

One

Every back road is somebody's main road. No matter how rough or remote it might be, a road always leads somewhere, and for someone, that somewhere is home.

I lived on a back road, a narrow, twisting lane bordered by hedges, lush pastures, and shadowy woodlands. My home was a honey-colored cottage in the Cotswolds, a region of rolling hills and patchwork fields in England's West Midlands, and my little lane was used chiefly by my family, my friends, and my neighbors.

Bewildered strangers occasionally knocked on my door to ask for directions, but they left as quickly as they came. They had no reason to linger—no castle, no cathedral, no Bronze Age barrow or seaside promenade to pique their interest. There was nothing special about my corner of the Cotswolds, apart from its tranquil beauty and the unchanging, ever-changing cycle of country life.

My husband, Bill, and I were Americans, as were our nine-year-old twins, Will and Rob, but we'd lived in England long enough to be accepted as honorary natives by our neighbors. Our cottage was situated near the small village of Finch, a place so tiny and of so little consequence to the world at large that most mapmakers forgot to include it on their maps.

Finch was, of course, of tremendous consequence to those of us who lived there. It was the center of our universe, the hub around which we revolved. We might not be able to name the newest celebrity, but we knew everything worth knowing about one another.

Nancy Atherton

We knew whose dog had acquired fleas, whose roof had sprung a leak, and whose chrysanthemums had been fatally stricken with root rot mere moments after such catastrophes took place. We knew who could be relied upon to make six dozen flawless strawberry tarts for the flower show's bake sale and who couldn't be trusted to bake a single macaroon without setting the oven ablaze. We knew whose children and grandchildren were delightful and whose were to be avoided like the plague, and we shared our knowledge with a diligence that put the Internet to shame.

Local gossip was the stuff of life in Finch, a sport, an art form, a currency that never lost its value. We didn't need celebrities to entertain us. We found ourselves endlessly fascinating.

Finch wouldn't suit everyone—those desiring privacy, for example, would find the lack of it hard to bear—but it suited Bill and me down to the ground. Bill ran the European branch of his family's venerable Boston law firm from an office overlooking the village green; Will and Rob attended Morningside School in the nearby market town of Upper Deeping; and I juggled a multitude of roles— wife, mother, friend, neighbor, community volunteer, gossip gatherer, and devoted daughter-in-law.

Bill's father, William Willis, Sr., lived up the lane from us, in Fairworth House, a splendidly restored Georgian mansion surrounded by an impeccably maintained estate. Willis, Sr., had spent most of his adult life in Boston as the head of the family firm, but he'd moved to England upon his retirement in order to be near his grandchildren.

My father-in-law was an old-fashioned, courtly gentleman, a handsome widower, and a doting grandfather. I adored him, as did nearly every widow and spinster in Finch. Many a heart had been broken when Willis, Sr., had bestowed his upon the celebrate

Aunt Dimity and the Summer King

watercolorist Amelia Thistle. Amelia had taken nearly two years to return the favor, but Willis, Sr.'s patient pursuit of her had eventually paid off. He had proposed, she had accepted, and the date of the wedding had been set.

Bill was delighted by the match. He looked forward to being his father's best man as eagerly as I looked forward to being Amelia's matron of honor. Will and Rob were somewhat less enthusiastic about fulfilling their forthcoming roles as Grandpa's ring-bearers, but Amelia had bought their cooperation by promising to hide a handful of their favorite cookies in her bouquet. For a woman who'd never had children of her own, Amelia possessed a rare gift for dealing with nine-year-olds.

Though Willis, Sr., was no longer the head of the family firm, he was still regarded as the head of the family and attendance at his nuptials was considered compulsory. Flocks of aunts, uncles, and cousins would soon be descending on Finch to pay homage to the paterfamilias, an event that did not fill Bill with unalloyed joy. He got along well with most of his relatives, but he actively disliked two of his aunts. He referred to them as the Harpies, but only when Will, Rob, and his father were out of earshot.

Though Aunt Honoria and Aunt Charlotte had been widowed for many years, they had, in their youth, married men from their own social milieu. They believed that Bill had let his old-money Boston Brahmin family down when he'd married a middle-class girl from Chicago. Had they been openly hostile to me, Willis, Sr., would have come down on them like a ton of bricks, so they disguised their disdain with artful expressions of "concern" for me, the unfortunate outsider.

They criticized my posture, my table manners, my dress sense, and my speech, but they did so solicitously, as if they were bringing

Nancy Atherton

enlightenment to a savage who'd been raised on a desert island by a troop of baboons. Willis, Sr., who could usually spot a hidden agenda from a mile off, was blind to his sisters' shenanigans. He saw Charlotte and Honoria through rose-colored glasses, but they made my easygoing husband see red.

