

HOME HOUNDS

A N BARDEN



© A N Barden, 2014
Illustration - Laurence Chandler

Why were they leaving when they'd been so happy here for the past two years? It didn't make sense and he couldn't get his head around it. He stared out to sea. It was calm and still, with barely a ripple, and its surface was glistening in the magical glow of the rising sun. Turning his head, he looked up and down the beach. The tide was out, and the golden sand stretched as far as the eye could see in both directions, edged by dark, craggy pools on one side and white, chalk cliffs on the other, creating a striking contrast.

Turning back towards the sea again, he wondered why anyone would want to leave somewhere so beautiful. It must be madness he decided - there could be no other plausible explanation. But whether mad or not, the fact still remained they were taking them away from Ramsgate in about a week's time, unless he could change their minds. And surely that was impossible, wasn't it?

'Why are you here, Runner, at the sea's edge?'

He turned around, and there - standing directly in front of him - was Tally, his tan and white hound friend, sniffing in amongst the rock pools.

‘Have you found a rotting fish?’

‘No. I’ve been thinking.’

‘Thinking?’ Tally repeated in surprise - she didn’t approve of anything that taxing.

‘Yes, Tally. We need a plan.’

‘To find rotting fish?’

‘No!’ Runner barked in frustration. ‘Forget about rotting fish. This is serious! We need to come up with a way to change their minds, and urgently.’

Tally looked back at him despondently. ‘Whose minds? What are we changing?’

Runner howled. It meant ‘give me strength!’ in dog tongue. Then he tried again. ‘Tally, you do realise we are leaving here soon, don’t you? That our humans plan to take us away from Ramsgate, never to return?’

Now he had her full attention. She stopped sniffing the rock pools at once and lifted her head up. ‘What? Really? No. I had no idea.’

Runner howled again, although this time it was louder and for longer. ‘But they’ve been planning and talking about it for weeks and weeks,’ Runner whined, once he’d regained his composure. ‘How can you not know?’

‘Oh, well, I try not to take much notice of what’s going on around me most of the time, because everything’s just too scary. So come on then, Runner, tell me all about it.’

Tally grabbed Runner’s neck, wanting him to play-fight with her, but he was having none of it.

‘Let go and keep still for a moment and I will,’ he growled, clearly unimpressed with her frolicsome antics.

She obeyed at once. Runner was not a dog to be trifled with.

‘Very soon we’ll be leaving Ramsgate,’ he began.

‘Really? Well, I never knew that.’

‘Quiet, Tally!’ Runner growled again; his patience was now teetering on a knife-edge.

Instantly, she dropped onto the sand with her front legs outstretched, her dog lips sealed.

‘As I was saying, in about a week’s time we’ll be leaving here.’

‘But where are we going?’

For Runner this was a step too far. He barked aggressively at her, baring his teeth.

Tally cowered, knowing that she’d finally overstepped the mark. ‘Sorry, sorry,’ she whimpered, pushing at the sand with her snout, wanting to bury her head in it.

‘Germany. That’s where they’re taking us. But I don’t want to go there, do you?’

Tally pulled her nose out of the sand and looked up at him, bewildered. Should she reply? Or would he get angry and bark at her again?

Sensing her dilemma, Runner stepped forwards and lay down beside her. ‘Sorry I got angry,’ he sighed, licking the top of her head. ‘I didn’t mean to. It’s just that I’m so stressed about leaving.’ He stood up. ‘And I can’t bear the thought of never seeing the sea again.’

Tally got to her paws, and side by side they trotted further up the beach towards their humans.

‘You don’t want to leave either do you, Tally?’

‘Well ...’ She paused. ‘Are we going back to that forest? You know, the one we visited a while back? Because if we are, I liked it there. It was teeming with wildlife and no scary humans.’

Runner gave a deep, low whine. This was hopeless. He might as well give up.

‘Oh, hang on,’ Tally barked, sniffing the air excitedly.

Runner’s ears pricked up - maybe he could get her to see sense after all.

But no such luck. An interesting scent had caught Tally’s attention, carried on the south-easterly breeze. ‘Small human with biscuits,’ she yapped, a few moments later.

But Runner hardly heard her, he was looking out to sea again. Tally was a lost cause. She wanted to leave. So he was all on his own. Or was he? What about the others? Couldn’t they help him? He turned to face Tally again, hoping to reason with her, but it was too late. She’d vanished.

