

## 7. I AM SKYLAR

Sometimes you have to start a really important story from the beginning

She smiles at me. I think that her name is Rose. There is this pout about her that I find so appealing. She tries to dance with the guy that she is with. He seems like a clown. He needs lessons. She likes it that way. It keeps him off guard. That way she can dominate him.

She is looking over at me. He catches her.

“That guy is a loser.”

Her name is Rose. I watch her drift off from her guy. When I try to approach her, she starts to look all serious as if I am disturbing her.

I catch up to her later by the bar.

“I’m with someone,” she maintains.

“I just wanted to buy you a drink. I’m not looking to go out with you. You smiled at me.”

“I’ll take the drink.”

She seems a little hard up. She takes her drink and head back to her friend. I watch her, and then I go back to doing something else.

After she is with her friend for a while, I notice that he is glaring at me. I go to the other room. He follows me in there. When I try to make it back to the bar, he blocks my way. What does he want from me.

“Will you please let me by.”

“Who the hell do you think your are?”

“I am Skylar Green.”

“Skylar Green is a woman,” he says.

“You are a fucking idiot. I write under the name Skylar Green.”

He looks dumb-founded. She perks up. She wants to catch up with me, but I am already too far away. He is still angry.

Sometimes it’s hard admitting it to myself. I am one of the world’s best read romance novelists. Still few people know that I am a man. I think that gives me an edge with my writing. The field is built on conventions. I am already putting up a front by writing the novels under a woman’s pen name. It only adds to the same thing when I come up with these extravagant plots.

I don’t know how I got started doing this. But it is now so much part of me. I can’t live without rolling out another story.

My readers love me. I really enjoy being a celebrity. But they all expect me to be something that I’m not.

I wonder if Rose’s friend is still reeling from my put down. He was acting tough with me. I pulled out the best card of all, my true identity. I know secrets about his Rose that he will never know even if he tries for the rest of his life.

He seem like the perfect topic for my new novel. This little hoodlum trying to throw his weight around. That is until he meets a woman who is willing to fight him way out of her weight class. She just fells him like a century old tree succumbing to the chain-saw.

I have a special place in my heart for Rose. She remains like all my readers. She wants to follow her fantasy. But she is bogged down in her everyday. It would be too violent a step to

change things. She doesn't have it all. But she has her security.

So I begin a new chapter. I have to keep it going if I am going to sustain my fan base.

I get invited to one of these Hollywood parties where everyone is pushing their wares. I am being handed these promotional mini-CD's. And the Royal Highness, the man and his music is supposed to be here. And there he is. He is walking by the crowd and reaching over and shaking hands. I am waiting to have him take one look at my smile and figure that I might be able to help him with his recording career. Everyone needs their own personal romance novelist. I figure that I can parlay the fact that I am Skylar Green into a movie deal. Despite my world-wide success, I have been unable at this point to crack the world of the cinema.

His Highness is ushered right by me as is the other stars. Before I realize, one of the guys with a clipboard and the wrist bands is approaching me. I try to hide from him, but he finds me among a group of people.

"I'm not throwing you out. But the party is really over here. You're not on the list for any of the party of parties. They're sort of doing things differently this year. I have to take you to the party for locals. I don't really mean it like that. It's going to be great party. But it is over here."

"That's OK. I remember that they did this last year." I am trying to play along. I don't want to feel as if I am being excluded. He takes me in a room where a buffet is just getting started. I can still work some kind of deal here. Maybe a cartoon version of one of my books. Or a graphic internet version.

"You're going to have to mingle with all kinds of people. I hope that you can deal with it."

Soon I see a few people that I know.

"This will be OK." I want to nibble on the buffet. I want to get involved in something before they start throwing us out. He seems to think that I am OK, and goes off on his own.

I soon realize that this is pretty much a waste of time. But I have come all this way. I want a little something to show for all the work that I have done.

A woman is pestering, "So you're Skylar Green."

At first, I think that she is some kind of agent. She is even lower on the totem pole than I am.