Bill's aunts had never darkened our doorway in England—they rarely left Boston—and he was not looking forward to their first visit. He made his misgivings known to me as we strolled along our little lane one day, three weeks before the wedding.

It was a glorious Saturday morning in early June. After dropping the boys off at the local stables for their weekly riding lessons, Bill had decided to clear up some neglected paperwork that awaited him at his office in Finch. He didn't usually walk to the village and I didn't usually accompany him, but the weather was superb and we'd both felt like stretching our legs.

My mind was on other things when Bill spoke, so his words seemed to come out of nowhere, like a bolt from the blue.

"If the Harpies are rude to you," he declared, "I'll strangle them." "I should hope so," I said lightly, but one glance at my husband's thunderous expression told me that he was not in the mood for levity. "What brought your aunts to mind?"

"A phone call from Father," he replied. "Honorina and Charlotte will be arriving at Fairworth House on Monday."

"Monday?" I said, my heart sinking. "Why so soon?"

"They say they're coming early to help Amelia with the wedding, but you and I know they'll do nothing but nitpick and nag." Bill laughed bitterly. "I wouldn't put it past them to spend the next three weeks trying to talk Father out of marrying Amelia."

"Fat chance," I said scornfully.

Aunt Dimity and the Summer King

“‘An artist in the family,’” said Bill, mimicking Honoria’s penetrating nasal drawl. “‘What on earth were you thinking, William? We could understand it if she dabbled. Everyone dabbles. But she sells her paintings. For money. My dear, it simply isn’t done!’”

“They wouldn’t be stupid enough to talk like that in front of your father, would they?” I asked incredulously.

“I almost wish they would,” said Bill. “It’d be a treat to watch Father kick them out of Fairworth.”

“If they spout off about Amelia, he will,” I said. “And they won’t be able to stay with us because we don’t have a guest room anymore.” “Yet another reason to be thankful for my beautiful wife,” Bill acknowledged, “and my beautiful, beautiful daughter.”

My husband’s entire aspect changed as he gazed down at the precious passenger I was pushing along in the pram. His shoulders relaxed, his fists unclenched, and his thunderous expression gave way to one of pure adoration. Bill was in love as he had never been in love before and I felt not the slightest twinge of jealousy because I, too, was besotted.

Don’t get me wrong. We loved our sons ferociously, but our baby girl had come to us long after we’d abandoned hope of having another child. Her late arrival had secured a special place in our hearts for her. Because of her, Bill had done the unthinkable: He’d cut back on his workload in order to spend less time at the beck and call of his demanding clients and more time at home with his family. It was a choice the Harpies would never understand, but I did, and I approved of it with all my heart.

Our daughter had been christened Elizabeth Dimity, after my late mother and a dear friend, but Will and Rob had dubbed her Bess. I suspected they’d done so for the pleasure of calling her Bessy Boots,

Messy Bessy and a host of other big-brotherly nicknames, but Bess she had been from that day forward.

Bess had entered the world on a stormy, snowy night in late February—a scant fifteen weeks ago—but we felt as if we’d known her forever. She had her father’s velvety brown eyes, my rosy complexion, and a wispy crop of silky, softly curling dark-brown hair.

“She is beautiful, isn’t she?” I crooned.

“She’s incomparably beautiful,” Bill agreed, “and highly intelligent.”

“And even-tempered,” I added.

“And healthy and strong and good-humored,” Bill continued.

“And kind and patient and wise,” I went on.

“Our Bess,” Bill concluded, “is as perfectly perfect as perfect can be.”

We looked at each other and laughed. We wouldn’t allow ourselves to become baby-bores in public, but we were free to sing Bess’s praises in private, secure in the knowledge that every word we said was true.

“She’s also considerate,” I pointed out. “If we hadn’t turned our guest room into her nursery, we would have had to offer it to one of your cousins.”

“Thank God for small blessings,” Bill murmured, beaming at Bess. “I don’t know where Father will put everyone,” he added, shaking his head. “Fairworth House is big, but it isn’t big enough to accommodate his out-of-town guests as well as Amelia’s.”

“He could put someone in the old nursery,” I suggested facetiously. Willis, Sr., had refurbished the nursery in Fairworth House with his granddaughter’s comfort in mind. It came in handy when our visits coincided with Bess’s nap times, but it wasn’t a bedroom for grown-ups.

Aunt Dimity and the Summer King

“Are you serious?” Bill asked, eyeing me doubtfully.