Scanning the beach, Runner couldn't see Tally anywhere. Where had she gone? How could she have disappeared that quickly? She was fast, but not that fast. Then he sniffed the air. Aha! Now he knew exactly where she'd gone and what she'd meant by 'small human with biscuits.' It hadn't been a question, as he'd first thought, but rather an observation. She'd caught the scent of the small human in the south-easterly breeze and had charged down the beach then around the curve towards Ramsgate harbour, in the greedy pursuit of a biscuit or two - the small human was always generous - and in return for a good sit, often a pawful could be scrounged.

Runner set off at a run, following his nose.

'Good girl, Tally,' the small human said in human tongue as Tally sat and was given a biscuit. Then unable to restrain herself as usual, Tally lay down and rolled over, all four legs in the air, to reveal her pinkish-white belly. The small human laughed, bending down to rub it, making Tally wriggle around on the sand in delight, causing Runner to look away in shame.

‘Jez, Millie, come!’ the small human shouted, standing up again.

The instant the command was given two black Collie-Cross dogs zoomed into sight, the larger, fluffier male carrying what looked like a rotting fish in his mouth. Tally instantly jumped to her feet and bounded over to him, trying to pinch the fish from his mouth. But Jez was having none of it. He firmly believed in finders keepers, and this fish was his, and his alone, and definitely not for sharing. Instantly growling and lurching towards Tally, Jez made his feelings crystal clear, and Tally quickly retreated, tail between her legs.

‘Jez, leave that!’ the small human shouted. Reluctantly, Jez dropped the rotting fish at once, grumbling repeatedly under his breath, then trotted dutifully towards his human with a silly dog grin on his face. He hated being caught. Sneaking was his speciality.

‘Good boy. Here, have a biscuit instead,’ the small human said as Jez approached.

For dogs, “biscuit” is one of those magic human words. In seconds, the small human was surrounded by many hungry dog mouths, including Runner.

After giving them one biscuit each, the small human put them away and began to stroll along the beach.

‘Come on, Tally, Runner, let’s catch up with your owners. Look how far away they are now.’

The small human then made odd, waving movements with its long, dangling arms as it laughed and hurried on. Runner followed the small human’s gaze and stared at his and Tally’s humans, standing there in the distance. Both were slim and fairly tall, the female slightly smaller than the male.

‘What’s up Runner?’ Millie said in dog tongue as she went charging past him in pursuit of her small, rubber ball that the small human had just thrown for her from a long, yellow stick with a ball-shaped curve in the end.

Runner kept pace with her as the ball rolled into the sea and she pursued it. Millie was a sensitive and intelligent dog. She’d understand his predicament, and perhaps even agree to help him.

‘I’m sad, Millie. I don’t want to leave all this,’ he whined, turning his head this way and that, surveying what he considered to be his territory now, his home.

‘Oh, I see.’ Millie waded further out to sea and watched a seagull gliding above her head. ‘Yes, I can understand that. I wouldn’t want to leave here either.’

At last, Runner thought, here was a dog on the same wavelength as him.

‘So what are you going to do?’ Millie was now trying to shake herself dry while still standing in the middle of a breaking wave - her fascination with the seagull making her forget where she was.

‘I don’t know,’ Runner sighed. ‘It seems hopeless.’

‘Not necessarily.’ Millie grabbed her ball that was now floating in front of her and trotted out of the sea.

Runner followed. ‘What do you mean?’

Millie came to a halt at the sea’s edge and dropped the ball. Then she shook herself, soaking Runner in the process. ‘You just need a plan, that’s all.’

‘Yes, yes, I know,’ Runner whined. ‘But what plan? How can I possibly change our humans’ minds?’

‘Mmm ... changing humans’ minds ... er ... that’s a tricky one.’ Millie turned to face him. ‘But it’s not impossible. Not if you have the know-how.’

Runner ran around in circles. For the first time since he'd stepped paw on the beach he felt optimistic. With Millie's help, there was still hope.

'So what does Tally think about moving to Germany?' Millie barked.

Runner stopped dead. He'd just caught sight of Tally licking Jez's slobbery mouth - his saliva must still taste of fish. Runner made a mental note to have serious woofs with Tally later about her obvious lack of dog decorum.

'As I'm sure you're already aware, thinking isn't Tally's strong point.'

Millie snorted into the sand, then bounded up to her small human, longing for the ball to be thrown again. This was a pastime Millie never tired of - Runner observed - whereas he, himself, got bored of it very quickly. And as for Tally and Jez - well, they preferred sniffing and eating.

Within seconds, Millie was back at Runner's side.