She adds, "You don't look like Skylar Green. Or course, I never imagined Skylar Green to be a man."

"Yes, I am a man." I check myself in a mirror. I will need to do something better about this.

This party has hardly started, and it is already degenerating. I feel worse than at a romance novelists's convention. At least there I am always treated like a celebrity. Most of the people here couldn't even get a job as movies extra. Coincidentally, I am approached by just a sort. He realizes that I am Skylar Green.

"I've read some of your books. I realize that your primary audience is women. But I love them anyway."

"Thanks."

"I've got a long list of Hollywood credits as an extra. Everything from *Star Wars* to

*Saving Private Ryan.*”

“Wow! That is exciting.”

“Yeah, I know. I have a new picture in development. I even worked up a script. I could use your help. I want to do my autobiography. I need someone to work as a ghost writer.”

“That’s not exactly what I do,” I tell him. “I do have a successful career.”

“I know. I’ve read your books.”

“I just thought...”

I interrupt him, “I’ve got to go. I see my agent.”

I see a girl that I’ve seen at some parties. She’s in a mini-skirt and go-go boots. She is wearing on her shoulder something that you might wrap around a Christmas tree.

“I’ve been hassled by some movie extra over there.”

“Oh him. He does that to all of us.”

Her *all of us* makes me feel as if I have been dumped in an insane asylum for out of work actors. She pretty well confirms my suspicions by what follows.

“He does?”

“Yeah, he wanted me to help him with one of his scripts that he was writing. He’d even come over to my place and practice line from the movie. He was convinced that he was going to get Danny DeVito to star in it. He told me that he knew Danny from some movie that he did.”

“That’s cool.”

“That’s really cool. Imagine being in a movie with Danny DeVito.”

She seems even more fractured than him.

“He was going to offer you a part?” I wonder.

“I was going to be Danny DeVito’s costar.”

“Great. I see that they’re putting out the buffet now.” I sneak over to the table.

One woman there is telling me, “This is how I eat. I get invited to parties like this.

“Great. If only I were so lucky to get invited all the time.”

“Yeah, my agent is famous in this town. He represents some big stars.”

And I suppose that she is picking up all the choice roles as well. No wonder she has to graze off of the buffet tables all the time. That is my sincere hope that I might be able to be this privileged night after night.

I am trying to figure where I came in. This hardly seems like the perfect locale for Ms. Skylar Green. I score a little grub and casually make my way to the exit. Where is his Royal Highness when I truly need him.

Just as I am out the door I get cornered by another guy who wants to talk my ear off.

“I’m on my way out.”

“No way,” he tells me.

“I’ve got to go.” He keeps talking.

I add, “I need to go!”

I am sure that he wants to talk to Skylar Green about some book deal.

“The world is coming to an end. I’ve discovered this secret CIA plot. No one seems to know what is going on.”

I can see this plane flying over head. It’s either going to obliterate us, or take us all to another planet.

“I feel for you. I’m just not qualified to help. I just write romance novels. There are loads of people in there who might be able to do something to help out.”

I point out the woman who feeds from buffet tables around the city.

“She’s an actress. A very good one.”

“I have an idea for a movie. We can reveal this plot to the world.”

I love what he is saying. I just can’t help. He is clearly in the right place. I am not. I have to go back home to work on one of my books.

*Paul teaches swimming lessons at the local country club to pay for his way through college. He spends his time listening to yelling kids all day. He is developing the patience of Job.*

*In the dressing room, he starts to talk to his co-worker Brian.*

*Have you seen some of those girls on the swim team, the way their gym shorts ride up their legs. And their tight swim suits just accentuate their muscles. It just drives me crazy.”*

*Brian smiles, “We don’t have a chance with those girls. They Grade A Choice. We’re just the hamburger meat around here. Besides, they’re in high school. Aren’t you almost twenty two?.”*

*Paul doesn’t want to think about himself as if he’s out of the game. Brian only reminds him of his frustration. If it’s not the kids, he has to deal with a mother screaming at him for almost drowning her child.*

