

STORYTELLERS: THEIR DREAMS WRITE OUR LIVES

By John Miller

Part One

The Storytellers were a fable told to me by my Scandinavian grandmother, a myth to frighten young children, similar to the boogeyman, it was part of a world that had been left behind in the Old Country, a world that spoke to me through stories Gran-ma-maw told me as a child. If I wasn't good, the Storytellers would write bad things into my life, perhaps even monsters. They were popular in the age when peasants thought writing was magic and attributed godlike powers to scholars.

"Do you hear them, Davie?" Gran-ma-maw asked when I was ten. "The Storytellers are writing our lives."

"I don't hear anything, Gran-ma-maw," I said as we walked to the store.

"That's because you listen with your ears," she explained, "Instead of here..."

She tapped her withered finger to my chest, and I knew she meant I hadn't listened with my heart—a magical technique taught in Trolldom (Scandinavian magic). "There are vast unexplored worlds of imagination out there, Davie, worlds as real as our own. Scientists claim these worlds are nothing more than dreams and imagination, but they are wrong."

I remembered her words as I pulled my car to a stop in front of a portside warehouse and got out. The reverie bled from my mind as I surveyed the supposedly abandoned warehouse. Ten cars were parked within the fenced area around it. I'd checked with the City of Peoria's Chamber of Commerce earlier that day and discovered they didn't have records of anyone using it for years, but my informant had told me the mysterious and powerful organization known as the Storytellers would be there. There were stacks of pallets and old forklifts.

My cell phone vibrated in my pocket and I almost shouted with fright. I slinked behind stacks of wooden pallets to turn it off but when the caller ID showed my editor, I answered it. It had to be important for him to call so late.

"What have you learned, Davie boy?" Spenser Williams III demanded.

"Nothing yet," I whispered.

"Can't hear you, Davie boy! Speak up!"

"Nothing yet," I said louder. "My contact informed me the Storytellers have rented an abandoned warehouse alongside the Illinois River. I just got here."

"Make sure you get the story," he said. "The competition is working on a conspiracy theory, and we need to compete. Dig up everything you can about these so-called *Storytellers*."

My boss had inherited the Philadelphia newspaper *Friendly Philly* from his family, and he had grown up in the business. He wasn't given to fancy ideas or change, and had been reluctant to pay my airfare and hotel stay to investigate the *Storytellers*—no matter how credible my informant had been.

Two weeks earlier I sat in an office in the employee lounge at work with my colleagues as our boss screamed because of decreased sales. A family owned business, the *Friendly Philly* delved into political satire and syndicated columns as well as major headlines, and our boss worried he would lose what his father and grandfather had willed into his hands upon their deaths.

"We need a big story to boost sales," he told us. "So big it rocks the foundations of the media."

We have to go by the books on this one with no exaggerations.”

A week later I researched *Storytellers* on the internet. I didn't do it because of my job; I did it because of Gran-ma-maw. It was Gran-ma-maw's birthday, and she'd been dead five years. At such times I thought of her... and the *Storytellers*. That's why I Googled “Storytellers” and found myself in a chat room called *Supernatural* at Yahoo Instant Messenger.

While in the chat room I met Simon Harms – username Record Mongol. He admitted the *Storytellers* were real and told me about a secrete meeting and how he planned to investigate.

“What are the *Storytellers*?” I typed.

“They are a group of people who believe in the power of an ancient mythical concept called *Story*,” he replied, and they believe it has great affect over the lives and destinies of others. Of paramount importance are those who believe in them: important politicians, world leaders, and clergy—those who come from old and powerful families which have had ties with this secretive organization for generations. The Storytellers have embedded themselves into these upper-crust families, and the families do whatever is asked of them. This is the true power of the *Storytellers*—they rule through the world's elite.”

“Why have you told me this?” I asked.

“For my safety,” he typed back. “They want to recruit me, but they demand I show up alone in Peoria, Illinois. I want at least one person to know who I am and my location.”

That sounded suspicious, but I didn't question him. I became excited to hear someone—*anyone*—who could tell me about the mysterious *Storytellers*.

