

Kevin Mullin

AMY COLLINS SERIES



BOOK TWO



**AMY COLLINS**  
**A BOSTON ADVENTURE**

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**AMY COLLINS BOOK SERIES**

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## PROLOGUE

When she was 92, my Gramma Amy took my sister Maggie and me to visit Boston. It was to be a reunion with her sister Millicent, who was 94. They were the last two family members of their generation. We all knew this would be their last visit together. Gramma Amy was thrilled to be able to see her sister again after so many years.

Her doctor recommended we take the train. That way, Gramma Amy could get up and walk to encourage her blood flow. Blood flow is very important for older people. It can also be quite beneficial to young people. The journey was uneventful, although I loved watching the scenery breeze by. The tall pine trees of northern Michigan were soon gone, replaced by unwholesome looking cities dressed in gray and brown. It was hard to imagine these places were once thriving towns that swarmed with contented adults and playing children.

One dying city replaced the next. Although, one or two downtown areas did seem to be clean and bright, with towering skyscrapers guarding its residents, just not the ones who lived near the tracks. I decided that towns along the Great Lakes weren't desirable places to live.

Boston's train station was loud, crowded and overwhelming when we arrived. People were everywhere, looking for arrivals or saying good-byes. Others were

sleeping on the platforms and benches or begging for money. It was not at all a fun place.

“Millie is sending a car for us,” Gramma Amy said as we walked off the platform into the station house.

I looked out the window into a sea of automobiles.

“How will we know which one?”

“He’ll tell us,” Maggie said, pointing to an older man in a gray uniform holding up a sign that said *Amy Webb*.

He escorted us to a stretch limousine while whispering to Gramma Amy. It was my first, and so far, only time I got to ride in such a grand vehicle. It had a television, wet bar (though I only got to drink a ginger ale), phone charger, and seats that massaged. It only lacked a bathroom. We drove for maybe half an hour, until we reached the Dorrance Hill neighborhood, where the houses were bigger than some hotels.

We zigzagged through the old streets until we came to Ellsworth Lane. We followed an off-white brick wall for a minute or two and turned into a driveway. The driver pressed a button on the dashboard and the wrought iron gate slowly side-stepped open for us.

“You’ll be meeting my sister Millie, her daughter Elizabeth, and her two daughters, Elaine and Doreen,” Gramma Amy repeated for the 100th time, “If America had royalty, they would be highly regal. True aristocrats. Be on your best and most silent behavior.”

The driveway was lined with tall dogwood trees that blessed us with their pink blooms. The trip ended in a circular drop off point, where we were deposited. Three women were waiting for us. An elderly woman who was obviously long retired, and two younger specimens of matronly elegance. They all wore long black dresses with pearl necklaces decorating their throats and gloves covering

their forearms. The younger two had fake smiles surgically plastered on their lips while their bleached blond hair brilliantly reflected the sun. Their plasticized faces were designed to make them look youthful, but they both forgot to fix their desiccated and wrinkly necks.

“Elizabeth,” my grandmother called out and the older woman hugged her warmly. She turned to the other ladies and greeted them by name and hug as well, “Elaine, you still look like you’re in your 20s.”

*I suppose, but you’d have to add two 20s together to be accurate.*

“You’re too kind, Aunt Amy,” the woman replied.

“And Doreen,” Gramma Amy went on to the other woman, “You will always be a beauty.”

Maggie and I glanced at each other with the same thought:

*If that was true, it’s time for us to start wearing paper bags over our heads.*

But we smiled politely as we were introduced. If there was only one thing I learned from Gramma Amy, it is this: Silence is golden.

The chauffeur came up behind us and carried our luggage to our rooms, two stories up and down a long hallway to the end. I felt like we had walked all the way to Vermont by the time he opened our doors and set our luggage down.

Our rooms were almost as big as our house in Michigan. Well, one floor, maybe. I got a queen-sized lace trimmed bed with fluffy blankets. Shelves of books and dolls were neatly arranged around the walls. The room was painted a pastel pink with lime green trim. Maggie almost gagged when she saw the color combination.

