Amy Collins and the Stolen Artifact



Amy Collins Series Book Three

Kevin Mullin

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AMY COLLINS BOOK SERIES

Finding Home (Book 1)
Amy Collins: A Boston Adventure (Book 2)
Amy Collins and the Stolen Artifact (Book 3)

OTHER BOOKS BY KEVIN MULLIN

Other Worlds, Other Nightmares

PROLOGUE

Gramma Amy moved in with us in 2010, after my 10th birthday. As usual, no one told me about her arrival, even though I had two parents, four half-sisters and four half-brothers. It annoyed me to always be the last to know about anything. Gramma Amy was 90, but she had a commanding presence. When she moved in, she quickly brought a stop to terms like half-sister. A family only needs brothers and sisters.

I initiated that change when I decided to be humorous and said, "I have eight half-brothers and sisters. They're 'half' because they hate me half as much as they hate each other."

She missed the humor.

"Nobody hates anybody, Jenny. They need space and time to create their future lives. Don't confuse momentary resentment with hate."

"If you say so, but I'm pretty sure if they had their way, I'd have been sold to the Bayville Fried Chicken House to be chopped, fileted, battered, and deep fried long ago."

"That's a snarky thing to say. Do you think if someone deep-fried your legs they'd look like a chicken drumstick? They certainly aren't *that* thin.'

Speaking about 'snarky.'

"Appreciate your family, Jenny. They won't be with you

forever. My original father, Michael Collins, treated me like a princess and I loved him. But not everybody had a high opinion of him. He punched a lot of people in the nose."

"I can see how that could make him unlovable to some people."

"I like a dry sense of humor." She smiled. "We'll get along. Anyway, Mary, my first mother, only had time for my younger sister and brother. Mrs. Carnahan, the neighbor lady, became more of a mother to me than Mary. She taught me reading and math. And music. She gave me my first violin lessons. She even gave me her violin and I treasured it.

"But my world soon fell apart. Someone murdered Michael and we didn't know what would happen to us. But my mother married an evil man named Geo (the Giraffe) Corelli who ran an illegal speakeasy with dancing girls. He immediately became cruel and evil to Mary and me, to my mind at least. His daughters had mean streaks in them too. One of them smashed my violin and I got so angry, I broke her nose. My mother put me on a train the next day to Faucette, Louisiana to live with my Aunt Cassie and her husband, Paul Villians, pronounced VEE-yawn."

"Did things get better in the south?"

"Not at first. Most of the children didn't like me. They were hateful and picked at me most of the time. At first, I thought they resented me because I was a Yankee, but no, I was born out of wedlock. You see, Cassie was my real mother. Mary was my aunt. They adopted me so I wouldn't grow up with the stigma of being a bastard."

"A bastard?"

"An offensive term people used for children born to unmarried women. It was a monumental social crime. Lots of women didn't let their children play with me or anyone

else in my family after I arrived. One boy pushed me into a moving swing and gave me a concussion. Eventually, they tolerated me. It motivated me to be accepted. It became kind of my quest. That's why I always suppressed saying clever or witty remarks because sometimes they sound mean."

"And it worked? They accepted you?"

"We were surprised by a twist of fate. It turned out I had another mother, a wealthy Boston aristocrat named Matilda (Tillie) Wentworth. Her husband, J.P. Wentworth, was an unscrupulous businessman and vicious person who wanted a son but only had daughters. He concocted a plot with Willie the butler to bribe the hospital staff after my birth. They switched me with Cassie's baby boy and Tillie wanted me home when she found out it happened."

"How'd she find out?"

"When J.P. and the boy died in a boating accident, Willie told her. He loved her more than anyone in the world."

"Doesn't sound like it."

"He did what he had to if he wanted to stay employed in the house with her. If he refused, he'd be replaced and he wanted to stay with Tillie."

"Did she love him?"

"I think so. She was a morphine addict and seemed unaware most of the time. But she loved me and made sure I became part of her family. I had six wonderful, if eccentric, sisters. I found a good home there. No one ever treated me like an outsider and they accepted me, but sadly, after eight months, Tillie died."

She sighed and her eyes lost focus. I thought she ended the conversation but she shook her head and continued.

