

## **INTERTWANGLE**

**As told by ALBERT AND DAISY DOLBEAR**

### **FOREWORD**

I felt it only proper and fit that my dear husband, Albert, also be recognized as an author of this story. He was with me all the way and actually helped me get things down in writing when I was at my most confused over this whole business. I could never have written this account without including Albert's name. As you read on I am sure you will understand why.

### **CHAPTER ONE**

#### **A BRAZEN LOOK, DOUBTS AND UNPLEASANT RESEARCH**

It had been our custom to take a walk in the Botanic Gardens of this fine city of Plymouth, especially on the days that we received a letter from either of our two children, Russell or Andrea. We would find our favourite bench, which had grand views all around and which, as fate would have it, was hardly ever occupied, and we would read aloud their letters, digesting every word, reading between the lines, (me especially), and enjoying hearing all their news. Andrea is, in general, a better writer, telling you what you really need to know whilst Russell, tantalizingly, just tells the basic details, leaving the imagination to fill in the unwritten. Since Andrea moved to Bolivia, as a Red Cross nurse, and Russell to Australia, they have kept in touch rather well and we are both so glad that, although they chose their path in life on foreign soil, as it were, that they are still both happy and do care for us deeply.

It was on one of these trips to the Botanic Gardens that we witnessed what ended up being something that would occupy our attention for quite some time: The Mystery of the Berries, as Albert called it. I remember it was a week or so after they had introduced a small entrance charge to the gardens. Albert said that he was pleased as it would, 'Keep the 'riff raff' out.'

I gently scolded him for saying this by patting him on the arm. 'That's not very Liberal of you dear,' I said. (You may notice the use of the capital 'L' in the word 'Liberal' as I was referring to his politics. He is fourth generation Liberal, old Liberal that is. He doesn't have much truck with this modern Social Democratic Alliance or whatever it is called.) But then I noticed the twinkle in his eye. He had said 'riff raff' to bait me, a thing he does from time to time. Although usually of a serious demeanor, never let it be said he hasn't a sense of humour. The problem is he only expresses it now and then and I never get it until it is too late and have misunderstood him. He would never use 'riff raff' in public as he is far from a snob, accepting that everyone has their place on the planet.

Anyway, there were fewer people around and so we made our way to 'our' bench and sat down. We had often sat there when the children were small and it had good all round views. It is always nice to go 'walkees' with Judy our darling little West Highland terrier but, of course, she can't go into the Botanic Gardens now so we were 'free' as it were.

The letter that day was from Andrea and she told us about her mistakes in Spanish, which were very funny indeed and made Albert chortle and unbutton his waistcoat, which was good as it is always a bit tight anyway. Unfortunately I can't remember any of her clangers now but they were hilarious at the time, I assure you. There was mention of Doctor Sanchez again. I asked Albert what he thought but he said there was nothing to read into that. He is from Barcelona so I suppose if anything did come off, romantically, and they moved to his home city it wouldn't be too far to travel to in order to see the grandchildren. I told Albert this and he smiled.

‘Always planning, my dear, always thinking ahead,’ he said in that nice kind way of his. ‘You’ll be saying next that there are now direct flights from Plymouth to Bolivia...’

‘Actually, no, only to Madrid... then you change, but it’s not far,’ I said, feeling a little foolish.

‘So, you’ve actually checked into it then?’ he went on. ‘Exeter is now the airport. Remember?’

‘Yes. Well, Andrea is into her 30s now. I want to be a granny before I get too old to play with the grandchildren, lift them up and all sorts of things,’ I said very logically, I thought.

‘I agree totally. We’ll see,’ he said as he patted my hand gently. It felt nice to know he had had the same thoughts too. You can decide to become parents but you have no say in whether you will get to be a grandparent or not. We would just have to wait a bit longer.

It was just as I was thinking this that we saw her, the woman who was to alter the nice, steady pattern of our lives in a few months’ time. It would be very glib to say that I had some premonition of what was to come the moment I set eyes on her. But it would be untrue. Some sort of feminine intuition perhaps? No, I was never much good at the intuition that many women claim they have. I think it’s just attention seeking and most of their so-called intuitive powers are demonstrated only in hindsight.