“Never mix pink and green in the same room,” she informed me, “It looks like this.”



I didn't think "this" was so bad. Maggie simply shrugged and told me that when I got older, I would develop aesthetic appreciation. Right now, all I had was childish infatuation mixed with gauche tastelessness.

*Whatever.*

After our debate, we went downstairs to join the adults. They weren't hard to find. All we had to do was follow the laughter. An extremely old woman sat in a wheelchair next to Gramma Amy. They were holding hands and giggling at old reminiscences.

"Maggie and Jenny," our grandmother called out, "Come meet your great grand-aunt Millie, my oldest living relative and best friend."

We politely hugged her and sat at the far end of the table. She smelled of canned beets and rancid perfume. A side effect of her medicines, Gramma Amy told me later.

Sadly, Aunt Millie didn't have much longer to live. That was obvious, even to a child like me.

We eventually moved to the large dining room for dinner. A flower arrangement in a green and gray glass vase shaped like a mermaid with very human exposed breasts centered the 24-seat table. Gramma Amy stared at it with distaste.

"I have never liked mermaids," she said, "Even when they were properly dressed."

The offending vase was removed by one of the servants instantly.

We then sat down with Aunt Millie at the head of the table. Our places were set with elegant extravagance. We had multiple plates and bowls, fancy wine glasses, tumblers for water, and approximately a dozen forks, spoons and knives.

*I'm going to use the wrong fork and spoon for every bite.*

My insecurity must have shown because everyone laughed.

“Just eat, Jenny,” Aunt Millie told me, “No one notices or cares what fork you use.”

And so, we ate. Since we were in Boston, it was no surprise that dinner was fresh caught fish broiled in butter. Small boiled red potatoes and broccoli completed the meal. Desert was Boston Crème pie, of course. The adults drank Riesling while my sister and I sipped iced tea.

“I set up an appointment for you at my clinic,” Aunt Millie told Gramma Amy. “It’ll be tomorrow. It’s so good to know we can find the truth.”

“Why?” my grandmother shook her head sadly, “Are we less sisters, less friends?”

“No, not at all. But haven’t you ever wondered? Hasn’t something got you so curious that you just had to find out, no matter what? Can you understand that?”

“I can,” I said, and all eyes turned to me with eyebrows raised to impossible heights. “It’s in all the fairy tales. The husband tells the wife she can go anywhere in the house except one room, and sooner or later, she goes in that one room.”

“And gets killed,” Maggie added helpfully.

“Have some more pie,” Aunt Millie said darkly.

Elizabeth and her two daughters were pleading for the cause as well. Finally, with an eye roll, my grandmother nodded. Everything was set. Whatever *everything* was.

Before going to sleep, I went down to her room to say good night. She smiled and let me in. Her room was bigger than my sister Debbie’s apartment, maybe even bigger than her apartment building.

I flopped on her bed and we talked for a bit.

“What’s tomorrow?”

“Tuesday.”

“I mean at the clinic? Are you testing to see if you can be a donor to her for something?”

“No, Jenny,” she replied slowly, “We’re testing to see if we’re sisters by name or by blood.”

“You don’t know?”

“Until DNA testing came along, we could never know, just make educated guesses. Remember, I have two stories about who I am. Two families that claimed me. I didn’t care really where my blood line came from. I felt unique because I had two families.”

“But I thought—”

“Let’s get away from what we think. I’ll tell you what we know.”

And so began her story of her life in Boston. Of course, Gramma Amy was very proper and her reminiscences were heavily edited to leave out the vulgar language and names people used so prevalently in her youth. She thought it made the world a better place when people spoke civilly to and about each other. It was an opinion I certainly agreed with. This is Amy Collins Webb’s story as she herself told it.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE DREAM

Although I couldn't have known it at the time, I think it all started with that nightmare, the one I always remembered. I was in the Malmort River again, near the bottom. An enormous and thoroughly evil alligator attacked me and dragged me down there for dinner. Most of us thought it was eighteen feet long, though after it was caught, the hunters decided it was a bit smaller. To a ten-year-old girl fighting for her life, the size was unimportant. It was big.

