



Aunt Dimity and the Lost Prince (Aunt Dimity Mystery)

By Nancy Atherton

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On the heels of two bestsellers, everyone's favorite paranormal detective embarks on her eighteenth cozy adventure. Watch out for Nancy Atherton's latest, *Aunt Dimity and the Widow's Curse*, coming in May 2017 from Viking!

It's a cold, dreary February in the sleepy village of Finch and Lori Shepherd has two stir-crazy kids on her hands. So she leaps at the chance to visit Skeaping Manor, a bizarre Jacobean-house-turned-museum. There she meets Daisy Pickering, a sweet, but strange little girl from a poor family who spins a wild tale about the Russian aristocrats who once owned the priceless silver pieces on display. A few days later, Daisy's shabby pink parka turns up at Lori's thrift shop—with a silver sleigh figurine in the pocket. Lori tries to track down the Pickering family, only to find that they've disappeared without a trace.

A delightful whodunit stretching back to the Russian Revolution, *Aunt Dimity and the Lost Prince* will beguile new and longtime fans.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Nancy Atherton and the Aunt Dimity series

"Atherton smoothly blends history, village life, and the otherworldly." —*Publishers Weekly*

"Every scene is superbly crafted to perfection. Even if you have not read all the books in this series, I have not, you can enjoy and immerse yourself in this cozy mystery." —**Open Book Society**

"I love the graceful style... the sense of tight-knit community, characters who aren't afraid to be themselves, and, the unique paranormal element...I only wish I had learned about this series earlier." —Gotta Write Network

"In the realm of the cozy mystery, there are few series that can hold a candle to Atherton's Aunt Dimity series." —everydaybook.com

"Atherton is a superb writer who brings a lot of charm and wit to her story." —Suspense Magazine

"Always a charming read, the Aunt Dimity series is just right for when life gets too hectic and you need to slow down a bit." —Deadly Pleasures Magazine

"Let Nancy Atherton and Aunt Dimity remind you of the reason you got hooked on books in the first place. I promise you will be scouring bookstores for more of the series after you give it a taste." —CrimeCritics.com

About the Author

Nancy Atherton is the bestselling author of twenty-two Aunt Dimity Mysteries. The first book in the series, *Aunt Dimity's Death*, was voted "One of the Century's 100 Favorite Mysteries" by the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association. She lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

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One

I've heard it said that when the poet T. S. Eliot was writing *The Wasteland*, he chose February as the cruellest month, then changed it to April in revisions. If you ask me, he got it right the first time. As far as I'm concerned, February's only redeeming feature is its brevity. If it were any longer, I would tear it from my calendar in protest.

Leap years? Don't talk to me about leap years. I suppose they serve a useful purpose, but if we must add an extra day to the calendar every now and again, why not add it to July? Or August? Or September? Why prolong the most miserable month of the year when we have so many pleasant months to choose from? Leap years, I'm convinced, were invented solely to torment me.

January isn't so bad. January offers a pleasant return to routine after the hectic holiday season. The Christmas tree has been mulched or planted or turned into a bird feeder. The twinkly lights and the

ornaments have been stored in the attic. The living room is spacious again, the dining room tidy, the kitchen organized. With the cessation of gift shopping, card writing, cookie baking, crèche building, church decorating, and Nativity play rehearsing, time itself is uncluttered. Grown-ups are back at work, children are back in school, and life ticks along with the soothing regularity of a well-oiled grandfather clock.

By the first of February, however, the novelty of normalcy has worn off. Christmas is but a distant memory and spring isn't even a glimmer on the horizon. It seems as though it has always been and will always be winter—bleak, cold, gray, dismal winter—with no respite in sight. If one lived in New Zealand, one might regard the second month of the year as the jewel in summer's crown, but I lived in England and I regarded February as the lump of coal in my Christmas stocking.

It seemed churlish to grumble as yet another February hove into view because my life was in so many ways idyllic. I was married to a wonderful man, we had two beautiful children, and we lived in a honey-colored stone cottage in the Cotswolds, a rural region in England's West Midlands.

The nearest hub of civilization was Finch, a tiny village surrounded by rolling hills, patchwork fields, and not much else. Traffic jams were unknown in Finch, litter was seldom seen, and crime was virtually nonexistent. The villagers' lives revolved around local events and a never ending stream of delicious gossip. A better woman might have turned a deaf ear to the tittle-tattle, but I wasn't a better woman. I believed quite strongly that inquisitive neighbors were preferable to indifferent ones and I behaved accordingly.

