

MASQUERADE

EXCERPT

CHAPTER ONE

Across town. Midnight.

The darkened streetlights would tell no secrets tonight.

“Did you buy the stocks?” The man asked. His eyes, dark and ominous, scanned the seedy bar. Music from scratched CD’s and the stench of stale beer and corn chips filtered through the air.

“I got the certificates right here. I still can’t figure out why you would drop so much dough into a stock that has been falling like this one.” His fingers picked at the dried catsup on the table. He didn’t look at his associate. He couldn’t. Nervous? Afraid?

“Don’t you worry. That’s my business. I got a feeling this stock is about to go sky high.”

“Well, whatever you’re up to I don’t want anything to do with it. What did Sky ever do to you, anyway? Some grudge you got going here.”

He didn’t answer. A low guttural laugh rumbled out his mouth. *Maybe if she had done something to me. . .*

With that brief conversation he was out the door. The night had grown cool and damp. The clouded sky blocked any light from the moon.

Footsteps clicked on the pavement in rapid succession as he walked to his vehicle. Suspicious eyes scanned the dark surroundings making sure no one saw him. He got in the car and sped off.



“Mr. McCray, I presume.” Samantha Skylar sat in the black leather, wing back chair the next morning, leaned back and rested her head in the headrest.

Her gaze slid slowly up and down the frame of the man sitting across from her. Serious. Powerful. Maybe as much as her. Impeccably dressed and just under the surface there was something else. Something she couldn't quite put her finger on. She would, given time.

“You have impressed my board of directors. However, I'm not as easy as they are.” She flicked through the papers on her desk trying to not pay attention to him.

Samantha prided herself for her toughness, her kick ass business sense and her take no prisoners attitude. It took her years to acquire and perfect it and now it was as much a part of her as her tailored suits. People feared her, some hated her, but she didn't care. This is who she was and how she made her money. Otherwise, she'd still be working behind a local pharmacy counter dishing out pills. This was the world she built and if people got in her way, she stepped on them and scraped the remains into the trash. She told herself everyday how much she loved it.

“And, why is that?” Elijah's voice was strong, yet elegant and at the same time commanding. His eyes never left hers but instead stared at her with such intensity she almost wanted to look away. Almost.

“Never have been, never will. Most people come in here thinking I'm a man and then sit in that same chair as you, taking up my time, tongue tied and dumbfounded. So let us cut to the chase.” Samantha turned to the day planner that lit up the computer screen to her right. She paused and leaned forward. “I have more important things to do

today than interviews and I don't like my time wasted. You have three minutes to bore me, eight minutes to entice me and twenty minutes to convince me why I should give you a job with my company."

She opened the top drawer of the desk, pulled out a small egg timer and sat it on the corner.

Shaking his head, Elijah cleared his throat and shifted his weight.

"You are wasting my time, Mr. McCray. You have only two," she glanced at the timer, "and a half minutes left. So far, I'm not in the least bit impressed. I would suggest you get busy."

"You do that very well," Elijah said with a voice warm enough to melt ice.

Tilting her head she asked, "And what is that?"

"Try to intimidate people."

"Doesn't seem to be working today."

"Not in the least." Elijah's lips curved into a soft smile that told her nothing as to what was going through his head.

His voice strong and husky, wrapped around Samantha like hot chocolate on a cold winter night. She took a quick deep breath and blew it out, not liking the way it felt.

Looking toward the egg timer she drew her hand up and tapped the top of it.

"Your time is running out, Mr. McCray."

A soft laugh escaped his throat. "If my memory serves me right, I did not look for you or your company. You came looking for me, besides it won't take me three minutes to convince you."

“Oh really,” Samantha leaned forward in her chair and crossed her arms on top of the desk. “I guess they forgot to tell you I am not interested in resumes, previous employment or letters behind your name.”

Turning to the right, she dropped his portfolio into the waste paper basket. “Now, your time is steadily ticking away. You did, however amuse me enough to surpass your three minute limit, but only because I like your ability to hold my attention. You haven’t told me yet why I should give you a job with my company.”

“Hum.” He nodded, a slow movement of the head. “I’ve never been called amusing. I grossed 1.25 mil last quarter in product development and sales.” Pulling a business card from his breast pocket, leaning forward, Elijah placed it on the desk in front of Samantha. “When you are ready to talk business have your people call me.” He pushed up from the chair extended his hand and waited for her to shake it. When she didn’t, he turned and walked toward the door.

Samantha relaxed back in her chair, took a deep breath. “I like you, Mr. McCray. Not too many people have the balls to do what you just did.”

“I’m not most people.”

“Oh, really? Have you ever worked for a woman?” Samantha knew this was a no-no question for interviews but what she gathered from him; his answer would play a deciding factor in her resolve and whether she wanted him on her team. If he couldn’t handle himself she’d have no place for him. Weak men were not her forte’. In and out of the workplace.

A harmless smile curved his lips before he answered. “You would be the first, but why would it matter? If you had taken a longer look at those papers you threw away

so easily, you would have noticed I'm a pretty boy from Penn State." He knew how to defend himself. Good.

"Kappa?"