My only weapon against this horrible reptile was an oar from the boat he destroyed. My original intent when I saw it lurching towards me was to swat its snout and swim away, but the paddle was reversed. I was holding the wide flat part while the handle was facing my predator. I grabbed both ends of the blade and pushed it at the creature's snout, thinking if I caused it enough pain, it would go away. My first father from New York told me that the best strategy in winning a fight quickly is to smash your opponent's nose.

In this case, it was even better. I missed. The current swerved the handle so that the oar plunged downward, deep into its mouth. I felt it shudder and swim off to clear its throat, allowing me time to escape while it was

distracted. I'm sure all it did was bite down and swallow the oar, but maybe that killed its appetite for little girls. Whatever happened, I got away.

This part of the dream was a simple remembrance. It was natural for a person to dream of her traumatic experiences. It was the next portion of the dream that was memorable. I swam up to the surface for air. But I wasn't in The Malmort River in Louisiana anymore. I surfaced in The East River in New York City. My Aunt Mary and Uncle Gio were there, along with my sister Julia and brother Patrick. My stepsisters were there too, Sophie and Isabella. The day was hot and the sky was a vivid, unnatural blue. The water was gray, and rather dry (I was in bed dreaming, after all). Everything was painted in unnatural colors, except Uncle Gio, who was a stark black and white. Silent and unsmiling.

"It's time to go home," he said.

I shook my head. I didn't want to go home with him. They sent me away and I was happy in my new home. I wanted nothing to do with them. I swam away as fast as possible.

"You can't run from home, Amy," Aunt Mary called out. She was frightened. Not for me. Never for me. She was afraid of her husband, and I was her sacrifice to keep him happy. I had to swim away.

"Come back here," Gio the Giraffe called out to me while pulling out his revolver, "Or I'll shoot you dead."

He repeatedly shot at me while I swam away, missing every time. I didn't even hear the bullets hit the water. When I felt I was far enough away, I turned back. The pistol shot backwards and the rounds struck him instead of me. His bullet riddled body fell forward.

“Amy,” a new voice called to me from far away, “Amy, over here, I need to talk to you.”

A large outcrop of boulders appeared nearby. I saw a young woman waving, motioning me to come to her. I swam over her way while the others bickered. It was a short swim. Effortless. But then, reality is different in a dream. I reached the rock and she lifted me up with ease.

“Well, hi, Amy Collins,” she said politely. She was pretty, with white hair and eyes as blue as the ocean.

“Hello Miss—”

“Endora. Here, sit, look around. The ocean makes a fine home for us all.”

Her hands firmly turned me around to where I had just swum. The New York skyline was gone. A rocky coast was there now with a pebble strewn beach maybe five hundred yards distant.

“This is Tarrelahuesett,” she told me, “The people who lived here call it The Still Waters That Kill. The settlers shortened the name to Tarrelsett: The calm waters.”

“That’s quite a difference,” I said looking back at her.

“It is. Everywhere you go, things can seem peaceful and quiet on the surface, but underneath, you will find evil people and whirlpools of animosity. You don’t see them until it’s too late. It’s all part of dealing with people. They think they’re entitled to what they want, and you don’t know what they’ll do to get it.”

I nodded, and that’s when I noticed she didn’t have legs. From the waist down was a gray and silver tail, just like a fish. My eyes jumped up to her face.

She smiled brightly at me. “It’s a matter of getting what you want,” she repeated, “People don’t want to eat people, but they do want to eat fish. Fish want to eat fish *and* people. So do mermaids.”

Her eyes transformed into fishy globs while her teeth grew into gigantic fangs and she lunged towards me. I jumped back, lost my balance and fell off the rocky cliff back into the ocean with her laughter echoing in my ears as I swam to the shore.

“Don’t be in a hurry my sweet,” she croaked out in an inhuman voice, “We have much to talk about.”

I woke up with my heart thumping hard against my ribs. After a while, I was back asleep. The nightmare forgotten but not entirely.