“I don't know why you would trust me, a total stranger,” I responded. I couldn't help my suspicion. “But an article about the Storytellers might make my boss happy. What if I went with you?”

“I would be glad for the company,” he typed back.

He gave me his phone number, and I called him. We discussed our itinerary and scheduled possible times we could meet, and I explained I needed my boss' approval since I had no vacation time left. This would have to be work-related, I told him, for me to go.

The next day I spoke with my boss, explained the situation. He was hesitant to believe me.

“You expect me to send you on a plane to investigate some clandestine meeting because of a conversation with some guy in a chat room?” he asked. “Who is this guy, anyway?”

“Simon Harms,” I replied, “CEO of Trident Records.”

That was all it took to convince him to send me. Trident Records surpassed Columbia Records in sales. It was an empire that controlled half the overseas market flowing out of the States. If an entertainer wished to sell to the Asian market, half the time they went through Trident Records. What caused my boss to budge was the fact that Simon Harms owned several smaller businesses, one of which was *The Philadelphia Examiner*, our competition.

Simon canceled at the last possible minute, after my airfare and hotel reservations had been arranged. He didn't give a reason.

Now, almost two weeks later, I stood beside a stack of wooden pallets with my cell phone pressed against my ear. I was there based on the assumption that the Storytellers were an ancient organization alleged godlike powers. They had close ties with some of the oldest monarchical families in Europe, and on a whim they swayed the minds of the most powerful world leaders—they were an advisory counsel hidden behind the scenes, the perfect story my boss needed.

“Do you think it's dangerous for you?” Spenser asked as an afterthought. My cell phone slid in my sweaty hand. “You remembered the revolver I gave you, I hope?”

“Yes, I have it,” I said. “It's in my waistband.” I felt the .45 magnum and shuddered—I had hated guns since an accidental death of a childhood friend, but I needed protection. “Somebody's going to hear me if I keep talking. “I don't want to have to use the gun, sir.”

“Say no more, Davie boy,” the editor interrupted. “I gave you that gun more to emphasize the

importance of getting this story... and just in case there actually was danger. Attach the story to an e-mail and send it to me by tomorrow afternoon. I want it slanted toward conspiracy. Got it?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Our competition, *The Philadelphia Examiner*, can't print a huge story without competition from us," he muttered. I heard telephones ring on the other line, and I wondered if he was still in his office at that time of night. "Got to go, Davie Boy. Be careful!"

I shut my phone off and walked in shadows. Twenty feet later I made it to the warehouse. I saw a single door and three rollup doors, all locked. I tried to be as quiet as possible, but stealth wasn't my forte. I kicked something in the dark, and a soda can skidded across the pavement. I froze. When no one responded, I continued to search for a way inside.

A fire escape on the back of the building presented itself, and I moved a stack of wooden pallets beneath it with a pallet-jack. I climbed up the wooden pallets which shook and steadied myself at the top and then reached for the bottom rung of the fire escape ladder. It slid down and struck the topmost wooden pallet I stood on, which was good, because it helped steady them.

Up a fire escape and across a metal balcony was a door. I slid a credit card between the door and the door jam, and I thought I'd gotten it stuck when the door opened much to my relief. I put the card in my pocket and stepped into dim blue light.

"The Storytellers aren't human," Gran-ma-maw told me when I was sixteen. "They're similar to the Three Sisters of Fate who weave the destinies of humankind with their looms." From my Mythology class I remembered that the threads woven by the Three Sisters dictated life and death of mortals and gods alike, and both feared the Three Sisters. "Some say the Three Sisters were Storytellers, and the myth of the Three Sisters of Fate resulted from people's misunderstanding."

I stood in a storage room. An open door led to a walkway suspended above the warehouse. Outside was a closed office at the end of the walkway with stairs beside it leading down. I crept to the storage room's wall next to the door, pressed my back against it, and listened. I couldn't believe I relied on Gran-ma-maw's Trolldom magic, but I was scared.

"When you use Trolldom magic to *listen*," she taught, "You have to feel yourself become one with your environment. Become one with the ground beneath your feet, feel it. Visualizing the ground isn't enough; you must feel the ground as if it is a part of you—feel *through* it.