*Sylvie knows she’s got something. All the other girls gather around her as if her magic can rub off on them just by being close to her. The other guys all melt when they’re around her. She pretends not to notice the attention. She is concentrating on bringing down her times in the free-style.*

*“She almost swims as well as all the guys on the team.”*

*Sylvie has almost set the State record for 50 meters. There is even talk about her trying out for the Olympics.*

*“How old is she?” asks Brian.*

*“I think she’s 17. Maybe even 18.”*

*“You’re just telling yourself that she’s that old so you won’t seem like an old man preying on a young girl.”*

*“She’s still pretty young.”*

*“You won’t be able to take her to get drunk at one of those bars down at Tech. You’ll have to change your method.”*

*“You know that I’m not like that. I’m not just into partying. I can’t even afford to be in a frat. I’m just your basic working guy.”*

*Brian is a little bitter. “What are you majoring in? Finance. Don’t you want to be an investment banker.”*

*“I just want to help the world.”*

*They both laugh.*

*“What about that Sylvie? ”*

*Brian answers, “I think that she’s taken a million time over.”*

*“I just think that we all get a little distracted working these hours. The little kids almost send me over the edge.”*

*Despite their misgivings, each one is a charm with young folk. Even the mothers have a crush on their children's teachers.*

*"They great!" the words echo around the gossip circle.*

*The married woman get a kick watching the guys get out of the water when their swim short hug their cute butts.*

*"I'd take him home in a minute."*

*Of course, none of them have the courage to follow through on the fantasy. They just watch the young men battle in the water with their little miscreants.*

Joy again lectures me, "It's pretty obvious what you're doing in that passage. You yourself have this perverse desire for these sweet young things. And you're acting it out through Paul."

"I actually have a thing for the mothers. But they won't give me the time of day."

"You want to sell novels to the mothers. But you'd never date one of those women. They don't engage in the kind of risky behavior that you're used to."

"What are you saying, Joy?"

"Let me just say that those women don't starve themselves so that they can fit into the same clothes as when they were 17."

"What are you accusing me of?"

"Nothing. Except that you'd rather be with a 17 year old."

"I don't think that I've even gone out with a woman younger than 25."

"But you want them to look like those young nubilees that you see in fashion mags. It's pretty much the same thing. They aren't 17, but they might as well be. These are girls who will never mature. And your brain is the same way."

"I look for interesting conversation from a woman."

"You just tailor your conversations to fit the backward nature of the girls that you meet. I bet you have loads of stuff to say about shades of lipstick. Or you can catalogue every designer outfit down to the year and size. What don't you know about the frivolous?"

"I have to know about those things. It's what I write about."

Joy just won't let me off the hook. I'm not sure what I can say back to her. This is all about the world of romance novels. The characters need temptation to get things going. Down deep they may be committed to an ideal. But the surface needs to have all kinds of appeals if there's going to be a story. I just hear conversations and write them down. I try to bring the world around me to life. All it takes is a little push, and it starts to get nasty.

"You dwell on the perverse. Everybody in that one scene has sex on the brain."

"They need something to take their minds off of their routine."

"But their thoughts are just part of the routine."

"They get tired. They bored. They just want to tear off their clothes and go wild. But they can't let go of convention. So that makes them more frustrated. That's why they read my novels. Something has to give. The characters have that rare opportunity to escape. They take their chances."

"But it's so unrealistic. They really get nothing in return for all that effort. They just burn in their own hells."

"Paul's having the time of his life. All he needs is a mom who is daring enough to take

chance.”

“She’s going to have look better than Sylvie if she’s ever going to have a chance in his mind.”

“That’s all part of the fantasy. The reader is one of those moms. And she makes herself over as Sylvie.

“And then what does she do? Have an affair with the cabana boy. That seems like a promising start. Then they can go into business together and franchise their fantasies.”

“Now you are getting perverse. What are you proposing? Some kind of call girl agency.”

“Or call boy. You take your pick.”

I find that Joy is only encouraging the baser instincts on the part of my characters. They really want to be cared for. They are in loveless marriages, and their hope is that this spark might reawaken the passions of old. For the time being, they can console themselves with a romance novel and some hugs from their kids.