'So how do you suggest I go about it?' he barked.

‘Changing your humans’ minds, you mean?’ Millie dropped the ball at her paws, then lay down on the sand to cool off.

‘Yes.’

‘Well, first, you need help: lots of help.’

Runner yawned, then stretched. He was completely unaware of the huddle of bitches to their left who were running round and round in circles - excitedly - as they each took it in turns to admire his lean and toned physique.

‘Millie, Runner - come,’ the small human shouted from further up the beach.

Instantly, Millie obeyed her human’s command and was off like a shot (after picking up her ball of course), Runner running a short distance behind her.

The bitches stopped circling; their forlorn and disappointed expressions followed Runner’s path across the sand.

‘Yes, I thought I needed help,’ Runner barked as they ran. ‘But with what exactly?’

Millie did not respond, but dashed over to a shallow pool of water and lay down in it to cool off again – it was a very warm and sunny day. Runner followed, sniffing around the edges of the pool with interest. Was that a crab claw he could smell?

‘Persuasion.’ Millie lapped the seawater, but immediately wished she hadn’t when she began to retch.

Runner looked away. He couldn’t bear to watch. Why were bitches so gross nowadays?

‘What do you mean?’ he barked, when she’d stopped.

Nearby, Jez was crunching a crab claw – did that dog ever stop eating? He was even worse than Tally, and that was saying something.

‘What I mean is ...’ Millie panted, ‘... hang on, just let me get my breath back ...’

Runner sighed deeply, his nerves jangling. Patience had never been his strong point, and bitches always seemed to test it.

A few minutes later, Millie stopped panting. ‘What I mean is the power of dog persuasion.’ She looked up at Runner, who was standing a short distance away. He was an

impressive-looking dog, she decided, as she watched him standing there with his black and white patched coat gleaming in the sunshine, all four legs taut and at full stretch, his back arched – a pose worthy of Crufts.

‘Ah,’ he said trotting over to her. Millie jumped to her paws at once in case he had the urge to sniff her bottom. ‘I see. Mmm ... I understand what you’re getting at now.’

‘But of course for it to work effectively,’ Millie continued, sensing she was now on a roll and impressing him, ‘is pack power.’

‘Help from my beach buddies ...’

‘Yes, exactly. And as many of them as possible. Look, Runner, here comes one now. No, hang on, two!’

Runner turned around. Millie was right. Bounding towards them was Lola, a brindle-coloured, long-legged Staffie, and - hot on her paws - Mad Max, a black and white, thick-coated and rather neurotic Border Collie.

‘Hello, you two,’ Lola barked as she approached, before jumping on Runner and grabbing his neck in a playful embrace. He responded in turn, and within seconds they were darting here, there and everywhere.

Mad Max, not wanting to be left out, ran around them in circles, barking madly.

Then Tally - appearing from out of nowhere - charged into their midst too; she adored a good play-fight. 'Hello, hello,' she barked loudly, running backwards and forwards at great speed. Mad Max kept pace with her; her enthusiasm was infectious.

Millie retreated into the shadows. Play-fighting wasn't her thing at all - well, unless it was with Jez, her brother, who she always had the upper-paw with and felt in control of. But Jez wasn't around. He was off sniffing somewhere again.

After an energetic five minutes, the play-fighters finally came to a standstill, panting. Millie and Jez swiftly joined them when Runner howled his customary signal for attention.

'Dog buddies,' he growled. 'Tally and I need your urgent assistance. As you must all know by now our humans plan to take us away from here in a week's time. But we ...' Runner hesitated for a moment as he shot Tally a warning look in case she decided to interrupt; but he needn't have worried, she wasn't listening - all her attention was focussed on digging a hole in the sand with her front paws.

Snarling under his breath at Tally's lack of commitment, Runner continued. 'We don't want to go, and with your help, we plan to persuade our humans to change their minds.'

'How?' barked Lola, pinching Millie's ball while she was gazing intently at Runner. 'I can't see what we can possibly do to help you. You're doomed if you ask me.'

‘No, I think it’s a great idea,’ barked Mad Max. ‘I’m sure if we all put our dog minds together, we can come up with a cunning plan.’

Runner did not feel overly reassured by this.

Lola dropped Millie’s ball. She’d lost interest in it. Millie quickly snatched it up, glaring at Lola pointedly as she did so.

‘But how can we possibly help?’ Lola persisted.

Runner glanced over at Millie. It was now her turn to address the troops.

