

She hadn't given Haridasa a pedicure, but she had seen his feet in the yoga class, and she could tell they were full of *chi* – life energy. Haridasa was a very spiritual person, a very giving person. She could reciprocate by giving him a massage, which would boost his *chi* even more.

She and Perro were well beyond the village now, and she let the poodle off the lead so that he could scamper where he liked as she sprinted up the hill to the woods. She loved the early morning coolness and quiet, and this was one of her favourite runs because of the view. The whole village was spread out below her, the honey-coloured stone of the cottages glowing in the sunlight, the river flowing gently under Frank's Bridge and meandering towards the green hills in the distance.

Was there anywhere more beautiful in all the world? If there was, she hadn't seen it. She felt sorry for people who lived in towns and

didn't have the blessing of countryside all around them.

She stopped at the top of the hill to do some leg stretches, surveying her beloved village as she did so. Her pink-roofed salon caught the eye like a cake in a row of bread rolls. And beyond the High Street was the big green handkerchief of the Victoria Park, another of her favourite runs. The sun glinted on the white marble of the Italian pavilion. It felt like a sacred space to her now, for that was where she had found Mario Bellini, the most handsome man she had ever seen, even more handsome than Alfie and Haridasa. And dead, unfortunately.

To be strictly accurate, she hadn't found Mario Bellini. Perro had. The clever animal had lain down by the body, whining until Debbie came to find out what was wrong.

Right now, Perro was leaping into the air, snapping at something.

“No!” called Debbie sharply. “Don’t frighten the poor butterfly.”

She mustn’t be too hard on him, she thought. It was instinct. Poodles were originally bred as hunting dogs.

Perro obediently trotted back to her, wagging his feathery tail, and she patted his head.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I won’t put you back on the lead yet, not until we get to Candymill Road. But you mustn’t chase any more butterflies, because that’s bad.”

At the sound of the last word, the poodle cocked his head, looking at her intently, and she was sure he had understood.

“Good boy! Race you to the bottom,” she said. She ran straight back down, while the poodle took a more zigzag route, investigating interesting smells, but they reached the road together.

“Come on, then,” she said. “Let’s get your lead on.”

But Perro’s attention was elsewhere. He sniffed the air, and then set off along Candymill Road in the opposite direction to the village.

“That’s the wrong way,” Debbie called. “Come back.”

The poodle ignored her and kept going.

She stared in astonishment. He was normally very obedient – she had taken him to dog training classes when he was a puppy. That time he bit Sergeant Harry Wilson, he wasn’t being bad, he was defending her, because the sergeant was shouting.

It had only been a nip, she was sure, but the sergeant shouted even more, and said he would have Perro put down as a dangerous dog. Debbie prided herself on being polite to everyone, but that was too much. She had grabbed Perro and held him tightly in her arms.

“Perro is not dangerous,” she’d said distinctly. “But if you ever try to do anything to him, you’ll find that I am.”

And with that, she walked away, ignoring the sergeant bellowing that he would have her for threatening behaviour. Nothing ever came of it; he was a typical bully, backing off if you stood up to him.

But now Perro was disappearing from view. She called him again, but he still ignored her. She felt a sudden chill. What if he had found another body? She had heard there were dogs trained to do just that, and Perro was so intelligent, he wouldn’t even need training.

She sprinted after him, and found him bounding along a dilapidated driveway flanked by tall magnolia trees, their pink, white and yellow flowers bright against the blue sky. The trees looked in desperate need of pruning, and Debbie wondered what state the mansion would be in. It must be three years since Mrs Benson