“You are so bleak. You pretend to be hopeful. What about this retelling of Cinderella? With that woman Cynthia”

“What about it?”

“All she does is conform her image to the prince’s. There’s almost a dark side to your retelling. He almost threatens her if she will submit.”

“That’s not my story.”

“Yes, it is. Cynthia diets and exercises and pulls and stretches just so that she can get in this dress. And it’s all to look great for this guy who’s not her husband. And the husband gets pissed that his wife is bestowing all her attention on this other man. Doesn’t it all make sense to you.”

“No!”

“The husband has these homicidal impulses against the wife. He is all in rage. But he can’t act them out. So he finds this man to temp his wife. And the man masquerades as a prince. This is all so evil.”

“You are exaggerating.”

“Cindy has to do everything that she can to protect herself against her husband. She throws herself into the arms of another man. But he is no more of a refuge. She’ll only love him if she looks like a princess.”

“So what. It’s a good story.”

“You don’t see the threat.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s obvious. He threatens his first wife if she won’t fit into the size 1 jeans. And then he threatens Cindy if she won’t fit into the glass slipper. It’s the same thing, be fit or die.”

“That’s not the story.”

“You offer the other version. She realizes that she’s going to be threatened. So she sets up her husband. She gets her lover to do him in.”

“I wrote a romance novel, not a mystery.”

“But it’s pretty much the same thing. It’s all about love and death. The husband can’t admit his homicidal urges. So he gets someone else to do the dirty work for him.”

“Only that’s not my story.”

She is fierce, “It might as well be. You’re telling your readers that they don’t really exist unless they can be perfect. Otherwise the best that they can hope for is to live through the mask of your romances.”

I object, “It doesn’t turn out like that.”

“The prince finds Cindy. Who are you kidding? The only way that he’s going to even bother looking for her is if she goes through a complete transformation. Not just a make over. She’s going to have to fit in the Queen’s strait-jacket of a dress.”

“You’re adding too many characters in the story. There is no Queen.”

“You’re taking them out just like an assassin so that the reader won’t have to face what’s really happening in the story.”

Joy tries to eloquently represent her point of view. I can only listen to her drag on for so long. She really isn’t helping me think creatively about my writing. I do what I can to tell a good story. I have to make it a little different each time. Variety is the spice of life.

I call my agent and tell him about the party that he got me invited to.

“You could have at least got me on the A-list.”

I tell him that the film has whetted my appetite to do a movie-deal.

He informs me, “I don’t think that they want to touch your stuff right now. It’s a little too racy.”

“I thought that was in right now.”

“In books yeah. But there’s a wave in the movie to be a little more wholesome.”

“I’m not going to tone down my books.”

“I’m not telling you to. It’s just not good for the theater right now.”

“I want to do a movie deal.”

“We can still adapt a book. It’s just going to have to be an indie picture. There are some guys in the Valley who might help you get financing.”

“I don’t want to do an adult film.”

It’s not going to be like that. It’s going to be a real movie. But just with a smaller budget. I know this one girl who used to be in the soaps. She was also in the tabloids all the time.”

“Not Jennifer Fisher. She might as well be in hardcore.”

He works to convince me, “Jennifer Fisher is good. You might even meet her if you know what I mean.”

I’m a little confused by all these plans. I still want to do a movie. If it has to be Jennifer Fisher, it will be. My agent also has Sy Warner on board to help me with the script. Somehow this is going to happen.

When Joy hears about all my troubles with my agent, she takes it as another point of contention with my writing.

“He’s right about all the sex. It’s as if you have this belief that sex is this spiritual enlightenment. No wonder your characters are willing to risk so much to possess another person. They consider it the centerpiece of their spiritual salvation.”

“You are really exaggerating that kinds of shit.”

“Hardly!”

“I’m writing romance novels. I just document the dreams that people have. A lot of that

is tied up with their desire for something greater.

There's a point in which you believed, and then you stopped. Everyone is so cynical in your stories."