"Next, stretch this *feeling* out into the immediate area. Listen to your heartbeat within the ground. Hear your breath within the trees and sky. Taste the earth itself."

I practiced this as a child, and I believed it then. I hadn't tried the technique for over a decade, and I wasn't even sure it worked or had been part of my youthful imagination. I used it now because of fear. I didn't want to get caught. If the *listening* technique my grandma taught me worked, maybe I could perceive the most opportune moment to go around the corner. After all, I had believed in it once. It's funny the things once abandoned as childish are the things we cling to in times of stress or danger.

I closed my eyes. My heart beat fast, and I heard the pulse in my ears and my deep breaths. I felt enormous pressure within the soles of my feet as if I'd jumped and landed hard, and the pressure intensified. I became one with the floor I stood on, and I felt stacked boxes and chairs pressing onto me—I *was* the floor. A red image composed of sound, sight, and physical impressions—as crazy as that sounded—swept into my mind. Although the wall blocked my view of the metal walkway, in my mind a red image of the balcony appeared, as if drawn by an artist in crimson ink. The balcony grew, elongated in my mind's eye, until it formed a perfect sketch. I let my awareness spread out until it encompassed the entire warehouse, red outlines beyond the wall at my back.

Gran-ma-maw's *listening* technique had never worked so well before!

I sensed—or thought I sensed—twenty people below. No one lurked in the empty office. The walkway led over the warehouse where the twenty people stood in a circle. Some strange object rested in the middle of the circle, but I couldn't tell what it was—the image I perceived made no sense.

I opened my eyes and the red images of the area disappeared as if by an invisible eraser, and reality sunk back into my perceptions. I risked a glance around the corner, and I didn't see anyone. I slipped around the corner and held my breath as I went to the balcony's railing.

I gasped and widened my eyes. An involuntary shudder weakened my legs, and I supported myself on the railing with trembling hands. Twenty people stood below just as I'd perceived through Gran-ma-maw's *listening* technique, but it wasn't the people that unnerved me.

A giant blue replica of Earth hovered in the center of the group, suspended by a means I couldn't decipher. The sphere was twenty feet in diameter and perfect in every detail. I saw clouds on the miniature planet, and I felt as if I stood on the moon itself and looked down at Earth, so lifelike was the replica. Wind swept from the planet facsimile and my hair wafted in the breeze, my clothes fluttered.

"It's tough to assimilate, isn't it?"

I yelped and turned back to the storage room I'd exited. Simon Harms, my informant, stepped from the shadows into the pale light onto the metal walkway. He made no attempt to be quiet, and his footsteps echoed. I saw some of the mysterious people below glance up and smile. Some waved.

"Simon?" I gasped. "Why are you here?"

Simon was bald, and blue light reflected off his Cuban features. His handsome face showed compassion, but intensity burned within his eyes. I looked at him as he watched the globe. He stood taller than me with chiseled cheekbones, an angular face and muscular body. I saw gang tattoos on his knuckles and hand. A black tear tattooed next to his eye made me picture him as a gang member in his youth.

"The same reason you're here," he told me. "We've both come to find the Storytellers. The difference between you and me is simple: I'm a member and you are not."

"You're a... Storyteller?" I stammered. "But-but this makes no sense."

His rich laughter echoed, and he waved to those below. I wondered if I would be alive tomorrow.

Part Two

"Carl Jung had it right when he spoke of the Collective Unconsciousness, but even he didn't see its full implications." Simon gestured at the orb and said, "This is the Collective Unconsciousness; this is *Destiny's Price*."

I stood speechless while he spoke, our bodies tinted blue in the sphere's glow.

"With *Destiny's Price*, the Storytellers control destiny through *story*," he said. "It is through *story* we rule the world."

"Through *story*?" I croaked finding my voice. "What do you mean?"

The globe lit the warehouse with its own luminosity. We walked in its glow. Simon's footfalls echoed in the warehouse. The other Storytellers took a break.

"Everybody has a story," Simon told me, "You, me, and everybody in the world. Some stories are beautiful and some ugly. Each religion, government, and tract of land has a story.