*We have much to talk about.*

## CHAPTER TWO

### REST AND RECUPERATION

In January of 1930, I was sent to live with my Aunt Cassie in Faucette, Louisiana. Within the first two months, I received a concussion from a kick in the head, slipped and fell when a bullet grazed my temple, and then the gigantic alligator attacked me in the river, which gave me a great story to tell. I think I preferred the concussions to the alligator attack. Doctor Gannon, our local physician, was worried about the bite wounds on my leg so I was kept out of school for several weeks with my foot propped up and my head in a book.

My adventure earned me a few newspaper stories, both nationally and in *The Faucette Local*, our daily paper published by the Harmon family. I never actually met the Harmons or their children. They were sent to boarding school and the parents went to the Methodist church on the Atchafala River. If I saw them around town, I wouldn't recognize them. They were familiar with me and my family though. My mother's family used to share the same church with them, but when my unmarried mother was pregnant with me, they led that congregation in convincing my family to find another church.

After I arrived in Louisiana, Mom put me in public



school, but soon I obtained a scholarship of sorts to a private Catholic school. My teacher, Sister Barbara, faithfully sent me my homework assignments and called once a week to see how I was progressing. She was a dedicated and wonderful teacher. My classmates also would come calling on me and I was able to maintain passing grades that year.

Although we were not Catholic, I was granted special permission to attend by Father Cassidy at the request of Governor Huey P. Long. Mr. Long gave Father Cassidy two options that day. Either accept me as a new student as part of a community outreach or watch the church be razed to the ground in search of 'evidence' of criminal activity.

I found out later that Father Cassidy not only accepted me into the school, he made clear that I was a part of the school. No one was to make me feel unwanted at St. Linus. Not only was I not unwanted, I made friends with my Catholic classmates and we went treasure hunting down a particularly dangerous river called *The Riviere de Mal Morte*. Malmort for short. It meant *The River of Bad Death*. It was there that I met that gigantic alligator, the biggest ever to swim in North America, at least to my mind. Of course, I'd have preferred to find the chest of gold coins instead.

Although my leg ached a bit because of the bite, Mom (the name Aunt Cassie told me to use for her) still expected me to contribute to the household. Thus, after I completed my schoolwork, she gave me chores that a wounded young girl could easily handle. I especially loved shelling pecans and prying up the soft nut from the hard shells, which I quickly threw into the fire for heat and disposal. Sadly, Mom got the not-entirely-incorrect idea that I was eating the pecans as fast as I shelled them.

My next job was polishing the silver. She correctly decided that I wouldn't eat any of the tableware. Luckily for me, Mom was seven months pregnant. She snacked all day long on strange things. Her favorites were popcorn loaded with mustard and ketchup or pickles in cream. Given that she seemed prone to eat anything, I suspected that if a spoon or two went missing, I would not be the prime suspect.

One day after the silverware was shiny and bright, Porky, our hired hand, came to the house with an ice chest filled with freshly caught perch. Mom had him put it on the table while she got out the cutting utensils.

"Have you ever cleaned a fish before?" she asked me casually.

"No, but I can get out some cleanser from under the sink if you want."

She laughed and hugged my shoulder.

"Amy, I just don't know how we ever survived without your wonderful sense of humor. However, on a serious note, I know you've *seen* them getting cleaned before."

She put a cutting board in front of me with a big mixing bowl and platter to the side.

"Just like with a chicken, we turn a fish into food. Now, you like fish, right?"

I nodded. "But will I still like fish after we're done here? They look so sad with their little dead eyes staring at me."

She picked up a viciously sharp cleaver and chopped down with lightning speed, cleanly decapitating one of the unfortunate perches. She picked up the head and examined it for a moment.

"Doesn't look sad to me," she said, "Appears to be happy to feed us. Rest in peace, my tasty little friend."

She tossed the head into the bowl and picked up a smaller knife.

“After the head comes the scales. Start at the tail and scrape forward to get him good and clean. No one deserves to get a mouthful of scales.”

“Are you sure? Maybe that’s how the scales of justice work.”