I try to listen to her criticism. I just don't see things as so involved.

"Think about it. You have this girl hanging around on a beach. And she's looking at a guy in a swimsuit. And you imply all this belief on her part. If they just hang out together, that it's going to be all fantastic. But he could be this really boring guy. And she's not really interested in finding that out. She wants to discover if he's a stud in bed. You place so much emphasis on the characters' romantic pursuits that this limits them from developing elsewhere in their lives.

"She could be a nurse. She's great at her job. But she just needs time off."

"But that's just it. These characters all live their lives like that. It's time off and time on. For them it's all this drug."

Joy feels that she has only scratched the surface with me. There is so much more about my portrayal of sex. I just feel that she isn't giving credit to the aspirations of my characters. If they express their dreams sexually so be it. It's part of them showing concern for each other.

"I'm not writing novels about a woman's conquests. These characters are looking for something long-lasting."

"At a beach? That may work well in your stories. But once the guy's been with her a few times, he'll find someone else. Your main factor that draws the characters together is how the sweat drips off his chest. Or how tight her swim-suit top is. That will only last a few weeks. Then they'll be a fresher face with a whole new appeal."

"But that's a story. She cares for the guy that she's with. But she really wants to be with the new guy that she meets."

"But there's really no balance. If the new guy has just a little more zing, then she'll be off with him."

"That's not true at all. She's basically a nurturer. She is trying to make a life for herself. She wants something constant. Something that will last. She might fantasize at the beach. But she's only going to follow through if her guy neglects her."

"But you spend most of your time concentrating on the salacious. Who really cares about the technical details of her relationship? It's all about who can pull off the other's swim suit faster."

"I have to offer the reader a little fun. But no one's going to accept these characters if they run off with some guy at the drop of the hat. My readers want substance. Not just sex."

Joy thinks that she has me cornered, "It all goes back to what you think about sex. It's the liberating force for all your characters. They believe that sex offers this ultimate transcendence."

"In its own way, it does."

"But it's a feeling. A more intense feeling. But if it can't influence the other things in your life, it's not part of a balance, then it too becomes an addiction."

"I'm just going along with what you're saying."

She is almost perturbed by my defense, "You've got these women staring at these guys in tight swimsuits, and they think that's going to change their lives. They moon about these guys all day. They enter this dreamy state. It's ridiculous. If the women are anything like your readers, those guys won't even give them the time of day."

“That’s the whole point. They can read my books and have a little fantasy. Then they can go back to the things that make their lives worthwhile, their husband and their kids”

“But the women are so subservient in their role. They don’t bring anything new to the table. So they only augment their frustrations. They make it harder to escape their fate.

I am Skylar Green. “They love who they are. And they work out their self-doubt positively by reading romance novels.”

Joy is having trouble trying to convince me. She is only providing me with more ideas for other novels. I am about to leave her to consume the rest of our uneaten pizza when she again tries to corner me.

“Joy, it isn’t worth worrying about.”

“Yes, it is. There are loads of women who believe this shit. They think that if they starve themselves and bubble at the mouth, that guys are going to go crazy for them. And at the opposite end of the spectrum, there are those girls who believe the same shit. But they just give up and console themselves with the stupid fantasies in your books. Neither group can really change things.”

“It’s not my job to change civilization. I just write books.”

“But you make money off of this shit!”

Since I am Skylar Green, I can’t just live on my laurels. That includes defending myself against Joy. I’ve got to come up with new stories that are going to sell. Joy has only made me think more about the movies. That is the life that I was meant for. Jennifer Fisher actually excites me a little. I suppose that I am acting like one of my characters. I have never really known any Hollywood actresses before.

My agent told me that if she is involved that she can help us raise the money to get the picture made. I want to be practical. I know that Ms. Fisher may be one of the worst actresses that Hollywood has spit out. She still has something in an almost cultish sort of way.

The next time that I see Joy, she is going off on Jennifer Fisher. She and I have made fun of her before. This is another opportunity for Joy to really go to town.