"I wish I could have stayed longer with her but it's not

a tragedy in losing someone you love. It's a blessing to know her in the first place. Anyway, after she died, my Aunt Vera and Uncle Edgar took charge of the family and had me take a blood test to prove I was a Wentworth and I failed.

"'This child is a fraud and is certainly not a Wentworth.'" Gramma Amy sounded like the Wicked Witch of the West when she imitated Vera. "'I knew my brother would never be so immoral as to switch babies and leave his own daughter to live with hillbillies and gangsters. That whole family belongs in jail.'

"I was at a loss for words, which wasn't unusual for me. Adults intimidated me, especially when they threatened to send me to jail. I felt better when Mr. Davis, her lawyer, rolled his eyes a bit. If he thought she overreacted, I was probably safe.

"In fact, things were better than I thought. Willie walked into the meeting and announced he was my real father. Tillie, ignored by her philandering husband, needed some companionship, which he provided. So, Willie and Edgar arranged a settlement. In exchange for Willie's silence about J.P.'s unscrupulous business deals, Willie received custody of me and I would remain with my sisters in boarding school. I also received 10,000 shares of Wentworth stock, which included canning, fishing, retail stores, farming, mining, and other assets.

"Edgar became the CEO of Wentworth Industries after J.P. died and he instantly approved the deal despite Vera's objections. But he had his own plans and embezzled all the cash to run off with a girl barely older than me. Wentworth Industries fell into bankruptcy and my 10,000 shares became worthless.

"No help came from my New England family. Edgar

wiped them out too and *they* had to survive with what *they* had left. I became an indigent friend of J.P.'s daughters.

"Willie found another job as a servant in Providence but I couldn't stay there. So, he sent me back to Faucette with Cassie and Paul. I stayed there even though Vera bribed the doctor to say the test was negative when it was inconclusive. J.P. could indeed have been my father. Tillie could have been my mother. Willie could be my father also. But Cassie could have been my mother. And Hugo Landacre, Cassie's lover, could have been my father. In those days, the doctors could only prove someone was not a parent."

"Wow," I processed this information, "that's a real-life roller-coaster."

"Indeed," she agreed, "but I never complained because I had two families filled with loving people. Most only have one. It's the same for you. You only feel like a half-sister because you emphasize the 'half.' Be the sister from now on. Let go of the rest and build a future with your family. Maybe you can try encouraging people. I'm sure at least someone could use your support or encouragement."

"I'm ten. They don't want support or encouragement from me."

"Have you tried to be a friend?"

"Yes."

"Without being snarky?"

I looked down, silent.

"I thought so. Who do you think could use you the most?"

"Didi?"

My sister, Didi, went to high school and the boys talked about her drop-dead gorgeous beauty. Her boyfriend still played the field with other girls who said he was *their*

boyfriend. Didi seemed to always be sad, angry or depressed. I stayed away from her since she dragged me into the pits of despair with her.

"So, she's after the same boy other girls want." Gramma Amy nodded. "That's not unusual. Some boys can make a girl's heart throb. It makes me think of an old jewelry box and a crystal everybody wanted."

"Huh?" I missed the connection.

"We had quite the time in Faucette," she went on without explanation. "Thieves stole these ancient artifacts from a train. The crystal was just an uncut diamond, but somebody killed for the Claman Case, an artifact named after the German archeologist Heinrich Claman who found it in India. It caused quite the stir where I lived."

"What was in it?"

"Nothing," she said. "It was an old wooden box. I couldn't believe it caused such a ruckus; it didn't even play music. It was the reason I came to meet Spring Waters, the Marsh Matron."

CHAPTER ONE

When I arrived in Faucette, my life went from a rather dull existence into such a whirlwind of activity that Gramma Morris, my great grandmother, once called me a tornado in little girl form. The other adults agreed with her statement.

I did find myself in undesirable situations because my decision-making abilities had not fully developed. But adults expect such lapses of judgement from ten-year-olds. One cold Saturday morning, I reflected on my past decisions. In two days, I would be a young adult of eleven, no longer making bad choices and I could hardly wait.

I felt out of sorts recently; the combination of achy joints and a general feeling of discontent made me irritable but that day we had a fun errand to do. Mom sent my sister, Anna Marie, and me to gather eggs for our big birthday party. Our birthdays were less than two weeks apart and our family combined them into one big party.