‘Humans,’ Millie began, ‘well, most humans I should say, want their dogs to be happy. And for some reason they love seeing packs of dogs play-fighting, running together, chasing each other – you get general the idea ...’

‘But I still can’t see how that will help,’ Lola growled stubbornly.

‘Silence, Lola!’ Runner barked angrily. ‘Let Millie finish.’

Lola hung her head. ‘Sorry Runner,’ she whimpered, feeling mortified: upsetting Runner was the last thing on her mind.

‘So, I believe that if we can all stick together as a pack and are able to show Tally and Runner’s humans what their dogs would be missing if they were taken away, we stand a great chance of changing their minds.’

‘Excellent,’ barked Mad Max.

You had to give him ten out of ten for enthusiasm, Runner thought, as he went over to Millie and licked her head to show his appreciation. Millie bounced up and down on the sand in delight. But, on the other side of Runner - after eyeing Millie enviously for a moment - Lola ran off into the distance in a huff.

‘But,’ Millie continued, clearly enjoying all the attention and admiration she was getting, ‘as well as showing your humans how happy you are on the beach, Runner and Tally, you must show them how miserable you are at the prospect of moving to Germany. So when you’re at home and your humans start packing or talk about the future, you must look glum: tails between the legs, hanging your heads - that kind of thing.’

‘Do you think you can do that, Tally?’ Runner growled, his heart sinking to his paw pads. He knew that he may stand a good chance of convincing their humans that he was unhappy about the move, but as for Tally - well, she was a

loose cannon – dog only knows whether she would do the right thing.

Hearing her name, Tally lifted her head up and looked at them, each in turn.

Had she even been listening to them? Runner wondered sceptically.

‘Yes, of course I can do that,’ she whined, taking him completely by surprise. ‘I don’t think I want to leave here either.’

Runner sighed in relief. Finally Tally was coming round to his way of thinking. ‘Why the sudden change of heart?’

‘Because Jez’s just told me that he doubts there will be any small humans with biscuits in Germany.’

Runner’s heart plummeted. She hadn’t been convinced after all. Her belly was still her only concern. But then again, perhaps that could be used as a bargaining tool ...

‘Mmm, Jez is quite right,’ Runner barked, trying to appear knowledgeable in these matters. ‘When we visited Germany before, and ventured into the forest, we never saw anyone, human or dog, did we?’

‘No, that’s true,’ Tally agreed.

‘And definitely no small humans with biscuits or even large humans for that matter,’ Runner persisted.

‘Will it always be like that? Just you and me in the forest with only our two humans for company?’

‘Yes,’ said Runner. ‘That’s the main reason I don’t want to go there. I know chasing small, furry animals, and even deer in the forest would be great fun at first, but that’s only until the novelty wears off.’

‘Oh! I wouldn’t like anywhere without biscuits,’ Tally whined, confirming Runner’s suspicions, ‘or not being able to see you lot and our other beach buddies every day,’ she added, looking at Millie, Jez and Mad Max in turn. ‘So, yes, Runner, I agree. We must convince our humans to stay here.’

Hurrah! Tally was with them at long last.

'Where's Lola gone?' Mad Max said suddenly, running around in circles.

'Give me strength!' Runner thought to himself wearily. 'Had Mad Max only just noticed she'd gone?'

'I think she ran further up the beach a little while ago,' Jez panted, following the others as they began to trot up the beach towards their respective humans, who were all huddled together in a circle, and seemed to be deep in conversation - what about was any dog's guess.

'WOOF, WOOF, WOOF!'

As one, they all turned to face the din coming from behind them, then visibly relaxed when they saw that it was only Roxy, closely followed by Raffy, and Daisy.

'We heard your howl for attention earlier, Runner,' Roxy barked as she drew nearer. 'Anything the matter?'

'Millie, fill them in, will you?' Runner sniffed the air. 'Looks like there could be trouble ahead. Tally, Max, you

two follow me. The rest of you stay here unless I give the signal.'

Before addressing the newcomers, Millie cast a hasty glance further up the beach. Cody and Billy were heading their way. But not quickly - Billy the Bulldog (or Billy the Bully as he was known by the beach buddies), Cody's right-hand dog - didn't do speedy.

'Okie dokie,' Millie barked, turning to face the others.

But Runner hadn't heard her. He'd already charged up the beach with the other two, their ears pricked and alert, ready for the inevitable dog-off with Cody and Billy.

Jez stood close to Millie, looking nervous. Cody scared him silly, and as for Billy the Bully - he always singled Jez out for some bizarre reason.