‘I wonder if I was right not to have put more pressure on Russell to go to college and follow in my footsteps. I mean there’ll always be room for civil engineers, won’t there? After that grape picking trip in ’98 he was never the same. Got the wanderlust and then ended up Down Under,’ he said distractedly. They’d always had a ‘hands off’ relationship. Russell was his own man.

The woman, dressed darkly and drably, came along the path and clearly she couldn’t see us. It was only springtime but, as you know, it comes earlier to the West Country so the greenery hid us well. She looked around nonchalantly as I listened to Albert. She bent down to a clump of bushes, dark red and with full berries.

‘Of course, you do mull over the decisions, don’t you? Should we have insisted on that tonsillitis operation? He did suffer for months. Maybe he never forgave us? Nowadays they just don’t do that operation anymore...’

She looked at the name plate underneath and sharply stood up. She looked around and then moved on, this time even closer to us. Heavy eye makeup. As Albert went on I nodded and hummed but my mind was on her and what she was doing. Once again she bent down to a clump of plants, read the name plate and this time out came a small clear plastic bag and tiny manicure scissors. I was pole-axed. This wasn’t just theft; it was premeditated theft.

‘You’re not really listening, are you dear?’

‘Just a second Albert,’ and in a hushed voice which even then sounded too loud I said, ‘See, that woman. She’s got scissors and is cutting those berries off and putting them into... see, she’s even got a bag for them. What a cheek!’

‘In broad daylight as well. I’ve a good mind to...’ and Albert half got up.

I said, ‘No, don’t, we’ll just watch her. There might be a scene. You know how I dislike scenes...’ I said tailing off. She then looked around, stood up and then put the berries into her handbag, just like that. Then she walked casually off to the right.

It was then that I noticed her face. It was not a look of fear. Oh, no nothing like that. I said to Albert, ‘Did you see her face?’

‘Yes, I did. Butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth, that’s for sure...’

‘Yes, she wasn’t at all worried. It was a hard look she had, sort of...’

‘Brazen, that’s what it was. Brassy even.’

‘Yes, Albert, you’ve hit the nail on the head. Brazen, that’s the best word for it.’

‘Well, it’s theft, isn’t it? I wonder if we should follow her. It’s rate payers’ money after all...’ he said, annoyed at the woman.

‘Council tax, or whatever it’s called these days. But no, she might turn nasty. Best leave well alone.’ But I have to say I was half thinking of it, following her to see what else she might take.

Reading my thoughts (when one has been married to a person for almost 40 years this process is not so surprising) Albert said, ‘I’m getting a bit stiff. Shall we tally-ho?’ This is our little shorthand for ‘get going’.

I took his arm and tried not to lead us off to the right. Honestly. But if Albert had wanted to go that way then, of course, being the dutiful wife that I am, I would concur. I didn’t need to worry about it as he gently but very definitely tacked in that direction. ‘The azaleas and begonias are really not quite open yet, are they? Let’s head off here to the right, shall we? I haven’t seen the rock gardens for a while. I wonder if the rain we had last week has perked them up or not.’ It was thus decided. I did not demur.

This sudden interest in the well being of the rockeries was short lived. As we made for them, trying not to look around to see if the woman was visible or not, Bob Rickard, from the council civil engineering department came into view. I could feel Albert tense up. Instead of stopping for a chat he merely doffed his hat and we walked on. ‘Must dash,’ was all Albert could say. It was quite embarrassing, to snub an old friend like that. I wasn’t sure what to say to Albert. I decided I would mention it that night over our cocoa and digestive. He’s in a mellow mood then.

On we went, past the duck pond and the herbaceous borders and suddenly she came into view. She had chosen the dark corner at the far end of the pond, where nothing much interesting grows, at least, not very colourful. It would be impossible to get closer to her without her seeing us and wondering why we had gone over to that side. So we slowed down instinctively and hovered about a large spread of London Pride, not my favourite flower. Its pink seems to me vapid. Cheap and common.