"Likewise, each culture has their *storytellers*. Some write articles like you do for newspapers. Some write books. Others write speeches and screenplays. A select few write Scripture and affect people for generations to come.

"Regardless of what role they play, they are the storytellers of the world: judges and lawyers; editors and journalists; preachers and gurus whose words—whether written or spoken—create reality within the minds and social customs of those who have placed trust in them."

"That's what you are," I said. We continued to pace the globe as it bathed us in its bluish light. "You're a Storyteller. You belong to this ancient sect and influence powerful families."

"I am so much more than that," he said with a chuckle. "What I just described are the storytellers of *your* world. I need you to think about your own storytellers so you can understand what we are."

I looked at the globe and shuddered. It floated in midair. It was dark enough that I couldn't see wires, but I began to believe there weren't any. Simon let me reach out and brush my hand along the edge of the globe. White clouds swirled around my hand, and a sudden blast of wind shook the building outside.

I removed my hand and stepped back. My heart thundered in my chest because I realized what had just happened, and it went against my logical worldview.

"What the hell?" I tried to control my voice's volume. "I created that wind, didn't I?"

Simon placed his hand upon my shoulder and said, "That's what you can do, my friend." He gestured at the twenty people who returned from their break. "Just think about what they can do."

They formed a circle around the globe again. I saw people from different nationalities: Japanese; Spanish; Russian; Native American Indian; German and others. They didn't hold hands or chant as I would have expected a secret cult to do. Instead they stood and stared... then closed their eyes.

I wouldn't have thought their closed eyes would be enough to frighten me, but they were. I knew they wielded great power. *I alone* had created an instantaneous windstorm when my hand had passed through the globe's clouds. What could they do *together*?

Simon led me to the steps up to the walkway. I watched as the globe—*Destiny's Price*, as Simon called it—shimmered brighter with blue light. The people stood beneath it, aglow with its power, and as their faces creased in concentration, *Destiny's Price* glowed even brighter.

"What are they doing?" I whispered.

"What we've done for centuries," Simon said. "What we always do. We write stories just like the storytellers that already affect your life. But *Destiny's Price* gives us... advantages."

"Like what?" I asked, my voice cracking.

A holy hush descended like the silence before a hymn sung in church. The Storytellers were the choir members, and we listened to their magic. Some great event was happening, and I realized a part of history hovered before me. The Storytellers my Gran-ma-maw told me about were real, and that knowledge coursed through my journalist's veins like molten metal. I had the conspiracy theory Spenser demanded, but I also had the blockbuster story of the Century!

"Do you want to know how it works?" he asked.

I nodded.

"It's easier to show you," he said. "Step closer."

"But I—"

I approached as the globe glowed brighter. It hummed and the pavement beneath my feet shook. I felt my chest vibrate. The globe's white clouds swirled and wind beat against the warehouse outside. Wind gusted from the globe and blew everybody's hair and clothes. Dust swirled up, and two small dust devils appeared in the warehouse. The wind increased as did the vibrations, until I stepped outside myself. Or, more accurately, an invisible force I had no power to resist moved into me.

My life opened within my mind like an electronic web page uploaded: all the details and nuances; each chapter of my life; every single event and scene; all my actions and words and thoughts opened like a book. And it didn't just open, it fed into my mind like radio feed as I received the transmission signal. In an instant, the story of my life flooded my mind.

"My God!" I wept. "Make it stop!"

I saw how uneventful my life was, but more so I saw what a bore I was, how misguided and naïve. I saw multiple relationships in which I, the ultimate nice guy, suffered betrayal again and again, the lonesome loser. I had few friends because I traveled too much like my father before me. My present job had taken me from the East Coast to Philadelphia, the third time I'd moved in as many years.

I moved around, I realized—as my life's story flowed into my mind—to insulate myself against life itself. Life and love couldn't hurt if I toured the country and never settled down to sink roots. But the story of my life didn't stop with my past up to my present; my future opened before me like the images

gleaned by a psychic's crystal ball. The concise images disturbed me.