“I was attempting to be humorous,” I said, sighing. “An attempt which has clearly failed. The serious answer is: Amelia has booked hotel rooms in Oxford and Upper Deeping for those who accepted their invitations promptly. Late responders will have to fend for themselves.”

“I suppose they could rent the empty cottages,” said Bill.

A sense of unease rippled through me. The empty cottages worried me far more than Bill’s aunts. Honoria and Charlotte would be gone shortly after the wedding, but the cottages were part of a troubling trend.

Two cottages stood empty in Finch and they had done so for five months. Their former owners had either passed away or moved away, and though the little dwellings were attractive and in good repair, no new owners had come to claim them.

I couldn’t understand it. Finch might be small, but it was not without resources. Taxman’s Emporium stocked everything from baked beans to freckle cream, Peacock’s pub was renowned for its pub grub and ales, and Sally Cook’s tearoom was a pastry lover’s delight. Finch had its own church, post office, and greengrocer’s shop and it boasted the finest handyman in the county. Mr. Barlow, the retired mechanic who served as our church sexton, could turn his hand to just about any job.

Finch even had an international contingent. Bree Pym was from New Zealand, Jack MacBride was from Australia, and my family represented the United States, as did my best friend, Emma Harris, who lived up the lane from us in Anscombe Manor, where she owned and taught at the riding school Will and Rob attended. Our village was, in its own way, quite cosmopolitan.

Granted, there was no school, but the old schoolhouse was still very much in use as our village hall. The flower show, the Nativity play, and numerous bake sales were held there, and committees met beneath its roof to plan the year's village activities.

Finch was surrounded by farmland, but Oxford wasn't far away and Upper Deeping was even closer. It seemed to me that a relatively short drive to work was a small price to pay for a home in such a beautiful setting.

Fishermen could cast their lures into the Little Deeping River, cyclists could pedal in peace along uncrowded lanes, hikers could ramble to their hearts' content on a network of lovely trails, and children could play in safety on the village green while the elderly swapped stories on the bench near the war memorial. All in all, Finch had a lot to offer.

Yet the two cottages remained empty.

"There shouldn't be any empty cottages in Finch," I said. "They should've been snapped up ages ago. What's wrong with people, Bill? Why doesn't anyone want to live here?"

"No idea," said Bill. "And it's too nice a day to waste fretting over a problem we can't solve."

I fell silent, but I didn't stop fretting. It distressed me to see Ivy Cottage and Rose Cottage uninhabited. Their blank windows seemed to peer reproachfully at passersby, as if the village had somehow let them down. Amelia's home, Pussywillows, would soon be on the market as well and I couldn't help wondering if it would find a buyer. The thought of three perfectly good cottages standing vacant for months on end was as depressing as it was perplexing.

Bill spoke of everything but the empty cottages as we strolled past Emma Harris's long, curving drive, Bree Pym's redbrick house,

Aunt Dimity and the Summer King

and the wrought-iron gates guarding the entrance to Willis, Sr.'s estate. We were within a few yards of the humpbacked bridge that crossed the Little Deeping when I came to a halt.

"Here's where we part ways," I said to Bill, nodding toward the trees on our right. "If you squint, you'll see an old cart track hidden away in there. Bess and I are heading for parts unknown."

Bill pushed aside the branches of the bushy bay tree that concealed the track's narrow entrance.

"I'm glad I bought an all-terrain pram," he said, eyeing the track's deep ruts doubtfully. "Do you have your cell phone with you, in case you get lost?"

"I do have my cell phone with me," I said, "but I won't need it. According to Emma, the track hugs the northern boundary of your father's property, so I can't possibly get lost."

Emma Harris was not merely a good friend and an accomplished equestrian. She was a master map-reader as well. She'd spotted the disused farm track on an old ordnance survey map, but though she'd told me of her discovery, she hadn't yet explored it. It cheered me to think of Bess and I going boldly where no Emma had gone before.

"Don't walk too far," Bill cautioned.

"Forty minutes out, forty minutes back," I promised. "Unless the track vanishes before our out-time is up, in which case we'll turn around sooner."

"A sensible plan," said Bill, adding under his breath, "if only you'd stick to it . . ." He gave me a kiss and bent low to kiss our sleeping daughter, but as he headed for the humpbacked bridge he couldn't resist calling over his shoulder, "Ring me when you get lost!"

I gave him a dark look as I steered the pram through the opening in the trees and onto the bumpy track. I didn't need Bill to remind

Nancy Atherton

me that my map-reading skills were less highly developed than Emma's, but I didn't need map-reading skills to follow the old track's twin ruts. And no map on earth could have warned me—or Emma—of what lay ahead.

None of us could have known that Bess and I were about to enter the strange and mysterious realm of the Summer King.