'Where do you think they're going?' the small human said to the huddle of humans, while at the same time pointing to Runner, Tally and Mad Max as they sped past them.

'Oh no!' said the tall, male human, staring into the distance. 'They've seen Cody and Billy and they're heading straight for them! Quick! We need to get them back here, NOW!'

But the humans were too late.

‘Oh, look, Billy. Here comes the king of the beach – well, according to him, anyway. The self-proclaimed defender of the common mutt!’ Cody snarled as Runner drew nearer with Tally and Mad Max flanking him, their hackles raised.

Billy laughed, his Bulldog folds wobbling all over his squat body, making him look like an unappetising jelly.

‘Wait here,’ Runner commanded. ‘Let me deal with them.’

Obedying at once, Tally and Mad Max stopped dead, and Runner stepped forwards, alone.

Cody was an imposing a dog, there was no denying that. Being a pure-bred Siberian Husky he had a large yet lithe build with a thick grey-white coat and piercing blue eyes that could turn even the largest German Shepherd aquiver with fear. But unlike most of the dogs that frequented the beach, Runner wasn’t scared of him.

‘Why are you and Billy here, Cody?’ Runner growled in a low and meaningful way. ‘You know that both of you have been banned from the beach because of your unacceptable behaviour.’

‘What’s it to you?’ Cody snarled, his whole bearing aggressive and intimidating. ‘Billy and I will do what we want, when we want. There are no rules for us.’

Billy snorted his agreement, but then hid behind Cody’s back legs when Runner took another step forwards.

‘Is that right?’ Runner growled. ‘Well, perhaps the human Dog Warden will have something to say about that.’

‘Is that a threat?’ Cody growled, baring his teeth.

‘Cody! Stop that!’ a thin, lanky male human shouted from the sea’s edge.

Cody closed his mouth and took a step backwards. Instantly there was a high-pitched howl of pain: Cody had trodden on one of Billy’s front paws, and he was now writhing around on the sand in agony.

Runner looked down at the sand, trying to conceal his glee.

‘Billy! Pull yourself together!’ Cody barked angrily, in a desperate attempt to reclaim the upper paw.

‘So what’s this I hear about you leaving soon?’ Cody snarled, trying another tactic to get Runner’s fur on end.

It worked. Runner was startled. ‘How do you know that?’ he growled, trying to keep calm.

‘I have my sources. So when are you leaving?’

‘What’s it to you?’ Runner barked, feeling his blood boil.

‘Nothing, of course.’ Cody began to strut backwards and forwards, Billy waddling unsteadily beside him; he was still limping, and his left front paw left a trail of blood in the sand. ‘Although I must say it will be fun getting my paws on your mutant mongrel mutts when you’re gone ...’

That was the final straw. Runner gave his signalling howl, then charged.

'NO!' he remembered hearing his female human shout, but nothing more. Everything else was a blur. His focus was solely on Cody, who had now grabbed his hindquarters and was biting down hard. Chaos followed. Several humans screamed, then ran towards the two dogs. And behind them stormed Runner's beach buddies, ready to defend their pack leader at any cost. But their bravery wasn't needed. The split second the two dogs had attacked one another, Cody's human had sprinted over, seized Cody's collar, and had pulled him off Runner, whose backside was now covered in blood.

'Your dog shouldn't be let off the lead!' Runner's female human shrieked. 'Look what he's done to my dog.'

'Your dog started it!' Cody's human bellowed in return. 'I saw it happen.'

'Rubbish!' Runner's male human yelled, squaring up to Cody's human. 'Cody's out of control. Everyone knows that. And, in any case, neither your dog nor Billy should be on the beach at all. They were banned by the Dog Warden last week.'

Cody's human did not answer, but snapped a lead onto Cody's collar and dragged him off in the opposite direction, Billy limping slowly behind them. Runner, who had collapsed on the sand, exhausted and in pain, heard Cody snarl 'loser' as he was led away.

'Oh Runner,' his female human groaned, kneeling down beside him and stroking his head gently, 'what are we going to do with you? Whatever made you attack Cody like that? Yes, I know it was you who started the fight, I saw you grab his neck. But what were you thinking? Well, whatever the reason, thank goodness we are leaving here next week.'

'No! No!' Runner howled desperately. 'Please don't say that. You don't understand. I lost my head. I didn't mean to attack Cody, but he insulted my pack. No one does that and gets away with it.'

But his humans couldn't hear him - well, they could, but not in dog tongue. To them all they heard was a howl.

