, of course, that wasn't me. So while Lisa exercised her female prerogative and arranged the rooms as she wanted them, I stayed out of the way and devoted most of my time to building the two kennels that could accommodate our four dogs during the day - when we weren't around - and also house Nowzad at night, while he learnt to be house-trained. The decision had been made that he would sleep outside for the time being, while Tali would have a bed in the kitchen where we could at least limit her wandering into the rest of the house. Fizz Dog and Beamer Boy slept upstairs.

During their six months in quarantine, we had kept Tali and Nowzad in separate kennels. We'd done this for a couple of reasons. Firstly, we weren't sure whether Nowzad wanted a bunkmate and, secondly, we were also extremely mindful of the fact that neither dog had been neutered. We didn't want to be responsible for bringing even more unwanted puppies into the world, so had to do something about it. As with everything else, it hadn't been easy getting the job done and we only managed to get Nowzad and Tali neutered towards the end of their six-month quarantine, after acquiring a special DEFRA permit to allow a dog in quarantine to be operated on.

During their harsh former existence as strays of Helmand, Nowzad and Tali had obviously known each other as part of my Now Zad pack. The six months apart during their enforced quarantine didn't seem to bother them at all. They resumed their friendship as we left the quarantine facilities with a quick sniff of each other, and that was it. Both Lisa and I let out sighs of relief; it was one less thing to worry about.

The kennels were fairly expensive models that we had ordered from a dog show the previous November. They resembled large garden sheds, and were insulated from the damp ground and fully waterproofed. A fenced dog run was attached to one side of each, enclosed by prison-style bars on two sides to allow the residents plenty of fresh air and the opportunity to watch the world go by. However, given that we lived in a pretty normal house on a pretty normal housing estate, the only bit of the world that was usually going by were the bin men who came once a week and the postman who came six days a week. Nothing very exciting.

The most interesting intermittent sight was, however, next door's cat, which had immediately discovered that he had the ability to drive Fizz Dog completely round the twist. I had noticed the cat on Day One. The playful cat had been perched delicately on the top of the dividing fence, sitting there with a 'you-can't-get-me' look written all over his face as Fizz Dog had barked and jumped up at him in vain.

The cat had also been there, watching me, as I put the finishing touches to the sheds on Christmas Eve. He, in turn, was being watched by most of our recently doubled-in-size canine contingent.

'I wouldn't think about falling in here, if I was you,' I said to him as I sat on the roof of one of the kennels, with a glance towards Nowzad who was propped up against the washing-line post surveying his new surroundings, and

probably wondering what the hell was going on. 'He wouldn't even bother to chew.'

Lisa and I hadn't had time to worry about whether or not Nowzad was going to take to his new kennel. I had certainly worked on the assumption that whatever it was like, it would be positively palatial compared to the ruined Afghan outhouses that he had been living in for most of his life.

In fact, Nowzad had been completely laid-back about his surroundings when we'd let him out of the van after picking him and Tali up from the quarantine centre, and he went through the garden gate as if he'd done it a hundred times before.

His lack of concern was good news in more ways than one, as it meant he was feeling safe and happy. And, in particular, it also meant he wasn't bothered by the fact that I had cut a few corners in constructing his new home: dumped unceremoniously next to Nowzad while I had been finishing off the kennel was an overflowing bag of screws and nails that had arrived with the kit and should probably have been part of the finished structure.

'Don't tell Lisa, buddy,' I had said as I slid from the roof of the kennel and landed gently on the lawn. 'What she doesn't know won't hurt her,' I added, as I scooped up the bag of what I hoped were non-essential fixings and dropped them in the dustbin.

Nowzad had just followed me with his eyes. I knew I could rely on him not to give the game away.

*

As if bedding them into their new life hadn't been enough of a challenge, Nowzad and Tali also had to fit in with our other two dogs.

