

An excerpt from:

# THE BOOK DOCTOR

by

John Scherber

No writer wants to hear this, but it's the quality of the promotion more than the quality of the book that makes a bestseller. Ask anyone in New York.

–Derek Hamilton

For writers it is always said that the first twenty years of life contain the whole of experience – the rest is observation.

–Graham Greene

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## CHAPTER ONE

“Her name is Dr. Ruth,” said my partner, Maya Sanchez, assembling a shrimp taco with an expertise born of long experience. We were sitting down to lunch in our San Miguel, México garden across from the thirty-foot bamboo towering over the east wall, where it got the full benefit of the afternoon sun. She had dressed the cast-iron table with an embroidered cotton cloth similar to the white peasant top she was wearing. The January sun was blazing, but we were shaded by a broad canvas umbrella large enough to cover the chairs as well as the tabletop.

“But I don’t think we need her help, do we?” I said, surprised. I searched Maya’s face for a moment. We’d been together eight years, but I hadn’t noticed things slowing down. At thirty, she was hotter than ever. I always thought our relationship was the inspired connection between an artist from Ohio and a México City woman with a master’s degree in history. The electricity was still crackling, and we shared a mental life that kept both of us balanced. “I thought we were doing OK in the bedroom. You would’ve said something about it otherwise.” Not only was her English nuanced and flexible, but her mastery of American slang grew every day—she could have found the words to let me know quickly enough if we ever had a problem. Not that I wouldn’t know it myself.

“We are doing OK, Paul, but she’s not that kind of Dr. Ruth. Her last name is Bendickson, and she’s a mystery writer. I told you about her last year when I was reading her books.”

As the Zacher Agency had grown more experienced over the last couple of years, Maya had gotten into mysteries, and I suspected she occasionally thought of writing one herself based on our cases, although she’d never brought it up to me directly. Knowing her mental process, I didn’t expect to hear any detail about it until she had most of it worked out.

“That Ruth? I didn’t know she was a doctor, too. Why is she still working after publishing those mysteries? She must’ve made a bundle.” I don’t read any mysteries, but I remembered that Maya had mentioned the incredible success of Ruth Bendickson. She’d come from nowhere to publish two blockbusters in quick succession, followed, after an interval, by a third book in the same series that was not quite up to the first two. Critics wrote that Ruth had strayed off course, which Maya said was not unusual after an initial success. Still, the third book was another bestseller because her fan base was huge and loyal.

“It’s not that kind of doctor, she’s got a Ph.D. in English. She teaches creative writing at Bolton College.”

“Very prestigious,” I said. “I read somewhere that they’ve resisted the pressure to become co-ed.”

“What’s that?”

“They still only admit women.” Obviously, *co-ed* hadn’t yet entered Maya’s vernacular lexicon.

“Sounds like you could focus on your studies better without men around. I know I could.”

“I think that’s the idea. Of course, they don’t have a football team.” Maya thought by football I meant soccer, which is called *fútbol* here.

“Anyway, I brought up her name again because she’s the featured speaker at the International Mystery Writers’ Conference this year.” She squeezed a dollop of hot sauce onto her taco. She preferred the lethal *habanero*, the hottest Méxican variety, which to me tasted almost radioactive. I always settled for *serrano*, a mere single step up from *jalapeño*.

“And it’s being held here in March. I saw that in *Atención*. So you’d like to meet her, or at least hear her presentation?”

“Sure, let’s put it on the calendar,” she said.

“But I have to tell you that I’m not certain writers like Ruth Bendickson know what really goes on in the lives of detectives in the trenches. I say that because we didn’t know anything, either, when we started, and I assume she’s never worked as one. Cody was a detective when we started, but you and I had to learn it by doing it. A writer would have to make up the detail, or research it by tagging along for a while, and if she’s an academic, well...how close would she ever get to it?”

“Maybe she could consult with us while she’s here. Why not? We know a lot more about it now, and we don’t have any cases going.”

“Consult with The Paul Zacher Agency? We’re the underpaid grunts of the investigative world.”

“Don’t we get enough glory for you? *Probrecito!* Poor baby!” She took my hand in consolation.

“Glory would be great, but usually I’ll settle for survival and getting paid. I can have glory on my tombstone, too. I don’t mind waiting for it.”

Some might think I was a little flip about this, but when we finished our ninth case with all of us still standing, I looked back on a string of tense moments where our survival had been in doubt too often. Sometimes we’d only managed by good fortune, a disturbing kind of support that could collapse at any time, like rickety scaffolding erected on spongy ground. Never available on call, you couldn’t anticipate when luck was about to desert you. Maya had left me for three months about halfway through those cases because she couldn’t control the risk around us, and she’d agreed to return only as head of the agency. Part of my acquiescence was that she came back to me personally as well. I continued as a staff investigator, although the agency retained my name as a nostalgic gesture to a less troubled time.

Cody Williams, our six-foot-three, 230-pound retired homicide detective from Illinois, was our procedural maven. When none of us knew what to do next, he could fake it better than either Maya or I could. He knew how to pick the locks, and possessed the mass to knock down the doors when his picks failed, or when we were in a hurry. He also knew what questions to ask. There were times when that was all we had, and in my heart, I knew we were probably no different from many other detective agencies in that way. Our current ace-in-the-hole card was one Cody had also brought us, his new girlfriend, Sheila Roper. She was a part-time psychic with an uncertain trajectory, so she was a natural fit. One reason I felt good about her was that she had brought it home for us on our last case, where the Virgin of Guadalupe was stolen when it was on tour across México. Of course, feeling good is not the same as trust. Trust is an edifice built on history, and we hadn't known her that long. At this point I was still never certain when Sheila said something whether it was her feelings or her gift speaking. I'm not sure that she knew either. There's an element of serendipity about the detective business that we don't mention in our brochure.