We traipsed to the chicken shed, skipping over the concrete steppingstones embedded in the grassy field. After the Great War, Paul, Anna Marie's father, installed the stones around the property to keep his wooden leg from getting sucked into the mud when he did chores.

We left the house after dawn, when the trees formed their shadows on the frosty ground as the sun burned the

rest of the night away. I wore a light sweater, while Anna Marie froze in her heaviest coat.

"You Yankees don't know when it's cold," she grumbled.

Yes, we do and this isn't it.

The brisk morning seemed like a late autumn day in the northeast. To my sister, the bitter air made the winter morning miserable. But she spent her entire life in Louisiana.

"I'm so happy we get to have a birthday party together, Amy," she said after she realized I had no sympathy for her shivering. "We missed your first ten, you know."

How could I not know?

"And just think, we could have missed it again if it wasn't for—"

She stopped, looking down.

"I'm sorry about your mother."

She meant Tillie. If she hadn't died, I would still be in Pennyton, a suburb of Boston. I lived a life of luxury there but Tillie discovered she had cancer shortly after my arrival.

"It's okay." I knew she meant no offense. "We're both happy I'm here. And I love parties too. Especially mine. This one will be great because I'm sharing it with you. I never got any parties."

"We'll have lots of fun at this one. I like sharing it with you too."

No, you don't. You want the spotlight on you.

"That's so good," I said, overcoming the temptation to be mean. "And since the guests know you better than me, I figure while they fuss over you, I get to sneak in an extra piece of cake."

"As long as it's not mine, I don't care. And I want people to fuss over you too."

"Oh?"

"I want extra cake too."

We laughed. I don't know why. It wasn't that funny.

When I arrived in Faucette, Anna Marie greeted me with hostility, but after a few run-ins, we learned to tolerate each other. We needed to establish our own 'space,' as Mom told us. She was always "Mom" to me, even though my birth circumstances were unusual, and she always treated me like a daughter.

"How many eggs did you get?"

"Six," I replied after a quick count. "You?"

"Eight. A couple more won't hurt. If that's too many for the party, we can scramble them for breakfast tomorrow."

"That seems sensible," I said. "Everybody likes eggs, especially Holly."

My seven-year-old sister always wanted to be with me, which made her my favorite sister here. Most children in Louisiana avoided me.

"I can hardly wait for our party," she went on. "If they put me in charge, we'd have a party every day. You'll get the presents. I only want cake."

"I'd share it with you," I replied. "But you wouldn't get mine unless Aunt Mary made it."

The cakes Mary made were dismal. She substituted leftover potatoes for flour, molasses for sugar and used cabbage water for milk. When I moved to Faucette, I had an aversion to most desserts. Food in general, for that matter. Cakes were not the only failures to come out of Mary's kitchen.

"If she cooks as bad as you say, I'd be my generous little self and let you have the whole cake. I have such a kind heart."

"Would you have such a kind heart if you liked it?"

"Well, no. Kindness only goes so far, you know."

Nowhere if it involves you and cake.

"Makes sense," I said with a strained smile. "But Aunt Mary lives in New York. I doubt we'll ever see her here. You'll never have the pleasure of tasting her cooking."

"Gee. I feel bad."

Dad never allowed us in the chicken shed before, not that I wanted to go there. It smelled earthy and sour, probably because the chickens smelled that way, and there were occasional bird leftovers on the ground. Our hired hand always cleaned the floor when he opened the gate to let them roam free and forage, so most of their leftovers rested unseen behind the shed.

Until recently, my two oldest sisters, Annette and Michelle collected the eggs, but Annette married and moved to California with her husband and newborn son. Michelle and her boyfriend, Adam Zirilli, drove to Neuville, a town about 20 miles north of us, to visit spooky, old, abandoned houses. They met at the state fair when I lived in Boston and he convinced her it would be fun.

Neither Mom nor Dad particularly liked Adam's method of courtship, but they knew Michelle would never have her pick of boys. She had a big-boned frame with large breasts and buttocks and no trace of a figure. Some men like women like that, but her thin hair emphasized her round ordinary features. However, her smile could light a room brighter than an electric chandelier and it showcased her good, kind-hearted and forgiving nature. When Dad started making his little put-downs about Adam, she stood up for him in a way that warmed everybody's heart.

