

# MIRACLE IN MILAN

by MaryAnn Diorio

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## *Chapter One*

Legal pad in hand, Amy Torelli entered the plush office suite of the founder and president of Enson Pharmaceuticals, located in downtown Manhattan's imposing Enson Finance Building. The large, spacious office suite occupied the entire fourth floor of the old building situated on Wall Street and overlooking Midtown Manhattan. From the ceiling-to-floor window, the six Corinthian columns of the New York Stock Exchange building loomed massive and majestic directly across the street. This was the hub of world business. The epitome of financial success.

And she was privileged to be a part of it.

At least, until now.

As chief CPA for the New York City global headquarters, she'd worked hard to get to her current position. But a single word from the company president could send her whole career into a tailspin.

Holding her breath, Amy took a seat in the black leather wing chair in front of the president's desk, settled into it, and crossed her legs. If things went as she'd planned, one day she'd be the one sitting in that brown leather swivel chair behind that large mahogany desk, calling the shots just like the man sitting there now.

The constant thought of becoming the first woman president of Enson Pharmaceuticals consumed her. It was what had driven her these past six years since she'd landed the job with the top pharmaceutical company in the world. Taking over the presidency was the one thing that would enable her to say to her father—if she ever saw him again—that she'd made it without him.

That she'd made it in spite of him.

But until that day, she'd have to play her cards right. Not rock the boat. Play the corporate board game with deftness and discretion.

She clasped her hands in her lap and took a deep breath. When Wendell Conklin called an employee into his office, it could mean one of two things: either the employee would be fired, or she would receive a special assignment.

Amy braced herself. She stood between a rock and a hard place.

A rock, because being fired would confirm her occasional doubts about her competence as Enson's Chief Auditor. A hard place, because a special assignment, if unsuccessful, would arouse her worst fear: that others would think she was incompetent. A failure.

A hypocrite.

Oh, she was great at simulating confidence. Everyone said she had it all together. But truth be told, what looked like "all together" was really "falling apart." She'd grown pretty good at faking it. Faking happiness. Faking confidence. Faking success. But deep down inside, the truth ate at her.

She was broken. Blighted. A reject.

That's what betrayal did to a girl. It broke her. Crushed her spirit. Shamed her to the point that she'd wrapped herself in an impenetrable cocoon and conducted life from within its restrictive confines.

Mr. Conklin lifted his eyes from his papers and squared his gaze on her. His face looked strained, and his demeanor, tense. "Amy, there have been suspicions of embezzlement in our Italian branch office. I want you to go to Italy to find out what's going on."

Should she breathe a sigh of relief at not being fired, or should she hold her breath as she waited for the details? She opted for the middle ground.

"Enson Italia has been losing money. So much money that I'm concerned about the viability of our office there and its remaining open."

Amy raised an eyebrow. "It's that serious?"

"Yes. That serious. Something has to be done, and done quickly."

She nodded, her muscles tensing. An assignment to the Italian branch office meant she'd have to be at the top of her game. No *faux-pas*. No missteps. Only walking the tight high wire of the corporate world with a grace and finesse she didn't think she possessed. What if the whole mission fell apart?

Just as her whole world had fallen apart that day way back, when she'd realized Daddy had left for good.

Her stomach tightened as she pushed back the awful memory and forced her thoughts back to the present. "What's the plan?"

Mr. Conklin's voice was firm. "I want you to investigate. I can think of no more competent person to do so than you. Not only are you good with numbers; you're good at pegging people."

As much as Mr. Conklin's compliment flattered her, Amy doubted she deserved it. Yes, she was good with numbers. Ever since she was a kid, she'd loved their precision, their predictability, their absoluteness. Numbers could always be trusted. They were faithful. They never changed. Numbers always said what they meant and meant what they said. Numbers always told the truth; people didn't.

"When would I leave, sir?"

"I had my secretary book you on a flight to Milan that leaves tomorrow night. You have three weeks to discover the truth. That should give you enough time."

Amy tensed. Three weeks? What was Mr. Conklin thinking? Ordinary audits took at least a couple of months. But an audit involving a possible embezzlement could take a lot longer. It could even expand into years. "I'll do my best, sir."

Mr. Conklin leaned forward on his desk, his eyes trained on her. "I expect you to do better than your best. Enson Italia is on the verge of financial collapse. Whether it survives or not depends on what you discover."

Amy's stomach churned. "As I said, Mr. Conklin, I'll do my best."

