

POWER PLAY

by
Julie Cannon



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CHAPTER ONE

I want this company, Monroe.”
Tate sat quietly, determined not to let her boss see how angry she was.

“I don’t want any excuses and I won’t accept anything other than Braxton’s head on my table and his company in my pocket.” The old man slammed his fist on the table, practically shouting the last few words.

What burr had gotten up his butt? Who did he think she was? Some fresh-out-of-grad-school-newbie with wet ink on her diploma and an imitation alligator briefcase? For God’s sake, she was Tate Monroe, whose name caused more than one CEO to quake in his tassel loafers. She had worked beside Clayton Sumner for ten years after graduating summa cum laude with a Wharton MBA and a Coach briefcase. She always delivered exactly what he wanted, and it pissed her off that he would think that she wouldn’t this time.

“Clayton,” Tate tried to keep her tone neutral, “have I ever failed to deliver something you wanted?” Her question was rhetorical. “Everyone knows Braxton is a perfect fit for Sumner, including Peter Braxton himself. What’s there to discuss? We’ll make him a decent offer and he’ll gobble it up.”

“You bring this in for me, Monroe, and you’ll be the next CEO of Sumner Enterprises.”

Tate snapped up her head and fought for control. Clayton hated any show of emotion, whether it was anger, disappointment, joy, or excitement. Tate had learned early on to master any outward sign of what she was feeling.

“You heard me. I’m tired of all this shit. Time for me to ride off into the sunset and grab me some bootie on the warm beaches of Tahiti next summer. I don’t trust any of those bean counters that work for me. I know I can count on you to keep Sumner and *me* in cash.”

Clayton was a chauvinist but that didn’t matter. Tate knew she initially got the interview because he thought she was a man and suspected she got the job because she was a lesbian. He had always treated her as one of the guys.

“But I don’t want to pay Braxton one red cent more than I have to.”

Tate was still elated over his promise to make her CEO, and soon. She hadn’t thought he’d be ready to retire for at least another five or six years. She shook her head and glanced around Clayton’s office. He had certainly decorated the expansive room lavishly. Every piece of furniture was custom-made, the art work original, and the plush carpet so thick that her shoes sank into it every time she entered.

“When I get through with Braxton, he won’t know what hit him. He’ll think he’s just made the deal of the century, but he’ll barely come out with enough money to pay his bills. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.” She rose from the Queen Anne chair.

“See that you do.”

Tate walked out of Clayton’s office and crossed the hall to her own. It was the first week in August, so the sun was high in the sky, and light hit her from all directions. She didn’t sit down at her desk but stood with her back to the room and gazed out the floor-to-ceiling windows that flanked her office.

As a child she had dreamed of having a job with an office instead of being a common laborer at the paper factory like

practically everyone else in her hometown of Hillsdale, Georgia. Her father had worked there from age sixteen, along with his two brothers and their father. Her mother was a housewife who spent most of her time dodging her husband's fists and bill collectors, and drinking herself into oblivion. Tate was a long way from Hillsdale now. She had studied and worked and clawed her way to where she was now, and her feet itched to take the final step.

Tate spun her leather chair toward her computer, sat down, and began to tap the keys. Soon she found what she was looking for and hit the Print button. Page after page of information on Braxton Products spilled out of the printer, neatly filling the bottom inch of the output tray. While the printer chugged, Tate picked up the phone and dialed the one man who would know everything possible about the company that would make her a star.

"Max, it's Tate," she said after the voice mail beeped. "Hey, I need everything you have on Braxton Products. Financials, client base, customer lists, employee information, everything, including the dirt." Tate paused. "Especially the dirt. I want to know who is hiding what skeleton and where the key to the closet is. I need this ASAP, dude, so price is no object." She hung up. The thrill of the chase began to pulse through her veins and she knew just how to celebrate.



"Victoria, we *need* this company. The board is getting restless."

"I know, Edward. I've received several phone calls this week. It's all Albert can do to keep the vultures at bay." Victoria Sosa didn't need anyone to tell her how desperately they needed this merger. As the CEO of Drake Pharmaceuticals she knew everything about the company, from the name of the mail clerk to the price of the compounds that made up their best-selling anti-

seizure drug. She could recite their financials in her sleep, and lately she had. She met with her chief financial officer three times a week, and the numbers kept getting redder.