'He's losing so much blood and I don't think he can stand,' the male human said to the others, looking worried.

Runner groaned and closed his eyes.

‘But if he can’t stand or move, how on earth are we going to get him off the beach?’ the female human asked in a panicky voice.

‘Can’t one of you two drive your car along the concrete promenade?’ the small human said. ‘It must be plenty wide enough as Council vans often drive along it to empty the bins. Then if you park up over there, at the far end by the slope, two of us together should be able to carry him to the car.’

‘Of course! That’s a great idea – thanks,’ the male human said, instantly jumping up and sprinting off towards the car park.

The moment he disappeared, Runner’s beach buddies approached. First of all it was Tally, then Millie; the others hung further back, unsure what to do for the best.

‘What happened? Did Cody attack you?’ Tally barked.

Runner opened his eyes.

‘Millie,’ he whimpered, ignoring Tally’s questions. ‘Millie.’

‘Yes, Runner, I’m here. What is it?’

‘Where’s Lola?’

Millie looked crestfallen. Why did he need Lola, when he had her?

‘Is she still on the beach?’ Runner whimpered.

He tried to get up, but his female human pushed him gently back onto the sand. ‘No, Runner, you stay where you are. We’re going to carry you to the car in just a minute. Rest now.’

‘Millie, I haven’t got much time,’ Runner pleaded. ‘Please tell me whether Lola is still on the beach.’

Scanning the beach in both directions, Millie couldn’t see her anywhere. ‘No, Runner, I think she’s gone.’

‘Mmm, it’s as I thought.’ He sounded disappointed.

Millie’s heart sank. What was this sudden fixation with Lola? Had Cody damaged his mind as well as his backside?

‘When are you going to tell us what happened between you and Cody?’ Tally whined impatiently. ‘Why did he attack you like that?’

‘Cody didn’t attack first – I did.’

‘What?’ Millie looked over at him in amazement. ‘But why?’

‘He insulted you lot.’

There was a stunned silence.

‘Lola betrayed us,’ Runner continued. ‘She told Cody I was leaving next week.’

‘No!’ Tally barked. ‘How could she?’

Millie felt oddly relieved. That explained why Runner wanted to know whether she was still on the beach or not.

‘So how did Cody insult us? What did he say?’ Tally growled.

‘He said that when I was gone he was looking forward to getting his paws on my mutant mongrel mutts!’

‘He called us that?’ Mad Max barked, darting forwards. ‘How dare he?’

Up until now, Runner had completely forgotten all his other dog buddies were still there, waiting in the wings.

‘I know, Max, I just couldn’t stand for it,’ Runner whimpered. ‘But, unfortunately, my act of gallantry has backfired - big time.’

‘What do you mean?’ barked Tally.

‘Our female human saw me attack Cody. So now she thinks I’m unpredictable, and believes it’s a good idea we’re moving to Germany because I won’t be in contact with other dogs there.’

‘Oh no!’ Millie howled. ‘That’s terrible!’

‘Yes, it is. The plan’s failed already, and it’s all my fault.’

‘No, Runner, you mustn’t think that,’ Tally whined. ‘Don’t give up.’

All the beach buddies barked their agreement.

‘Now come on you lot,’ the small human said suddenly, shooing them all out of the way.

‘I know you’re all worried, but we need to carry him off the beach now.’

The male human was back, and was pointing to a car parked at the end of the promenade.

The dogs ran off and, carefully, Runner's two humans carried him over to their car, Tally trotting behind them.

'See you soon, Runner,' Millie barked, 'and don't give up.'

Runner did not answer her.

The next morning, Millie and Jez were down on the beach bright and early, hoping to see Runner bounding up to them, fully fit. But they were disappointed. Tally was alone with her female human.

‘Where’s Runner?’ Millie asked the minute Tally ran over for her customary biscuits from the small human.

‘He’s at home resting with the male human.’

Millie eyed Tally with distaste – how could she possibly eat at a time like this?

‘But he’ll be okay, won’t he?’

‘Oh yes, he’ll be fine,’ Tally grunted with her mouth full. ‘Our humans took him straight to the vets yesterday morning, where they bandaged his hindquarters and gave him an antibiotic injection in case of infection.’

‘So when will he be back on the beach?’ Jez enquired, after scoffing a couple of biscuits.

Tally looked uncomfortable, and would not meet their gaze. Then, without warning, she raced off towards the sea. Millie and Jez followed her.

‘Tally, what is it?’

‘The humans, Millie. Our humans.’

‘What about them?’