“I thought that your books were terrible. But she is really nuts. She’s like a blow-up doll. You’re only going to encourage these perverse guys in their fantasies.”

“I’m not making a porn movie. I’ve already fought against that sort of thing. This is romance.”

“She is going to hijack the picture.”

“I’m going to work out the script with Sy Warner. He was nominated for an Academy Award. This is going to be a serious picture.”

“She’ll be in a bikini for the whole movie. What’s serious about that?”

“It’s going to have a real plot.”

“Like that one novel of yours with the three girls. One is interested in a ne’er do well, one likes a married man, and the third is after this wealthy guy.”

“What about it?”

“There is that one scene where they are all looking at the stars together. That is a good scene. But otherwise the book just blows.”

“What?”

“There’s no real plot except the girl with the married guy. You keep wondering when

he's going to put it in."

"And you're accusing me of lacking romance?"

"Do you think people are interested in the interesting dialogue between this girl and the older guy? He has one interest and one interest alone. To get in her pants."

"They listen to music together. They talk about Shelly and Keats."

"What do they ever say that has any real intelligence. It's just disguised sex talk. He's just waiting for a moment when he can get away from his wife. A likely story."

"You have a way of distorting my novels."

"Your novels are distorted."

Joy is seeming no more sympathetic. Even after explaining myself, she only sees the worst. I really worked on that novel. *Crest Point* to make sure that it had strongly developed characters. All the girls want to go to college. But each has some reason that prevents her from pursuing her dreams. They explore love as a way of providing a clearer access to the life that they want.

Joy summarizes, "It's always going to be the same. You don't know what it really takes to offer depth to your characters. They don't have any real independence from their sex drives. Sure they read in that one book. But it's more smut to get their fantasies going. Keats and Byron. I'm surprised that your characters can even lift the books, much less understand them."

"You've got them all wrong."

"It takes more than ideas to change someone's life."

I am ready to take notes from Joy. She is going to help the great Skylar Green chart the course for the Great American Novel

She adds, "You can always change your ways. Do something serious for once in your life."

"I'm trying in my new novel."

"What's it about?"

"It's more of a mystery. A woman comes to New York to start a career in publishing. She gets a job as an assistant to an editor. She gets sent a manuscript about a murder plot. A woman wants to kill her husband. But it turns out to be the real thing. And this editorial assistant gets entangled in the plot."

"This sounds more entertaining. Although it's pretty much the same story. How does the editorial assistant get involved?"

"She realizes that there's a true side to the story. She blackmails the author."

"Why would the author be so stupid as to reveal herself in the novel?"

"She isn't. It's a ruse to involve another person. To get the editorial assistant interested."

"How is the author sure that the story is going to end up in the right hands?"

"I can't tell you that. That is the key to my story."

For once I've got Joy curious. She has jumped off her soap box to reveal a human side of herself. I feel like more of a success.

I am again thinking about my encounter with Rose. I guess that it didn't impress her that I am Skylar Green. It probably doesn't make sense to her. She's too jaded to like romance novels.

"My life is too much of a soap opera to read that sort of thing."

“All the more reason to like the sort of thing that I do.”

“But your characters just pant all the time. I want a little more from a book.”

“Don’t you like to be distracted?” I question her.

“I don’t have that much time to read. I like biography. Or detective novels.”

I tell her that I am working on a mystery novel.

“What’s it about?”

“This woman convinces another woman to kill her husband.”

“That sounds like it would take a lot of convincing.” Rose gives me her cat-like smile.

“Do you want some of this pizza? It’s still warm.”

“I don’t really eat pizza.”

“This is good.”

“I know. I don’t like to eat too much cheese.”

“It’s like romance novels. A little rich for the blood.”

She turns her lip up, “Are you making fun of me?”

“Not at all. You’re the one who’s begging off reading *my* novel.”

She shrugs her shoulders, “I might do it for you. I might read if you wrote it.”

I can almost feel that she is going to be in my next book. She is the perfect model for the editor’s assistant.

“Are you in school?”

“Yeah. I study architecture.”

“What is there about architects?”

She smiles. It begins from here.