He furrowed his gray bushy eyebrows that framed piercing blue eyes. "I want you to be extremely thorough on this Italian audit."

Amy stiffened. "I'm always thorough, sir."

He waved a dismissive hand. "Yes, yes. I know you're always thorough. That's the reason you're still working here." He peered at her over his horn-rimmed glasses. "But on this trip, you'll have to do more than your best, if you know what I mean."

She nodded, fear niggling at the back of her brain. Best meant nothing better. More than best meant impossible. Could she pull it off? Or would she fail? The way she'd failed as a kid. Enough to make Daddy walk out on her and Mama.

"I want you to triple-check everything. While I don't have any proof, I've got a gut feeling that our Italian division isn't being managed properly."

Amy made a note of Mr. Conklin's comment on her legal pad. She raised her gaze toward him. "May I ask what your specific concerns are, sir?"

"You can ask me anything you want, except what I had for lunch." He grimaced. "The awful thing—whatever it was—is turning my stomach sour as I speak."

"I'm sorry."

He grimaced again. "Not sorrier than I."

Mr. Conklin leaned back in his chair. "To answer your question, my specific concerns are that the Italian division is performing under par and losing money. Lots of money. I've been watching the situation for a while now, and it's not simply a question of normal economic cycles of ups and downs. My concern is that our profit margin has been demonstrating a consistently sharp downward spiral. Enough to place the entire branch in economic danger."

"Do I have *carte blanche* to look at everyone at Enson, right up to the top?"

"Absolutely." Mr. Conklin leaned forward and placed both hands on his desk. "I want you to be a detective of sorts. Look for clues as to shabby leadership, division in the ranks, and anything else that would indicate why the ship is sailing with a precarious tilt."

"That's a pretty tall order. I was planning to spend the entire three weeks auditing the books. There won't be much time for anything else."

"You've got a good, intuitive sense about people, Amy. You'll pick up vibes in the midst of the auditing, I'm sure."

But Amy wasn't sure at all. Sleuthing was out of her comfort zone. Hiding behind numbers on a computer screen was more to her liking. "I'll do my best there, too, Mr. Conklin." She didn't dare share her discomfort with him. Wendell Conklin accepted no excuses. Only positive results.

"Is there anything else, sir?" She was itching to leave.

Mr. Conklin broke into a smile. "Yes, there is. You'll be working with Ted McMasters, our American vice-president in the Italian office. Ted was the first one to pick up discrepancies in the books and to alert headquarters. He'll be of big help to you."

"Thank you."

Mr. Conklin chuckled. "I hear Ted plays a mean game of tennis. You may wish to challenge him to a match."

Amy's face grew warm at Mr. Conklin's allusion to her poor tennis-playing skills, all the while reading between the lines of his not so subtle, matchmaking comment. She smiled in spite of herself. For all of his severe demeanor, Mr. Conklin was half-executive and half-grandfather. "I'll tell Mr. McMasters you send your regards."

Mr. Conklin grew serious again. "Amy, I'm sending you into a potential quagmire. At all times, watch where you place your feet. I don't want you sinking into a morass of ugly company politics." He sighed. "Or something worse."

"I don't want to, either, Mr. Conklin." She smiled. "But what could be worse than company politics?"

He ignored her attempt at humor. "Be gentle as a dove, but wise as a serpent."

Mr. Conklin's warning quote from the Bible set Amy on edge. What did he know that he wasn't telling her? What did he suspect?

And why was he sending her into the unknown with only a warning and nothing more tangible to go on?

Amy shifted in her chair. "Is there anything more you can tell me, sir?"

He shook his head. "I wish there were. I'm going only on a hunch. A sixth sense I've developed over nearly thirty years of running Enson." He paused, a pensive look on his face. "And I hope my hunch is wrong."

Amy nodded. "I hope so, too, sir."

He stood. "One last thing. If you run into any problems while you're over there, call me right away. You have my direct number."

"Yes, thank you. I don't expect any problems, but if I do encounter them, I'll call you."

"Good."

"Is there anything else, sir?" She had an urgent desire to leave.

"No. That will be all."

Amy rose and straightened to her full height of five feet six inches. "I'll bring back a complete report when I return."

"Very good." He steadied his eyes on her. "I'm counting on you, Amy."

"I hear you, sir." What she really heard was, "There's no room for failure, Amy."

"*Bon voyage.*" True to his eccentric ways, he gave her a parting military salute that reminded her of sending a soldier off to war.

A chill ran through her. Was that how Mr. Conklin viewed her mission?