“Victoria, some of the board members think it might be time for a new direction.”

Victoria’s heart skipped but she remained calm. “You mean a new *leader*, don’t you, Edward?” This was not news to her. She had been down this road before with some of her peers. A *new direction* was a euphemism for *you’re fired*. She watched the chairman of her board struggle with a response. “Relax, Edward. I know what I’m up against. I’m confident we can come to terms with Braxton Products. Their inventory fits the hole we have in our supply chain, their customer base practically mirrors ours, and their culture is very similar. When Peter Braxton sees that we’ll let them be a stand-alone business unit he’ll be thrilled. I have a meeting with him next week.”

“Victoria, you realize I have complete faith in you—”

“And I appreciate that, Edward. The people working for me are great, and they’re committed to making this merger happen.” Victoria had either handpicked or personally groomed her senior staff and would defend their ability and dedication to the very end. She just hoped the end wasn’t looming just around the corner.

Edward left, giving Victoria a few minutes to reflect on their conversation before her next meeting began. She had been the CEO for eight years, and during that time the pharmaceutical industry had taken a huge hit from Wall Street. Investor confidence was at an all-time low, and the FDA had dug in its heels on several patents Drake had pending. All in all the company had fought one battle after another. She sighed and straightened as her CFO entered her office, wearing her familiar worried expression. Victoria had one fight left in her, and hopefully acquiring Braxton Products wasn’t the one that would cause her demise.

CHAPTER TWO

Any questions so far?" Victoria glanced around the conference table at her direct staff. The company's head of research and development, the vice president of human resources, head of marketing, her administrative assistant, and Robert Moore, the chief legal officer, looked as if they were in a pre-flight briefing. Her chief financial officer and longtime friend, Claire McCarty, sat at the end of the oval table. A brunette with unrelenting drive, Claire drummed her fingers on the walnut table in time to the rocking of her chair, her papers spread out in front of her in neat little piles, her calculator at the ready. The company could not be successful without these six people.

A major headhunting firm had recruited Victoria Sosa to run Drake eight years ago. At thirty-six she became one of the youngest CEOs of a Fortune 500 company in the country, and she had carefully built her staff around her. Working together as a team of strong personalities, they knew each other's strengths, weaknesses, and foibles. Their discussions often became heated and animated, but they respected each other's opinions and supported one another. They were also unafraid to question Victoria's decisions, and she valued their input.

"Okay. The board is counting on us to bring Braxton in. Contrary to word on the street, this deal is not about me or my continued seat at the head of this table. It's about Drake. It's

always about Drake and keeping the values and services that this company provides to millions. We provide healthcare services to the neediest population when other companies don't think they can profit enough from them. We cannot let these people down." Everyone around the table nodded, even if they had heard this speech a hundred or a thousand times.

James Drake, a Harvard-educated PhD who founded Drake forty-two years ago, believed that researchers should be adequately funded to discover a cure for all diseases, not just those where money could be made. The big pharmaceuticals shunned "orphan drugs."

"Okay, let's go around and get all we know about Braxton out on the table."

Victoria admired the detail and thoroughness of the information her staff provided for the next three hours, jotting down occasional notes to remind herself of something or to clarify a point. She made additional notes as each person presented, intending to coach them in areas they could improve on. Her job was not simply to run the company, but to mold the leaders that would follow her. She didn't plan to leave, but she wanted to ensure that if she did, someone could fill her shoes without disrupting Drake.

She looked up from her notes when Claire finally stopped spouting numbers and mentioned the name Lisa Billings. Lisa was a senior vice president for the investment-banking firm Drake had hired to help them secure not only the financing they would need to buy Braxton, but confidential information and analysis on Braxton.

Victoria and Lisa recognized each other as lesbians the minute they shook hands. Lisa was tall and attractive with short, jet black hair that framed her oval face. Her eyes, equally dark, were sharp and focused when she spoke. Her suits were impeccable and fashionable, equally a badge of status with Tollison Brothers, her firm.