Lisa and I had got our first dog in 2001, just a month after we had been married. As a kid, I had had a dog called

Shep, but being a youngster, I couldn't really remember too much about him. But dogs had always been part of Lisa's family, so it seemed natural to follow tradition.

Having a dog was something we'd talked about vaguely even before we'd got married. We had not really given choosing the right pet much thought and had bought our first dog from a breeder in Manchester. Looking back, we were naive in the extreme and didn't research it in the way we should have done. At the time, we knew nothing about puppy farming and some of the other sinister stuff that goes on in the canine world. But we were delighted by the dog we chose, a Rottweiler called Fizz, or 'Fizz Dog', as we liked to call her.

She'd been a challenge in many ways, but mainly because of her inherited obsession with chasing squirrels, or indeed any other animal. As a result, taking Fizz Dog for a walk was a perilous undertaking. She simply couldn't be let off the lead.

It had been when we'd collected Fizz Dog from her breeder that we'd been told about her heritage as a squirrel catcher: "Er mum's a right good 'un at catching them little tree rats," the breeder had told us proudly as we collected our young pup. We had smiled nicely and ignored her.

'Like she would *want* to chase squirrels . . .' Lisa had cooed as she stared into the melting-chocolate eyes of the innocent-looking puppy.

Just how wrong could somebody be? Once she was old enough to go out for a decent walk, Fizz Dog had immediately proven that she was without question a chip off the old block. In fact, she only had to sniff a squirrel from 200 yards away and she would be off.

And, as she grew up, Fizz Dog had revealed that it wasn't just squirrels that she enjoyed chasing. Any animal would do, which was why if there was just the slightest possibility of livestock anywhere near us then Fizz Dog was

grounded. In the early days, it was all we could do to hold on to her, while we scolded and attempted to drag her tensed body in the opposite direction as she howled in short, sharp screams of frustration at not being allowed to hunt her prey. Her high-pitched squeals would draw looks from passers-by, as it sounded as though we were secretly torturing her with electrodes as we dragged her away.

'It's okay, she's friendly really!' I would shout to people whilst smiling sincerely, my arms bulging as I used every ounce of power to keep her under control.

But otherwise Fizz Dog was a great companion, a dog that loved human company, children especially. Lisa used to take her into the gym in Yeovil with her when she was stationed there, and Fizz Dog loved nothing more than greeting the kids as they finished their swimming lessons and learned to sit to attention as they all came skipping out of the changing rooms, waiting for their hugs and cuddles. Lisa would watch over her but she had little to worry about as the kids pulled and prodded at Fizz Dog. She genuinely loved the attention.

Much as Fizz Dog enjoyed human company, however, we soon sensed she needed a dog pal.

Since getting her, Lisa and I had become supporters of an independent animal rescue centre in Somerset, Happy Landings, which was close to where we lived. Reading their monthly newsletter could put a smile on your face and reduce you to tears at the same time.

I hadn't really thought about it until then, but I was constantly struck by mankind's inhumanity towards the animal it likes to call its best friend. Some of the things I heard that the staff at Happy Landings had had to deal with made me angry and sick to the stomach.

So I had to agree without hesitation when Lisa said one night, as she put down a copy of the centre's latest newsletter: 'I think we should give a rescue dog a home.'

Lisa did all the ground work in finding a suitable companion for Fizz Dog. Sadly Happy Landings didn't have a dog that was compatible with our Rottie, but eventually we found a homeless Springer Spaniel that the rescue centre staff thought was called Beamer or Beamo or something like that but they were not quite sure. He had been taken in at an RSPCA shelter.

We knew how important it would be that our two dogs got on, so Lisa had taken Fizz Dog along to meet and socialise with Beamer Boy (as Lisa now called him) in one of the shelter's specially built enclosures. Luckily, they had got along brilliantly, chasing each other round and round in circles with no sign of aggression.