‘They’ve decided not to bring Runner back on the beach again.’

‘No!’ Millie and Jez barked in unison.

‘I know.’ Tally stood with her tail between her legs, looking grim. ‘It’s terrible, isn’t it? And it looks as though we’re definitely going back to Germany now.’

‘Not necessarily,’ Millie panted. ‘But this calls for urgent action.’

Tally and Jez stared at her transfixed. She was a dog with a plan.

‘Tally - I want you to run up the other end of the beach and see if you can find the Collie trio anywhere. You know: Tess, Toby and Mad Max.’

When Jez looked back at her with a rather disgruntled expression on his face (he had a soft spot for the Border Collie, Tess), she added, 'Tally's a lot faster than you, Jez. Sorry.'

He gave a resigned grin. 'Yeah, I guess she is.'

'Anyway, I need you to look for Roxy, Raffy and Daisy,' Millie went on.

Jez wagged his tail. He was pleased to be included. 'Okay. I'm your dog.'

'And when we find these dogs - if we find them - what exactly are we supposed to be doing with them, Millie?' Tally barked, looking sceptical: she'd never had much faith in Collies, or Collie-Crosses for that matter.

'Play-fight with them. At every possible opportunity. Especially you, Tally.'

'Why me?'

'Because you're the one who needs to show your humans that you must have the company of other dogs to be truly happy. So your mission is to convince them that you're a pack animal, and that solitary living isn't for you. And in order to thrive and continue to be a well adjusted ...'

Millie hesitated for a moment as she watched Tally rolling on the sand like an oversized puppy, ‘... sociable dog, you need to have a pack around you.’

‘A mission?’ Tally stood up, her ears pricked. ‘You trust me enough to give me a mission?’

‘Yes, Tally, I do,’ Millie lied - now was not the time for home truths.

Tally looked elated. ‘Really? That’s great. I love a good mission.’

‘Excellent! Well, off you go then. And remember - you must not fail.’

Tally gave an assertive woof then sped off, her female human calling after her.

‘And you, Millie, what will you be doing while we’re gone?’

Jez followed his sister’s gaze.

There she was. The dog Millie had been searching for. She was standing on the steps leading down from the promenade looking decidedly shifty.

'I'll be having woofs with Lola,' Millie barked to Jez, as she moved into stalking mode and kept her gaze steady on the long-legged Staffie who had just caught sight of her and was weighing up her best possible escape route. 'Now off you go, Jez. See you later.'

Once Jez had disappeared, Millie sped over to the bottom of the steps and confronted Lola, just as her paws touched the sand.

'Good Morning. How are you today?'

'Get out of my way!' Lola growled.

'No, I won't!' Millie growled back. 'Not until you've told me exactly what you said to Cody.'

Lola did not reply, but lurched towards Millie aggressively, almost pulling her human over, who was hanging on to the lead for dear life.

'Lola, no!' her human cried. 'Stop that!'

'Ooh, not very friendly,' Millie growled, standing her ground and not letting Lola pass.

'What were you thinking, pulling me like that?' Lola's human grumbled. 'Look - see, it's only Millie. You like Millie.'

‘Not anymore,’ Lola snarled under her breath as she was dragged onto the beach by her human, who quickly unclipped the lead and set her free. And, not a moment too soon. Lola shot off like a dog possessed: she was desperate to put as much distance between her and Millie as was dogly possible.

But Millie was up to the task. She caught up with Lola as they neared the end of the promenade, and as they ran side by side, barked ‘Cody hurt Runner. Did you know that?’

Lola slowed down, then stopped, as Mille knew she would. After all, she wasn’t a bad dog - just a sulky bitch who’d got the hump and put her paw in it.

‘What?’ Lola panted. ‘What?’

‘Cody hurt Runner,’ Millie repeated, laying down on the sand to cool off. ‘Just after you told him that Runner would be moving to Germany next week.’

Lola looked shifty again. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Leave it out! Runner knows it was you!’ Millie barked angrily.

Lola sunk onto the sand, defeated. Then she put her paws over her muzzle in shame.

‘What happened?’ she whimpered after a short pause.

‘Cody sunk his teeth into Runner’s backside and wouldn’t let go.’

‘Oh no!’ Lola howled.

‘And he was so badly hurt that he couldn’t move or even stand up. His humans had to carry him off the beach.’

‘Stop it! I’m sorry all right. I should never have trusted Cody. But he told me that he wouldn’t mention it to another living dog. And as for Runner getting hurt ... well, I would never ...’