Though my husband and I were American, we'd called England home for almost a decade and our nearly eight-year-old sons had never lived anywhere else. Bill ran the European branch of his family's venerable law firm from a building overlooking Finch's village green, Will and Rob attended Morningside School in the nearby market town of Upper Deeping, and I scrambled to keep up with the myriad roles of wife, mother, community volunteer, busybody-in-training, and chairwoman of the Westwood Trust, a nonprofit organization that funded worthy projects.

Stanley, who lived with us in the cottage, did little but eat, sleep, frolic, and strike elegant poses, but since he had four paws and a tail, nothing more was expected of him. Stanley was a gleaming black cat with dandelion-yellow eyes and a dog-like devotion to Bill.

The rest of us were devoted to Bill's father, William Arthur Willis, Sr., a white-haired widower with a fondness for orchids, antiquarian books, and long walks in the countryside. Willis, Sr., was as wise as he was kind, an old-fashioned gentleman, and a doting grandfather. When he retired from his position as head of the family firm and moved into Fairworth House, a splendid Georgian mansion not far from the cottage, our family circle was complete.

With so many blessings raining down on my head, I had no right to whine about February, but when my husband was called away on the first of the month to attend to a client in Majorca, I couldn't help feeling hard done by.

I was, of course, accustomed to Bill's frequent business trips. He was an estate attorney with an international clientele and I couldn't blame him for doing his job. I could, however, blame him—severely—for basking in the sun on a flower-strewn Mediterranean island while I was cooped up in the cottage with a pair of bored and irritable little boys.

To be fair, Will and Rob were rarely bored or irritable. As identical twins, each had a built-in playmate, and as my offspring, they weren't lacking in imagination. Under normal circumstances, my sons were cheerful,

energetic, and eminently capable of entertaining themselves. In winter, I could rely on them to spend their after-school hours in the meadow behind our back garden, sledding, throwing snowballs, and constructing everything from snow forts to snow dragons.

On Saturdays, I would drop them off next door at Anscombe Manor, where they would be free to pursue their primary passion: horseback riding. Nothing on earth, including my oatmeal cookies and Bill's imitation of a *Tyrannosaurus rex*, pleased them more than a day spent galloping over hill and dale on their gray ponies, Thunder and Storm.

Sundays were spent first at church, then at Fairworth House, where Will and Rob had free rein to play hide-and-seek, explore the attics, and hone their shot-making skills at their grandfather's billiards table. If the spirit moved us, we'd go on a family outing to a local attraction. All in all, my sons had little reason to complain that their lives were dull, dreary, and confined.

February's curse was upon us, however, and I could do nothing but stand by and watch as our pleasant routine disintegrated. Bill's departure coincided with a cold front that swept in from the North Sea, plunging our region into a deep freeze that proved to be too much for Morningside School's high-tech heating system. The school's headmistress telephoned me on Sunday evening to inform me that classes would be suspended for at least a week because the parts needed to repair the complex furnace were buried somewhere in a snow-covered warehouse in Helsinki.

Will and Rob liked school very much, but they were quick to see the advantages of an unscheduled vacation. Since dangerous wind chills prevented them from playing outdoors, they found new and creative ways to blow off steam. Overnight, every chair in the cottage became a trampoline, every table a launching pad, and every inch of floor space an obstacle course of train tracks, model cars, building blocks, dinosaurs, stuffed animals, and whatever else they could drag from their toy boxes and scatter underfoot. In self-defense, Stanley retreated to the guest room and hid under the bed, emerging only at night, when the boys were fast asleep and the coast was clear.

Unlike Stanley, I had nowhere to hide. On Wednesday, I imposed martial law, threatening my sons with dire consequences if they continued to behave like barbarians. They dutifully cleared the decks and settled down to more civilized pursuits, but drawing, reading, writing, and other forms of quiet play were poor substitutes for racing around the back meadow like a pair of untamed colts.

Unable to rid themselves of their pent-up energy, the twins' tempers became frayed and their imaginations ran dry. When they weren't quarreling over crayons, books, board games, and toys, they were sitting morosely on the window seat in the living room, their identical noses pressed to the frigid panes, longing to be released from bondage. I was run ragged, trying to calm them down one minute and cheer them up the next.

I called Willis, Sr., for backup, but he'd contracted a nasty head cold, and his housekeeper, a caring and capable young woman named Deirdre Donovan, had barred the door to visitors. When I heard his hoarse voice, I agreed that peace and quiet would be his best medicines and put away all thoughts of setting my sons loose at Fairworth House.