We had a few formalities to go through to convince the RSPCA that we were fit and proper owners. The rescue centre home checker wanted to know whether we would give Beamer Boy plenty of exercise, and had been fairly satisfied when Lisa informed him that as we were both physical-training instructors in the Armed Forces, Beamer Boy would not go short of a walk or two.

The story of how most stray and abandoned dogs end up in the care of rescue shelters is never normally made public and so while we had no clear guidance on Beamer Boy's past, one of the kennel girls did whisper to Lisa that it was something to do with him being left alone on a boat. I hadn't really understood why they could not tell us his past history; I assumed that it was to prevent us treating Beamer Boy too differently or maybe even seeking out the previous owner.

It had been Lisa's choice to get Beamer Boy. I was tied up with work at the time and hadn't been able to go and see him with her the first time. But she had taken lots of photographs that had made me smile as I had flicked through them on our computer screen.

Beamer Boy's playful, endearing face filled the screen. His coat was straggly and unkempt; white with occasional

jet black patches. His head was a mask of black except for a lone white stripe running from his forehead to the tip of his nose. His large, floppy ears were covered in black matted hair and desperately needed a trim.

But I agreed with Lisa that he was quality and we hadn't needed to discuss it any further. If Lisa was happy to give Beamer Boy a home, then I was too.

This time, it was Lisa who had been tied up with work on the day it had been agreed that we would collect him, so I had travelled to the re-homing centre in Weston-super-Mare. As I had stood in the waiting room waiting to be introduced to our new dog, I had felt overwhelmed by all the posters and information sheets on the walls:

'Is your dog micro chipped?'

'Have you neutered your dog?'

'Regular worming - what you should know.'

'Has your dog invited unwanted guests into your home - fleas?'

Owning a dog really was a big responsibility, so what about two of them? Little did I know that one day owning two dogs would be the least of my worries . . .

A young girl had appeared with a small, timid black-and-white Springer with a tennis ball lodged firmly in his teeth. His tail was wagging furiously as if he assumed he was going for a walk, which he was, of course, in a way: a long one.

'Here he is,' the young girl had said happily and, to my surprise, the receptionist just handed me Beamer Boy's lead.

'There you go,' she said as I took hold of it. 'Your wife completed all the paperwork last time she was here.' I had imagined there was going to be more to it than that.

As I stepped out, Beamer Boy trotted alongside me as if he didn't have a care in the world. And I didn't know it at the time, but I reckon that was the moment my interest in dog rescue began.

Little could I have imagined where it would take me.

When I sat down and thought about it, I realised I had not really thought about the intricacies of owning four dogs. As Lisa reminded me with annoying regularity, I was probably taking on more than I could handle, especially when two of those dogs had never been house-trained or ever taken for a walk on a lead before. Something I had not really considered, I had to grudgingly admit.

We introduced the four of them for the first time at Lisa's father's farm in Wiltshire, where we'd left Fizz Dog and Beamer Boy while we'd headed up to the quarantine centre outside London to collect Nowzad and Tali. We had our concerns, of course, especially about Nowzad. But we'd been hopeful it would be fine, especially given the natures of our other two dogs.

Getting all four dogs together for the first time had been nerve-racking but, much to our relief, Fizz Dog's and Beamer Boy's meeting of Nowzad and Tali had been a bit of a non-event, as they'd welcomed the new arrivals with barely a second glance.

Ever since we have had them, Fizz Dog and Beamer Boy have been amazing in their ability to welcome all and sundry into their lives. I had really hoped they wouldn't be fazed by the two new weary arrivals and, sure enough, they weren't. Just to be on the safe side, we'd kept them all on a lead, but our fears of all-out dog war had not materialised; instead, they'd just greeted each other in typically canine fashion, by sniffing each other's bums.

As I watched them, I couldn't help thinking how glad I was that as humans we used the good old-fashioned handshake as a way of introduction.

'See, instant dog karma,' I had said to Lisa as she stood nervously by, holding on to Nowzad's lead with an iron grip.