I fell upon troubled times—or I would in ten years. I married, had a child, and the woman was the same type of woman I always dated. I never chased women; a certain type of woman always came after me. My future-wife had a hard heart, and she became extremely selfish. I worked fifty to sixty hours per week, came home to clean the house, and took care of our daughter, Emily. I got up at night, exhausted, and fed Emily her bottle and sang her to sleep. The long workdays and lack of sleep blurred into depression and health problems.

While married, I was still alone in the world. It wasn't a very happy future. A heart attack gave me an early death and I never saw Emily graduate from high school.

"What do you see?" Simon asked in a gentle voice.

I couldn't answer because what I saw horrified me. I didn't want to see those images of brutal truth, and I realized I blocked so much from my mind for the sake of false security. The slices of my past that didn't sit well with me I ignored, like an alcoholic who denied he had a problem. I denied my mundane existence, denied my uselessness in the world, and in the future I would let a selfish woman rule and dominate me into an early grave.

I cried. I cried at the useless life I lived, and I cried harder at my useless future. Anger boiled inside, but it wasn't directed at the Storytellers nor at Simon; I was angry with myself for the future façade of marriage to an emotionless woman.

"What is it?" Simon asked again.

I felt my *story* recede from my mind. It felt like a drug wearing off, as if I was regaining consciousness after surgery. I shook my head and wiped tears from my cheeks and eyes.

"I didn't need to see that," I told Simon. "Just because I know I'm useless doesn't mean I have the power to change who I am."

"The power of *story* is all you need to change who you are," he disagreed. "Story has always changed people's lives. The story of Scripture, the words of a politician or President, these are all words and ideas expressed. Would you deny such stories have changed the lives of people for centuries?"

"No, but I—"

"Your life is... what?" he asked.

"Useless," I replied, "And without life. And it will continue to mean zilch in the future."

"But just because your life is meaningless doesn't mean you can't change your *story*," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I was like you years ago," he said. "I'd come from Cuba on a boat. I joined a gang in Florida, got busted, and went to jail." He looked into my eyes and added, "I was *useless*."

I averted my eyes and watched the people, the Storytellers, around the globe while Simon spoke. His words comforted me.

"Then someone asked me to attend a meeting for Cuban refugees," he said. "The rented high school gymnasium was a façade for the Storytellers. I went and found *Destiny's Price*. Storytellers stood around it, and they let me *read* the story of my life like you just read yours.

"I saw how useless my life had been up to that point. I had stolen from others, had sold drugs. I was worse than useless; I was a criminal."

"Then what?"

He smiled and pointed at *Destiny's Price*.

"Then *Destiny's Price* chose me," he said. "Destiny intervened. Just like destiny intervened in your life. You're here for a reason, same as me so long ago."

"You mean I'm chosen?" I asked amazed. "But why?"

I couldn't understand why anyone would choose me. Why would someone useless like me be chosen for anything other than articles about parades, obituaries and occasional headlines?

"Consider it like winning the lottery," Simon said. "We didn't pick you; *Destiny's Price* picked you. It

told us who you were and where you lived, and we arranged the elemental threads of your destiny so

we would meet, and here you are. Today's your lucky day."

* * *

I worked with *Destiny's Price* an hour later. The Storytellers left me alone with the globe, except for Simon who assisted me.

"Before you can change the world as a Storyteller," he said, "You must first change your own life to become secure in your finances. And if you mess up, you'll be messing up your own life instead of the lives of others. Consider changing the *story* of your life practice. When you're successful, you can work with others to write the World-Story."

"Thanks for your vote of confidence," I said sarcastically—I didn't have much confidence.

"Don't worry," he said. "*Destiny's Price* chose you. There's a reason you were chosen, and it wasn't so you could use the power of *story* to destroy your life or the lives of others."

"Still... I'm not sure about this, Simon," I hesitated. "Isn't this the domain of God? When you affect the world like this—"

"How do you know God doesn't use *Destiny's Price*?" he asked. "How do you know God doesn't work through the people who control *Destiny's Price*?"

He had a point.

"You were chosen for a reason, Davie," he said. "You must find out why."