‘Runner is on the mend now,’ Millie interrupted. Lola had suffered enough. Now it was time to show her some compassion: dog to dog. ‘His humans took him straight to the vets for treatment.’

Lola still looked dubious. ‘But where is he? Why isn’t he on the beach?’

‘The vet said he had to rest. He lost a lot of blood, you see.’

Lola looked distressed again, grunting over and over
'What have I done? What have I done?'

'Look, Lola, listen to me,' Millie barked authoritatively.

She stopped grunting at once and stared up at Millie, all ears.

'Perhaps there is something you can do to make amends.'

'What?' Lola looked hopeful. 'I'll do anything. Anything at all to put things right.'

Over the next five mornings Millie's plan was initiated, and every single beach buddy played their part. Even Tess (who as a rule preferred to watch the younger dogs frolicking rather than partake herself), joined in. And, better still, it was having the desired effect: Tally and Runner's humans had begun to have doubts.

'Oh look,' the female human had said on the third morning. 'Isn't it lovely the way Lola and Tally play together all the time?'

'And here comes Max to join the party,' Lola's human had added. 'What a shame they won't have any dog friends in Germany.'

'Mmm, it is,' the female human had replied, looking thoughtful.

And on the fourth morning the male human had observed, 'Tally is so happy here, isn't she? I think she'll really miss her beach buddies when we leave.'

'Yes,' said the female human. 'I think she will.' Then turning towards the male human added, 'Do you think

we're doing the right thing – leaving I mean? Will Tally and Runner be really miserable in Germany?’

‘What are you saying?’ the male human said. ‘Have you changed your mind?’

‘Well, no – I don’t know – perhaps.’

When Millie overheard this conversation she was bursting with excitement and had to run over to Tally at once, who was scrounging biscuits from the small human as usual.

‘It’s working! It’s working!’ Millie barked, bouncing around on the sand.

‘Yippee!’ howled Tally, running around her in circles. ‘Runner will be thrilled.’

Millie stopped bouncing at once. ‘Is he any better?’

‘Yes, he’s fine now. Back to his normal, grouchy self.’

Millie ignored this – she didn’t consider him grouchy in the slightest.

‘So why isn’t he back on the beach then?’

Jez had asked the question Millie had been dying to ask, but hadn’t had the nerve to.

‘Our humans don’t think it’s a good idea.’

Then in answer to Jez’s questioning look she added, ‘They’re worried he’ll get himself into another fight.’

‘But that won’t happen now. Haven’t your humans heard? Cody and Billy have been banned from the beach indefinitely!’

‘Really?’ Tally barked excitedly. ‘I can’t wait to tell Runner. He’ll be delighted.’

‘So is Runner still playing his part in my plan?’

‘Oh, yes, Millie. He’s a natural. Every time our humans pack something in a box, he sneaks over and takes it out again.’

‘And he does this in front of them? Because that’s the key point. They need to know that he doesn’t want them to move.’

‘Oh, they know all right. And last night Runner overheard the male human saying that the move to Germany was a big mistake.’

‘Wow!’ Millie was bouncing about on the sand again, then running around in circles. ‘You’re kidding? One day left and we’ve cracked it already!’

And then, on the fifth and last day, they all had a wonderful surprise: Runner was back.

'Beach buddies – my friends,' he howled as they all gathered around him, excitedly barking a chorus of 'Welcome back, Runner.'

'Thank you. It's great to be back. And I want to thank each and every one of you for your sterling efforts in trying to change our humans' minds. Tally and I really appreciate all your support.'

'Yes, many thanks.' Tally barked, unable to contain herself.

'But did it work? Have we managed to change your humans' minds?' Mad Max enquired urgently.

Runner gave a short, sharp bark and the pack fell silent at once.

'I'm sad to announce that this is our last morning on the beach ...'

'No!' Millie howled.

'It can't be!' Jez whimpered.

'So it didn't work?' Mad Max barked.

'It's all my fault!' Lola whined.

Runner gave his characteristic howl and instantly they all fell silent again.

'Please, let me finish!' he barked sharply. 'Yes, this is our last morning on the beach – for now.'

At this the pack went mental. The din was deafening.

'For now?' Millie repeated, taking a step towards Runner. 'But I don't understand. What does that mean exactly?'

'It means that although we're leaving today, we will be coming back.'

'Really?'

'Yes, Millie, really.'

Runner moved towards her, and for a moment their noses touched.

'Thanks to you, Millie, and all our beach buddies, one day soon this will be our permanent home.'