At this moment he started to talk intelligently about flowers but I never really heard him as I was intent on making sure she kept in view. Albert is excellent at sounding knowledgeable at the drop of a hat, which is why he is so often asked to dinner parties. Even with plenty of notice I really can’t manage to sound knowledgeable about many things, so on this occasion I just pretended to listen and he rambled on very nicely in case anyone should pass and wonder why we found these flowers so very interesting. She dipped out of vision and we darted forward, Albert saying that she must be seen in the act once more and then we could report her, ‘Maybe,’ he said, for he is not a vindictive soul.

We got to the edge of a glade and there she was again, bending down and we saw her through some bulrushes, clipping expertly away. This time she didn’t look around afterwards but hurried off away from us at quite a speed.

‘Shame she ran off like that. I would have liked to have warned her...’ said Albert, but unconvincingly. He hates a showdown as much as I do.

We carried on towards to the spot where she had stolen the property of the Botanical Gardens. ‘I wonder why this one and not that one for example. It’s much prettier,’ I said frivolously. I could even see

where she had uprooted a part of the plant and hastily covered over the soil. Then I stopped dead in my tracks and so did Albert. We both at the same moment had noticed the large red printed words on the sign underneath.

‘DO NOT UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES INGEST. EXTREMELY POISONOUS.’

‘But... I mean to say... Albert... do you think this means anything?’ and though it sounds really silly, a shiver went up my spine and her face swam before me, no longer just brazen but witchlike and evil. But I chided myself. I was being too ridiculous.

‘It’s certainly very strange. I don’t know what to think, Daisy. It could be just a coincidence, of course... but the only way we can find out is by going to the other spot and seeing what she took from there... what do you think?’

‘Oh, you’re so logical. I’m sure it must just be a coincidence,’ I said sounding and feeling reassured. But all the same I did want to check. We made our way back to ‘our’ bench and although there were now one or two people about we went over to the plant the woman had cut the berries off. I hoped that nobody would think we were acting strangely. I hardly dared to look but there once more was the sign warning that the plant was poisonous. Albert and I looked at each other, not really sure what to say.

‘Let’s look at the plant she decided not to touch,’ he said sensibly.

We had a look at it and there was no such warning this time. It was an odd moment as both our imaginations started to create scenarios and motives and so on. We are an ordinary, middle class sort of family, unsensational in every way. Our only brush with murder is on the pages of an Agatha Christie, or a television serial. We neither know anyone who has been murdered nor anyone who has committed such a crime. It was very unnerving to say the least. Such things are hardly supposed to happen to the likes of us.

As we slowly walked home, the letter from Andrea now forgotten, we mulled over the possibilities. Was there another explanation? Some way in which her behaviour and choice of plants could be justified?

‘What about New Age people?’ I suggested. Albert looked blank.

‘New Age? You’ve got me Daisy, I can’t see a connection here at all, m’dear.’

‘Well, maybe they use such things in herbal treatments, now long forgotten remedies. These plants could be used for antiseptics, poultices and so on. But not ingested, as the sign indicated,’ I said, trying to sound hopeful.

‘She doesn’t look very ‘New Age’ to me,’ replied Albert, doubtfully.

‘Oh, I believe all sorts of people are interested in ‘alternative’ things these days. Even quite respectable people...’

‘Did she strike you as respectable?’

‘No, not really, just hard and brazen. I will never forget the look she had. I would know her again in an instant.’

‘Well, I took a note of the names, the Latin ones, of the two plants, and I shall look them up,’ Albert told me and I was happy that at least he was taking the matter seriously and not fobbing me off.

While I got dinner ready he started searching on this thing called the Internet. It’s on his computer which he bought with his early redundancy money which he took so as to make way for a younger man. The council was very good about it and I like the sound of it when I tell people ‘Albert Dolbear, civil engineer, retired’. Such a nice ring to it. He also bought a swarm of bees, which may seem a rather odd thing to purchase but it had been his dream for years. Luckily, we have a rather long, thin garden so, thankfully, he placed the hives at the end.

‘We don’t want Judy getting stung now, do we?’ he said dryly.

‘And what about me, dear?’ I replied, but knew he was just having me on.