Nodding his head, Elijah continued, "I go after everything I want and I get everything I go after."

Samantha fisted her hand under her chin and continued to listen to him, liking what she heard. She loved the idea of a money making man. Earning potential always caught her attention.

"Does that matter?" Elijah asked. "If I've never had a woman, *over me?*"

"Of course it matters," she said. "It's all relevant. Positioning in this world can make or break a person."

Samantha picked up the phone and dialed a few numbers. After a brief pause she said, "Jacob, I've got McCray here. Find him something to do." She hung up. No goodbyes, no talk to you later, no nothing. "Go see my assistant. She'll tell you where to go."



Samantha relaxed in her chair. Her legs extended out and propped up on the desk. She closed her eyes. *Umm, umm, umm, that's one fine brother.* Just the thought of his espresso skin with a splash of cream and those ebony eyes made her shudder. She even noticed the empty tiny hole in his right ear lobe and imagined a small diamond stud twinkling when the light hit it just right. Her heart sped up when she wondered what he could do with those strong hands and long fingers.

“I’ve got to tell my people to screen the applicants better,” she muttered to herself. *Someone like Elijah McCray could really keep me distracted. What a day. I’ve got to learn how to curtail those thoughts. He could really get me into trouble with the board. The last time I had thoughts like that and acted on them I was dragged through the coals. Wasn’t a pretty sight after I finished with him, either.*

She sat and remembered Samuel. He was the one man in her past that melted her heart and when he was finished, threw her away like yesterday’s trash. Her smile slipped as memories of him flooded her mind. Shaking thoughts of Samuel away, her consciousness floated back to Elijah. Taking a deep breath she could still smell remnants of his scent mixed with his cologne.

Samantha leaned over and pulled his portfolio out of the trash. She slowly perused the papers containing all of the information about his life. “Not bad at all,” Samantha mumbled while she made notes in the margins. A devious smile pursed her lips as she turned and focused her gaze on the buildings rising in the view of her window. *The brother could go far in this industry if he lived up to his resume.*

She liked that he was single, educated, and definitely good-looking. Plus, he had a great earning potential. The resume didn’t say it, but she knew he had to be in his early forties. The few flecks of gray at his temples came to mind as she continued to read the papers. She liked what she saw. She liked it a lot.

He’d already made quite a bit of money. He’d spent a lot of time and resources on education, too. Advanced degrees in pharmacy, chemistry and a degree in strategic marketing. She folded the papers in half and placed them in the desk drawer. Grabbing the phone off of the base, she placed another call.

“Jacob, how much does McCray want?” An eyebrow arched. “Oh really.” She snorted out a laugh. Something she rarely did. “I bet he does.”

Pausing for a brief second, she took a deep breath and continued, “Give him what he wants and add ten percent.”

After listening to Jacob’s response she then said, “Don’t worry. He’s going to work very hard for his money.”



Elijah’s earlier conversation with his friend Barry popped into his head. The edges of a smile began to tug at his mouth. Barry teased him about his move north. He asked him who he was running from and why? Elijah just laughed at him. He wasn’t running from anything. That was his story and he was sticking to it.

He hadn’t even thought about leaving his last place of employment until the public relations headhunter contacted him three weeks ago. However, the position they offered sounded good, Executive Vice President of Product Development and Sales. Stepping into the office he felt tiny beads of sweat form on the back of his neck and his stomach knotted. Something about the infamous Sam Skylar escaped him.

In everything that had gone on over the past week he’d forgotten Sam Skylar was a woman. Samantha Skylar to be precise. *And what a woman.* Standing in the corner of the office, she talked on the hands free phone arguing with whoever was on the other end. Something to do with money, stocks, sales and point margins.

She had such power in her voice; in the way she stood and carried herself. Pacing the office, Samantha’s hands waved in the air expressing each syllable.

His eyes scanned her from head to toe. She was tall, very tall. At least six feet, maybe even a few inches more. He watched her as she walked by him. *Absolutely stunning.*

Her hair was medium length, softly touching her shoulders. Jet-black, just the way he liked it. Not too long, but long enough for his fingers to get entangled in. No highlights. No different colored roots shining through. Absolutely stunning, re-entered his mind as he tried to push back a smile.

Her makeup was impeccable. He'd never seen such beautiful lips on a woman before. Each time her mouth moved they curled perfectly. Even and full. Visions of him sucking, pulling them in his mouth and tasting them ran through his mind. He laughed inwardly, shuddered and tried unsuccessfully to ignore the tingling in his groin muscles.

Even her suit was impressive. Tailored. The jacket cut at the hips showed her curves and the skirt short enough allowed him to see those sexy dimples behind her knees. He wanted to run his hand up the length of her long curvaceous legs and have her heat warm his fingers.

Shivering, Elijah looked out the window, hoping it would distract him from those last thoughts. He wasn't sure where they'd come from, but knew they needed to leave.

This couldn't possibly be the president of Sky Pharmaceuticals. Or could it? For the first time in his life Elijah wished it was a man. This woman was going to make it awful hard for him to stay focused. It was easy talking to men.

Something about this woman intrigued him though. He wasn't sure what, but he knew it would be nice to find out.