"Aye, aye, Sir!" She joked, returning the salute in a vain effort to dispel her anxiety. It was clear that her work on this trip was cut out for her.

The question was, was she cut out for it?

\* \* \* \*

Back in her office, Amy opened her purse and withdrew the string of pearls she'd kept there since her mother died five years earlier. Other than Amy's memories, the pearls were her only connection to the mother who'd nurtured her and raised her alone, while holding down a full-time job. The mother Amy loved more than any other human being in the whole world.

The mother who'd died too young.

The longer Amy lived, the more she missed Mama. The more she appreciated Mama's sacrifices for her.

And the more she hated her father.

One by one, Amy tenderly fingered each pearl, blinking back the hot tears that always stung her eyes when she remembered Mama. After Daddy's cruel and senseless abandonment, Mama had tried to create as normal a life as possible for her only daughter. Without a word of complaint, Mama had hidden her own pain and had sported a continual smile. But, young as Amy was, she'd read the truth in Mama's eyes.

A lump formed in Amy's throat. If only Mama were still alive! Somehow, every time Amy fingered the pearls, she felt her presence. Mama had given them to her on her sixteenth birthday, and Amy had treasured them ever since. They were the pearls Mama had worn on her wedding day.

"Perhaps you'll decide to wear them on your own wedding day, sweetheart." Mama was the eternal optimist, despite all she'd gone through. But why would Mama want Amy to wear a string of pearls connected to a man who'd betrayed her and her daughter? Had she still loved him? Never once had she expressed any hatred toward him. Always she had prayed for him.

Far more than Amy had done. Truth be told, she could care less for what happened to her father. As far as she was concerned, he could rot in Hell. That's what he deserved for what he'd done.

Besides, no wedding day loomed in Amy's future. Not because she hadn't met anyone, but because she didn't *want* to meet anyone. She'd go it alone rather than risk being hurt again. Betrayed again. Abandoned again.

No! No man on earth was worth that.

Just then, her co-worker and best friend Sara poked her head into Amy's office. "Need a break?"

“Yeah. I could use one.” Amy placed the pearls on her desk. “I was just going to grab myself a cup of coffee. Do you want one?”

“Boy, do I. I’m falling asleep at my desk.”

Amy poured two cups of coffee from the pot she kept going all day long on the little table in the corner of her office and then handed one to Sara. “Have a seat.” Amy motioned to the small sofa in her office. “So, I’m going to Italy on assignment.”

Sara plopped down on the sofa. “Really?”

Amy nodded and then sat down next to Sara.

“So, when did all of this happen?”

“A few minutes ago. Apparently, there’s trouble in our Italian office, and Mr. Conklin wants me to check it out. I’ll be there for three weeks auditing the books.”

“Wow! Are you excited?”

Amy took a sip of her coffee. “I have mixed feelings. I’ve wanted to go to Italy for a long time, especially since my grandparents came from there. But I’m nervous about the pressure it puts me under. The stress. The fear of messing up. What if things go wrong?”

“What could possibly go wrong?”

Amy looked at Sara. “I could blow it, that’s what.”

“You won’t blow it. How can you blow an audit anyway?”

“I could miss something big.”

“I think you’re making a mountain out of a molehill, Amy.”

“I don’t know. You know Mr. Conklin. He told me he expected better than my best.”

Sara laughed. “That’s crazy.”

“No. That’s Mr. Conklin.”

“Amy, you know that underneath that gruff veneer, he’s really a teddy bear at heart.”

“Well, I hope you’re right.” She sighed. “What if I botch up the whole assignment and get fired?”

“You won’t get fired. You’re one of Enson’s prize accountants.”

“You’re saying that because you’re my best friend.”

“It has nothing to do with friendship. It’s the truth.” Sara squared her gaze on Amy. “What I’m most worried about is that you’ll meet an Italian guy, fall in love, and get married. And then I’ll be left all alone in this place.”



Amy nearly choked on her coffee. “No way that’s going to happen. You know how I feel about men. Ever since my father left me high and dry at the Daddy/Daughter Kindergarten party, I want nothing to do with men.”

“It’s not men you want nothing to do with. It’s hurt.”

Sara’s words struck a chord.

“Well, I’d better get back to work before I’m the one who gets fired.” Sara rose.

“Congratulations on the assignment, girlfriend. I just know you’re going to be a big hit.”

Amy rose, too. “I’m glad you think so.”

“I know so.” Sara gave Amy a quick hug and then left.