[Now, dear reader, you are probably wondering what the actual names of the poisonous plants were, which she took from the botanical gardens. Well, I know that the literary agent and the publishers did their best to reassure me that there would be no legal difficulties in printing the names of the plants in this book. They said the plants and their poisonous properties are already well known and indeed information on their use and application are in what is called ‘the public domain’ (wherever that is).

But I didn’t feel happy in case someone bought this book and then experimented or was tempted to experiment. A socially disadvantaged teenage boy from, say, Macclesfield, (I don’t have anything against that town but it was just the first one that came to mind) could just walk into the library and get this book and start growing the plants and who knows where that would lead?

So, dear reader, they shall be referred to as plant X and plant Z from now on. In case.]

Back to the story. Albert looked the up their names and over the dinner table he told me how one can be slowly administered over a period of weeks in tea or coffee to induce kidney failure. Almost impossible to detect in post mortem. I played with my pork chop and put the roast potatoes to one side. He went on and said that the other plant can be chopped up very finely and added to soups or casseroles, where its slightly bitter taste won’t be noticed. I couldn’t even look at my apple crumble and custard after hearing that.

Albert obviously has a strong stomach as he ate as heartily as normal and even had my pudding. He was welcome to it, though I tutted. Even my little trick of adding desiccated coconut to the crumble didn’t tempt me.

Judy cadged shamelessly round the table legs and ended up with my half-eaten chop. If she were not a dog I would swear she was purring with delight. We had started giving her cat food actually as, one day in the supermarket, she had appeared beside the cat food stand. I’d tied her up outside but somehow she’d broken free and made directly for the cat food. The staff were really horrible so I bought up a few packets and tins, tried to smile my way out of it. She won’t eat anything else now.

‘Was there nothing on the Internet about usage by New Age or alternative sorts of people?’ I asked hopefully, for I didn’t want it to be true that a potential murderer was in the making.

‘I suppose that if it has been used before there would be information about it on the Internet too...’ said Albert. By this stage I decided to have a headache and go and read a book in bed. Please understand this is not something I do very often. Ask Albert. But it was all a bit upsetting.

Reading books, that always makes me feel so relaxed, of course, but it didn't work that night. On the bookshelf I was very surprised to notice how many we had about murders. I never thought we were like that and I felt ridiculously ashamed. I switched on BBC Radio Four. It was Gardener's Question Time. A bit off putting. I decided to simply lie down and see if I could sleep.

Then I remembered about Bob Rickard and how we had rushed past him today. I got up and found Albert was on the telephone. I stood in the corridor and listened, which, of course, I never do, and found he was apologizing to him and saying that we were in such a rush and was so sorry and could he come for a drink tomorrow evening as he had something to ask him about.

It was good he had thought to do so without me mentioning it over our cocoa and digestive. I would have hated to have nagged, or even hinted. It's not like me at all.

Bob is one of our oldest friends. Very precious. Albert and I have often gone with him and his wife, Joy, on our little caravan trips. To Wales and Cornwall, mostly. Bob is one of these cheerful people who always makes us laugh and Joy and I have been fine friends for years. We first met when we did our amateur dramatics, many years ago. It is also how Albert and I got acquainted but we didn't really go seriously until a few months had passed. They adopted a boy from Thailand a number of years ago, Oliver, and he has brought them such delight as they were unable to have their own children. He is now 17 or so and very good with technology and all that.

Was this thing he wanted to talk to him about to do with this woman today and her poisonous plans? It seemed unlikely as he wouldn't surely discuss it without consulting me. I hoped.

'I'll get the cocoa made tonight m'dear. You seem a little out of sorts,' he said and I was content to have him run around. 'Oh, I called Bob a few minutes ago and apologized for today. He was fine about it. Good lad, isn't he? I said to come round tomorrow and talk about that by-pass they're having trouble with.'

So I didn't need to say anything at all. He wasn't going to speak about the woman. I was glad. After all, it was like 'our' secret. The Mystery of the Berries. Whatever the outcome would be, Albert would be there beside me. This I knew and it was a considerable comfort to me.