They met for the second time over dinner at the posh La

Boheme restaurant in midtown Manhattan, not far from the Tollison offices and across the street from Victoria's hotel. She had come to New York to meet with several investment bankers to secure the funding Drake so desperately needed. Over the best steak she had had in a long time, Lisa asked some perfunctory questions about Victoria's personal life, but Victoria always pulled them back to business topics. Lisa was attractive, and at another time and under other circumstances Victoria might have ventured down the personal path, but now she was fighting for Drake's life. She couldn't afford to be distracted.

"Lisa's coming to town next week to brief us on the latest information Tollison has gathered on Braxton," Claire was saying. "Victoria, she's already on your calendar for Tuesday afternoon."

"Ms. Sosa, do you want me to arrange dinner for you two Tuesday evening?" Albert Heard, Victoria's administrative assistant, asked.

Albert, who was fifty-eight years old, was the most polished administrative assistant she had ever had. He was British and very proud of his role as her gatekeeper and protector. Though she told him repeatedly he didn't need to be so formal with her, he simply replied that he took his job seriously and was proud she had selected him. It was not in his nature to be anything other than professional, he said.

"Yes. Albert, thank you." Victoria had a nagging thought that she already had plans for the evening. It wouldn't be the first time she canceled personal plans for business and would definitely not be the last. Albert would remind her later of whatever it was.

"Okay, everybody." Victoria closed her notebook. "You know what we need to do. I can't overemphasize the confidentiality of this deal. Until we have everything lined up, every *i* dotted and *t* crossed, we cannot let our interest in Braxton slip out. They are not looking for a buyer and won't like it when I approach Peter Braxton, their CEO. We have to be prepared. I don't expect any issues other than the normal, but we cannot be caught flatfooted.

We need this, and I'm counting on you to help me make it happen." Victoria made eye contact with each staff member and saw the seriousness of their situation reflected in each pair of eyes.

Shortly after the meeting broke up, Albert entered her office carrying his standard steno pad and blue pen. One afternoon not long after he was hired, she even saw him coming out of the men's room with the pad under his arm and the pen in its standard place, clipped inside the spiral.

"Excuse me, Ms. Sosa. You have tickets to the ballet with Ms. Latile on Tuesday evening. Should I call her and cancel?"

At times Albert acted like her butler as well as her assistant. He volunteered to run her personal errands, take her car into the shop for an oil change, and reminded her to buy birthday cards at least a week before the event popped up on her calendar. On more than one occasion she wished she could take him home so he could organize her personal life as efficiently as her business life.

"No, thank you, Albert. I'll call her myself. Shit," she mumbled under her breath. This was the third time in a row she had to cancel with Carole. She would understand, but Victoria knew how much she looked forward to seeing *Swan Lake*.

"Albert, send the tickets to her office. If I can't make it, she can at least enjoy the performance." Carole had many friends and shouldn't have any trouble finding someone to accompany her.

Carole Latile was Victoria's not-quite-so-serious girlfriend. They had dated casually for a year, having dinner once or twice a week, usually followed by equally enjoyable sex. Carole, the DA for the city of Lake Forrest, a town just outside the Atlanta city limits, carried a heavy workload and tried to be a surrogate mother to her sister's kids, so she had as little free time as Victoria. They enjoyed each other's company when they could get it, neither of them pushing their relationship to the next level.

"Yes, ma'am. Will there be anything else?" Albert had his pen poised to take down anything Victoria needed.

Victoria was about to say no, but he had assumed his puppy-

dog look that said he wanted to do something to ease some of her burden. Instead she asked for a fresh cup of coffee. He jumped as if she had asked him to get the president of the United States on the phone for her.

Soon holding the steaming cup in her hand, she returned to reading the preliminary report that Lisa Billings had prepared on Braxton. She had been over it so many times she had almost memorized it, but each time she came away with an additional nugget of information or insight into the company. She and Lisa had decided they needed to completely understand Braxton and its CEO in order to pull off this deal.

Victoria always did her homework on anything she set her mind to. She was methodical by nature, knowing what she would do three steps before she had to do it. She was rarely impulsive, but preferred to plan her life as she would plan her business day. She would know this company as well as she knew her own before she even set foot in Peter Braxton's office.