“Ha-ha,” she flipped the denuded fish over and scooted the cutting board and knife over to me. “Let’s see Amy work now. Remember, you have to learn to be useful. A woman can’t make it in the world if she’s only a decoration.”

I held the tail down and started scraping. It was not a pleasant job. The dead fish smell instantly made me a little queasy. Not sick enough to get me out of my fish cleaning lesson, but enough to wish we gave the little perch a bit more mercy. The tail was not exactly slimy, but moist in an unwholesome way, leaving my hand sticky and smelly.

“You are doing so good with this project. So much better than with the chickens.”

I had to agree. Last month, before my fight with the alligator, she taught me how to ‘turn a bird into food.’ I felt quite a bit more empathy with the birds. They were fluffy, clucked a bit and gave us eggs. Fish just aren’t sympathetic animals. Their whole purpose in life was to be eaten. If not by us, by something else. I’m glad we got to them first.

*I’m really on my way to being a country girl.*

One quick slice down the underside then more scrapping as the digestive parts oozed out. On second thought, this was just as bad as the chicken. The guts made a nauseating plop in the bowl and the fins and tail quickly followed. What was left was a fish as I knew it. Soft, white and ready to be battered and fried. We placed the now

edible fish on the platter and we went to the next one.

“I’ll be glad when we’re fin-ished,” I told Mom, making a weak pun.

She gave me a sideways glance and said, “Don’t tell me this is worse than plucking chickens.”

“No, the chickens are higher on the SCALE of disgusting, but they gave me a TALE to tell.”

“I’ll be glad when you outgrow the bad jokes,” she shook her head.

“Then things will go swimmingly?”

My first father was a wonderful Irishman named Michael Collins. Back when I lived with him, we told each other puns all the time, much to the annoyance of my Aunt Mary, who I was raised to think of as my mother. Papa, as I called him, was not my father, he just happened to marry my Aunt Mary at the right time. Mom was a young woman “in trouble,” a wonderful euphemism for pregnant without wedlock. Mom gave birth to me in New York and left me for them to raise as their own. That way the stigma of being illegitimate wouldn’t follow me. And in those days, it was a big disgrace, for both of us.

Things went well in New York at first. We had a wonderful neighbor who took me in and taught me all kinds of things that led to my being a star student at school. Aunt Mary was always distant to me, but I was loved enough by my younger sister and brother, along with Papa. Then one winter day, my first father was gunned down while delivering illegal booze to the city.

That sad news was followed by another dreadful turn of events when Aunt Mary married her second husband, a thoroughly repugnant and oily hoodlum named Giovanni Corelli, known as Gio the Giraffe. I had to call him Papa Gio and refer to him as my second father. Disgusting Pig

would have been my more accurate, if socially unacceptable, name for him.

He had two daughters who absolutely despised me. They resented me being in the new family. So did Gio. Eventually, he decided he would become Uncle Gio at the same time Mama became Aunt Mary.

The Giraffe worked for a man named Antonio Dragucci at a ‘gentleman’s club’ in Manhattan. They decided that I would work there as penance for breaking Gio’s daughter’s nose after she smashed my violin into pieces. Aunt Mary stole some money from her evil husband that night and whisked me to the train station with a ticket to Faucette, Louisiana to be with her sister, my real mother.

Mom was a bit embarrassed to tell me about my birth but after a few weeks it became clear who she really was. For one thing, she did not let me call her Aunt Cassie. It was Mom almost from the first day, even though I thought she was my aunt.

“I’m your real mother,” she would say, “And even if I wasn’t, I would be.”

That sounded so good to me. She had the same rule for my two new brothers and four sisters. None of them were my *full* brothers or sisters by blood, but that didn’t matter because Mom made it clear that we were all full family, even if we didn’t share the exact same lineage.

However, I was the only one who loved to play on words. Mom considered that kind of humor to be God’s punishment for sins of the past. Her sideways glance made me aware it would be wise to let them go for a while.

I remember that day we cleaned the fish vividly. After they were put in the icebox, Mom received a letter from the postman that required her signature. She read it, threw it on the table, and waddled over to the phone to call New York.