I loved Michelle dearly, provided she stayed away from the piano. The poor instrument howled in agony when she

attacked it, torturing it with sadistic glee to amuse Jason, our little brother. Mom demanded a short truce from the musical nightmares because Matthew, my baby brother, needed his sleep. We enjoyed the quiet ever since Michelle stopped assaulting the keyboard.

At least my violin was portable. I could take it out on the back porch to play when I wanted. But I played less and less. My dear friend and music teacher died recently and there were no other violin teachers near us. Not many other people wanted to listen to me play, because of my status. It made me sad for a moment.

"Are you getting misty on me?" Anna Marie asked softly. "I didn't mean it. You can have the cake if you want. I don't even want it. Really."

If it's cake, you can dislocate your jaw and swallow the whole thing in one sitting like a snake.

"I remembered some things. It won't be much of a party if you don't eat cake," I replied. "Besides, we Villians stick together. Cake for one, cake for all."

Our family name was Villians, but I remained a Collins. It cost money to change my name and no one knew what the new last name should be, since no one knew who my father was. Or mother. Besides, the town knew what family I belonged to.

"We Villians do stick together," Anna Marie agreed. "And anybody who doesn't like Amy Collins doesn't like any of us. And the whole town knows we got the bridge over Faucette Creek only because of you."

"Mostly through luck."

When I arrived in Louisiana, the other children were so hostile to me that Gramma De Montfort, Mom's mother and the school board president, gave me the final examinations for fourth grade. When I passed them, she

pulled me out of class for the rest of the school year. Of course, I had to study some fifth-grade material and do other useful chores, like read to Mr. Benson, the blind and retired former teacher.

I also worked at Mom's restaurant, The Faucette Café, and Cici, our Negro chef, took a shine to me and taught me how to cook. One day, I had one of those severe lapses of judgement and Cici exiled me from the kitchen forever so I volunteered to sell sodas and chips at the train station to help out. I met Governor Huey P. Long there and he chose to visit our café to chat with the townspeople. Several citizens mentioned the Creek Bridge washed away and it was inconvenient for drivers. He had his assistant, Rob, take care of it.

He also convinced Father Callahan, who ran the private Catholic school, to transfer me there as a fifth grader for community outreach. The good priest had two options: Accept me as a fifth-grade student or he'd tear the church and school to the ground in search of evidence of nonexistent crimes. The Parochial school accepted me with open arms and I made my first real friends. So, I completed both fourth and fifth grades by the end of the year.

"Are your Catholic friends coming?" Anna Marie asked.

I hadn't seen them since the end of the school year but I made sure they knew about the party.

"It's hard to say, since we don't go to the same school anymore. And nobody from my school is coming."

The community outreach program ended with fifth grade and I returned to public school for seventh. While in New England, Nadia, my governess forced us to study every day, even in summer, until the authorities quietly deported her to Yugoslavia after she and the other servants attempted to kidnap my sister, Millie, and me. That little

detail aside, as a teacher, she did such a wonderful job.

Gramma De Montfort decided I belonged in the junior high class. She figured I could do the work and the older students wouldn't antagonize me. She was right on both counts. Our teacher, Miss Hartgrove, wouldn't tolerate any bullying, although, she couldn't stop the older children from ignoring me.

"How about your Boston family?" Anna Marie asked, as if reading my mind.

"I hope Willie can make it," I said.

He was always Willie to me, even after I found out he might be my father. We couldn't know for sure in those days, but he claimed me and he had legal custody. After he sent me to Faucette, he faithfully phoned me twice a month, but he never visited or sent for me.

"I wish you lived here when you were born. You'd have a party every year," Anna Marie continued with a shivering voice.

"It would have been nice," I replied. "I only got two parties in my life."

I had a party for my seventh birthday in New York. Michael welcomed some of his underworld friends like Frank Costello and Meyer Lansky. His other friends made Mary nervous, so Michael didn't invite them.

My other party was my send off when I left for Pennyton. Dad got a little peeved at one of the guests and threw her and her husband in a fountain because he decided her baptism needed to be renewed. His display of temper embarrassed me and I was happy to leave.