The germ afflicting Willis, Sr., had evidently spread far and wide because all of the boys' school friends were sick as well. Though a few beleaguered mothers offered to offload their runny-nosed darlings on me, I was understandably reluctant to expose Will and Rob to such a virulent virus and gently refused to set up playdates.

As our options for escape narrowed, the cottage seemed to close in around us, becoming smaller and smaller with the passing of each spat-filled hour. During a brief moment of calm, I considered building a recreation center in the back meadow, equipped with a swimming pool, a cricket pitch, a riding ring, and miles of monkey bars. It seemed like a perfectly rational plan to me, but it also seemed likely that Bill would wish to have a say in it, so I shelved it for the moment and returned to the living room to keep peace among the pirates storming the sofa.

By Friday morning, the only weapon left in my maternal arsenal was the promise of spending Saturday at the stables. I unsheathed it during breakfast, reminding the boys that in less than twenty-four hours we would be on our way to the Anscombe Riding Center for a full day of horsey fun. Even if the cold snap prevented them from riding their ponies, I told them, they could spend the day cleaning tack, climbing hay bales, talking horse with their fellow equestrians, and grooming Thunder and Storm.

My pep talk worked like magic. Will and Rob bounced upstairs to play checkers in their room and I spent much of the morning singing, smiling, and baking cookies for them to share with their stable mates. I blithely disregarded February's malevolent influence until the telephone rang and I stiffened, gripped by a chilling sense of impending doom.

"Lori?" The voice on the other end of the line belonged to my best friend, Emma Harris, owner of the Anscombe Riding Center. "I hate to say it—"

I groaned inwardly and braced myself for bad news.

"—but the stables will be closed for the foreseeable future," Emma continued.

"Stables?" I echoed weakly. "Closed?" I cast a haunted glance at the wall calendar, sank onto a kitchen chair, and put a weary hand to my forehead. "How could you do this to me, Emma? Will and Rob have been bouncing off the walls *all week*. They *need* to see their ponies. Do you have the slightest inkling of what will happen when I tell them they *can't*?" I covered my eyes and heaved a dolorous sigh. "You have condemned me to a foreseeable future filled with terminal crankiness."

"I'm sorry to inconvenience you, Lori," Emma said tartly, "but we're suffering a few inconveniences ourselves. The water pipes leading to the stables are frozen solid and one has burst. Derek and his crew are working on it, but at the moment, the stable yard is a skating rink."

Derek Harris was Emma's husband. Since he restored old buildings for a living, he had the tools, the skills, and the manpower needed to deal with just about any household emergency. If Derek couldn't repair or replace the damaged pipes quickly, no one could.

"It's the curse," I muttered.

"Oh, Lori," Emma said impatiently. "You're not going on about February again, are you?"

"What month is it, my friend?" I retorted. "And what has happened to your pipes?"

"Pure coincidence," Emma replied. "Cold spells happen in winter and pipes sometimes freeze during cold spells. It has nothing to do with a curse."

"What about the school's broken furnace and the universal head cold?" I demanded.

“Coincidence,” Emma said airily.

“So you say,” I grumbled, but even as I spoke it occurred to me that I might not be responding as a best friend should in a crisis. With a heroic effort, I thrust my own troubles aside and focused on Emma’s. “You poor thing, How can I help? Hot soup? Warm beds? A truckload of blowtorches? Name it and it shall be yours.”

Emma chuckled. “Thanks, Lori, but we’re managing. It’s a big job, though, and it’ll take time to put everything back together again. The stables are high and dry, thank heavens, so we won’t have to move the horses.”

“Are the horses okay?” I asked.

“They’re jittery because of the noise and the commotion,” Emma replied, “but they’ll settle down once they get used to it. Tell Will and Rob not to worry about their ponies. We’ll look after them.”

“I know you will, and so do the boys,” I said. “You must be up to your eyebrows in emergency management, Emma, so I’ll let you go. If you need anything, day or night, you know who to call.”

“I have your number on speed dial,” Emma assured me, and hung up.

I returned the receiver to its cradle and searched my mind for an alternate activity that would placate a pair of profoundly disappointed seven-year-olds, but for once my imagination failed me. I could think of absolutely nothing that would compensate Will and Rob for a Saturday devoid of horsiness. With my brain running on empty, I sat paralyzed at the kitchen table, unable to bring myself to break the disastrous news to my unsuspecting sons. I was still in a state of suspended animation when the doorbell rang.

I flew up the hallway to answer it, hoping to find a magician or an acrobat or a troupe of juggling chimpanzees on my doorstep, but what I found there was even more astonishing than a passing circus.

When I flung the front door open, I saw flames.

Users Review

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