I looked at the globe, let my mind wander, and closed my eyes. A wind shifted through me, but I concentrated until I felt my brow furrow with effort. I made a connection with *Destiny's Price*. My life flashed within my mind again, the *story* of my life. Scenes of my life were interwoven together within the *story* like threads, and with little effort I could reach out and rearrange those fragments. I could edit my life like an editor rips into a manuscript to change it. I could *write* myself into a geographical location, and I would instantly teleport there.

It was easy to do once I let my imagination work. I changed the *story* of my life so that I didn't move around so much, and I *wrote* or *willed* myself employed at the newspaper years before I actually was hired. I *wrote* a good working relationship between Spenser and myself, and he trusted me. I also *wrote* into his life the desire to sell his family owned newspaper which was already in financial trouble. I *wrote* a scene in which he sold his business to me, and he retired to Florida content to live off the last of his family's inheritance. I made sure his life was happy and contented with many friends and loved ones in Florida.

I opened my eyes. I felt the connection snap between *Destiny's Price* and myself, and a physical sensation hummed into my body as the globe's blue light faded.

I stepped back and a rush of memories gushed into my brain. I staggered and felt someone steady my arm. Memories of events that had never happened crushed my existence as a journalist, and I remembered—vivid and strong memories—that I bought the *Friendly Philly* from my boss years ago. This memory was powerful and strong, and the event wasn't illusion, it was bedrock reality.

"Are you okay?" Simon asked steadying me, his hand upon my arm.

I nodded and took out my wallet. I opened it because I remembered my business cards were tucked inside next to one-hundred dollar bills. I pulled a card out and read it:

The Friendly Philly
Reporting tomorrow's news today!
Editor: Davie Miller

My hand trembled and I dropped the business card. It fluttered to the floor.

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"Will you be okay?" Simon asked. "When you wake up and your entire past has been rewritten,

it comes as quite a shock for a new *Storyteller*.”

“It’s... just amazing!”

“It’s tough to assimilate, isn’t it?” he asked.

I remembered when he first asked me that question an hour earlier on the walkway above us. I had just found *Destiny’s Price*—or had it discovered me?—and I wondered if he would ask me the same question again in the future. If he did, would the question follow more life-changing revelations?

It was definitely tough to assimilate.

* * *

In the days that followed I overhauled my life: past, present and future. I lacked self-esteem, so I wrote that out of my life. I found a thread of low self-esteem that flowed into me from my own father, and from his father before him, and I removed the entire thread.

I became self-confident.

I also changed the way I looked. Simon had done the same thing, he’d told me. After I considered his handsome features in contrast with old photos he showed me, I felt I decided I should change my looks too. I never knew how an ordinary and mundane appearance held me back. I became handsome after I wrote it into my *story*, and I began to notice looks from people. The looks were obvious from pretty women (who never would have noticed me before) as I took a break and sat at lunch with Simon.

“Do you think beautiful people have it easier in life?” I asked as a pretty waitress at the diner eyed me.

He laughed and said, “Do I even have to answer that one?”

The waitress blushed, but she let her hand graze mine as she took the menus. I watched her walk away, the way she put emphasis in the sway of her hips, and I saw the backward glance just as she disappeared into the kitchen to see if I noticed.

I thought of two people interviewed with basic backgrounds. What if one person was beautiful and the other looked like me—or looked like I once did before I wrote it out of my *story*?

“Life is about beauty,” Simon said when our waitress brought our lunch. “But not everyone is born beautiful. Some work their way into beauty, become beautiful in character or through work and art, while others born with physical beauty have lives that mirror ugliness.” He cut into his steak with greed. “The question is what will you do with your beauty, Davie? What will you do with the *Story* that rewrites your life?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

I looked at my steak and eggs. I wasn’t hungry anymore. I felt the waitress’ eyes bore into my back, and I shifted uncomfortable in my seat at the booth.

“*Destiny’s Price* chose me for a reason,” I said with a shrug. “I guess I have to find out why.”

Simon grinned through a mouthful of meat. He jabbed his fork at me while he spoke.

“You’ve got that right, Davie!”

John Miller is a single father with full custody of three sons. His stories/poetry have appeared at The World of Myth as well as other publications: The Horror Library; Monsta Productions; Red Pulp Underground, and he is in two anthologies. His family jokingly attests to his writing addiction.