Amy poured herself another cup of coffee and then settled in at her desk.

A shiver coursed through her body as she replaced Mama’s pearls in her purse. The only thing to do was not to fail. Not to depend on anyone but herself. Then she could still hold her head up high. Still show the world she was somebody.

Still show the world she could make it without a man.

But now, she needed to focus on preparing for her trip to Italy. To tie up loose ends in the New York office before she left. To pack for three weeks away. She took a deep breath. Mr. Conklin's assignment had taken her off guard. Surprised her big time. And she hated surprises. Sudden changes in the *status quo* unnerved her, shook her equilibrium, set her on edge. She needed stability. Security. Sameness. Rocking the boat was not her way to sail.

Mr. Conklin’s words echoed in her mind. “I expect more than your best, Amy.” What human being could give that? For all of his grandfatherliness, Mr. Conklin was still a no-nonsense boss.

While she couldn't control the consequences of her visit to Italy, she could control her efforts on the job. She determined to do her best, if for no other reason than that her own integrity and self-respect—traits she'd come by at a heavy price—demanded it.

She'd do the right thing in the right way for Enson Pharmaceuticals and let the chips fall where they may. She'd do her best to investigate the goings on to set Mr. Conklin's mind at ease. To maintain her self-respect.

And to keep her job.

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The morning of her departure, Amy found herself seated once again in Mr. Conklin's office for an emergency meeting. His face looked strained, and his demeanor, tense.

She waited as he gathered his thoughts. A deliberate man, Conklin chose his words slowly and carefully, as she'd learned in the six years she'd worked for him. Meanwhile, she busied herself reviewing the previous day's meeting notes on the clipboard she held on her lap.

After a few moments, Mr. Conklin cleared his throat and leaned forward, his elbows on his desk, his penetrating gaze squared on her. "I've received word from Ted McMasters. Things aren't looking good. He's been reviewing the books in preparation for your audit and doesn't like what he sees."

Amy's muscles tensed. "How so?"

Mr. Conklin lowered his voice. "Ted doesn't want to jump the gun, but he's pretty sure now that someone's been fiddling with the books. He said to come prepared."

Amy's stomach hitched. Come prepared? What could that mean but major problems. Problems for which she might *not* be prepared. "Did he give you any specifics?"

"No. He said he'd give you all the details when you got there."

Amy took in a deep breath. This trip was going to be more than she'd bargained for. "What do you think is going on?"

"I don't know for sure. But I advise you to keep your eyes wide open, both while looking at the books and looking at the staff. We could have a major battle on our hands."

An alarm went off in Amy's gut. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that Enson Italia may be implicated in a global embezzlement scheme that could have international repercussions not only in Italy, but also in all of our fourteen global offices."

Her throat tightened. And she would be at the center of it all. The star of an ugly show that could air around the world.

Mr. Conklin's voice interrupted her thoughts. "What time does your flight leave?"

"At 7:30 tonight. I arrive in Milan at 8:00 in the morning. I hope to meet with Enson Italia's staff shortly thereafter."

Mr. Conklin nodded. "I'll notify Ted to set up a meeting for you." He looked at her. "Keep your wits about you, Amy. I have a feeling there's a wolf in the pack."

She took a deep breath. "Yes, sir. I will." She managed a smile. "I've wrestled with a few wolves in my life."

"Just make sure the wolf isn't dressed up like a sheep."

Amy's blood froze. The wolves she'd faced seemed minor now compared to what Mr. Conklin was implying. "I will, sir."

A sudden urge to run overwhelmed her. "Will there be anything else, sir?"

"No. That will be all." Mr. Conklin stood. "I wish you a pleasant trip, Amy." He extended his right hand. "As pleasant as possible under the circumstances."

Amy stood, her muscles tensing, and shook his hand. "Thank you. I'll keep you posted on what I find."

"Very well." Mr. Conklin's gaze steadied upon her. "I'll be praying for you, Amy."

Praying? The situation must be pretty serious for Mr. Conklin to make such a statement. "Thank you, sir."

"Sure thing."

She turned to leave. As she opened the door and entered the hallway, the impact of it all hit her with full force. Come prepared? Embezzlement? Wolves?

What had she gotten herself into? What should she do? Should she ask to be relieved of the assignment? Not without being relieved of her job at the same time.

Amy shuddered. The next three weeks in Italy could drastically affect her career forever. If only she could turn back the clock. If only she could change her mind about the trip. If only she were as great an auditor as everyone thought she was.

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