It didn't take long for me to miss them and realize people will always say or do things that can be annoying, but the underlying love is always there. I managed to get myself into some dangerous situations and when things

looked hopeless, it was always Mom and Dad I wanted.

"Hey, girls. Are you supposed to be in my chicken shed?"

Porky, our hired hand, stood over us, trying unsuccessfully to be intimidating. He handled the chickens and eggs for twenty dollars a month and a room in the shed provided with a kerosene heater and a water pump. I suspected he only drank from it because he didn't look or smell like he ever bathed.

I always enjoyed talking to Porky when we stood outside. He once owned a farm in Arkansas but his wife ran off with another man right before a tornado destroyed everything he had. Dad hired him a few years back and he more than earned his keep. He handled the chickens like they were his own and never gave Dad a problem. But he never changed clothes and rarely shaved, so he looked as scruffy as he smelled. He was young enough to find a new bride and start another farm but seemed content here. Mom said he would never let another woman hurt him again, so his life would always be here, unless he changed. That seemed sad, but I was only ten. What did I know?

"Mom wanted a dozen eggs for the party," Anna Marie replied defiantly. "And I'm old enough to get them."

"No, you ain't and neither is she," he sounded stern, but he couldn't lose his smile. "No children in the shed until they're twelve."

"Mom said we could get the eggs," I said quietly. "They're for our party tomorrow. And Anna Marie will be twelve in less than two weeks."

"Good," he said. "Since Annette got married, I only have Michelle for help and those hens started laying twice as many eggs to keep her running."

Michelle handled the eggs but she also helped with the

housework and sometimes cooked dinner as part of her chores, so Mom often excused her from egg gathering so she could keep her grades up. She wanted to become a nurse, like Gramma De Montfort, who served in the Spanish-American and Great War.

"I'll be ready for them eggs," Anna Marie grinned. "You just wait."

"I have to," he replied as he handed her a clean pail for our harvest.

He stopped and looked behind us. We turned to see a little movement in the grass outside the shed. Porky grabbed a rusty hoe and hurried out with us behind him.

"Will you look at that," he said with a whistle.

A snake slithered away from us at breakneck speed.

"Here it's January, almost freezing and we have a snake out and about."

He lifted the hoe but the reptile scooted away. Porky chased after it, swatting the ground behind it or to the side, until it dove into our pond. It swam a safe distance and poked its head out of the water to study us before it swam away, leaving only a few ripples in the water.



The air frosted our breath as we hurried home, increasing our pace when a slight drizzle began to turn into sleet as the temperature dropped. Dark storm clouds blotted out every trace of blue sky, announcing the kind of rain that would last for weeks and ruin our celebration.

"It figures it'd rain for our party," I complained.

Anna Marie shrugged.

"Next time, don't be born in January."

Next time?

"Besides, it always rains for my birthday too, except for last year."

This marked my second January in Faucette but I did remember last year was warmer and drier. The cold bothered everyone else more than me. Anna Marie put on a resilient face, pretending to be immune to the nippy air like me, but her chattering teeth gave her away.

Dad's brother, Vincent, parked his truck at the end of the driveway. We didn't see him or Dad anywhere, so we tromped inside with our loot, seconds before the rain attacked the tin roof with a thunderous crash.

"Oh, good," Mom said loudly enough for us to hear. "You're back. Paul's going to bring the ingredients to the restaurant and we'll bake the cake there. I see no reason to bake a cake here and bring it over there in the rain."

"Sounds like an egg-cellent idea to me," I agreed with a smile as the rain lightened and my aches seemed to go away. "Here're the eggs you wanted. They're in egg-cellent shape. Eggs-actly what you wanted. And we got a couple eggs-tra, in case you drop one. You might think that's eggs-travagant, but we want our party to be an eggs-traordinary eggs-perience. A real eggs-travaganza. The paper will print an eggs-pose, maybe Egg-er Allan Poe could write it. People would be raven about it."

"Would you stop with the egg-ravating puns?" she asked without smiling.

Michael and I told puns every day, from the moment I started talking. Mom pretended to hate them, but I knew she loved this kind of humor. She only had trouble showing it.

"I'm showing some egg-zuberant appreciation for an egg-cellent Mom. I can't eggs-ude love and warmth like you so I make you smile."