After lunch, since I'd never heard of it except in our newspaper, *Atención*, I looked up the International Mystery Writers Conference on the Internet. It was a big deal, if you believed the hype on their website, and every March it pitched its tent in a different warm-weather venue. I could see how it would be a great draw for writer wannabes suffering in cold climates, deadly sick of winter and eager to hang out with the published literati. Last year they'd convened in Orlando, two years ago in Scottsdale, and the year before that, they'd come to earth in some palmy resort outside of San Jose, Costa Rica, nearer the beach. They billed themselves as bilingual and multicultural. To me, it sounded like the conference had touched all the right bases. I understood why they'd chosen to come to San Miguel this year. Here, 10,000 expatriates rub shoulders with 65,000 locals. Writers and painters are disproportionately represented, even if most of them didn't write or paint that much. After all, México is a laid-back kind of place and people here tend to accept without question what you call yourself.

Of course, at 6400 feet up on a mountain plateau, we're not a beach community. You'd have to dress indecently to get sunburned in March, but afternoon highs consistently reach the 80s with low humidity, and the angular sun does its eager part almost every day. If you were coming from Manchester, Vermont; Billings, Montana; or Calgary, it makes sense in a compelling way. It probably didn't matter if you could write, simply hanging out at the conference with people who did made it worthwhile. For the conference fee, plus hotel, airfare, and meals, you could feel like a winner in print, although the conference website said they gave you a bag lunch. As Maya had mentioned, this year the renowned Ruth Bendickson would be among us as the featured speaker, her slightest gesture launching fairy dust in clouds over the wannabe literati.

The event also touted lesser stars in mid-rank positions. One was Bill Masterson, who wrote wildly popular mysteries that were dressed up as travel books. Each one was set in a different exotic locale. His blurb made it sound like his detective could knock back

a lot of rum or tequila while half-dressed women dropped to their knees at his approach. This would be a specialty following; some would call it a niche, but I suspected it was not small. Whether Masterson was the real deal, or only offered some fantasy on the beach, I didn't plan to investigate.

Another mentor was Justus Barlow, a name I also didn't know. His blurb explained that he was a book doctor, one who had assisted at the birth of nearly two dozen best selling novels. The slogan, *beating them into condition*, was used to describe his preferred technique. Was it authors or their manuscripts taking the blows? It sounded kinky to me. I didn't know any writers, other than Maya, but if they're like painters, I could understand the phrase. Barlow offered to have meetings with potential clients during the conference, based on a pre-submitted sample, all for an extra fee, not disclosed on the website. If you recovered from the initial assault, you could apply to be his student. I suppose it was determined by the condition of the manuscript in question. As a painter, I knew that making progress in the arts often requires some degree of suffering, but I had never seen it spelled out so forthrightly. Two or three additional featured speakers of lower rank were listed, plus numerous breakout sessions, an hour or so long, where all kinds of subjects were treated in a more cursory fashion by experts whose credentials were not disclosed in detail. Maybe they were friends of the director. If I sound cynical, it's because, as a painter, I don't believe in the effectiveness of this kind of group hug.

It was at this point, near the bottom of the webpage, that I noticed that admission to the conference was \$495. Had we been working a paid case at the moment, I might have justified it, but as an amusement, I didn't think it had merit, at least, not for Cody and me. Maya did, however, and she's head of the agency.

"I think we should go," she said, "why not?"

"Cody and I aren't capable of writing so much as a grocery list. Your case is naturally somewhat different, now that you're published, but you're not writing any mysteries." Maya's book on the early years of our town's revolutionary hero, Ignacio Allende, had been out and struggling to find an audience for almost two years.

"But you always write the case reports."

"Yes, but I'm working from our notes, and we would never show them to anyone, except at gunpoint. It's only to have a record for our own files. You should attend if you think you'll get something from it, but for Cody and me, it would be a waste of time and money. If you go, you can tell Ruth Bendickson in person how much you like her books. Cody and I will stay behind to solve cases and make money." We both knew we didn't have anything on the horizon. I was also struggling to find a new painting idea, so it was like being in a mental vacuum. I tried to think of these periods as restful, but they felt more like frustration.

But then, two days later, we got involved in an urgent missing person case that turned out to be a couple's dust up that paid nothing, and while we were sorting it out, Maya didn't follow up on the conference for two weeks. When the subject came up again, I thought she'd forgotten about it, because I had. Then, when she was just about to

enroll, we received an email from the director, a person named Chad Metcalf, asking if we would like to be participants in the conference and give what he called “a breakout session on the activities and procedures of a genuine working detective agency.” Of course, we were the only such organization in San Miguel, and Metcalf must have known that. Maya suggested that our credibility had been enhanced because she was, after all, a published author.

“What does it pay?” I asked. Since Maya wrote the checks for the bills, this was normally her question.

“They’re offering attendance at the conference for all three of us, and the chance to promote our business to people attending. They’re expecting almost two hundred this year. I also get to sell my book in their bookstore.”

I called Cody and signed him up. He grumbled a bit about missing a football game or two, but that was no different when we had an active case. Anyway, by the time the conference started early in March, the Super Bowl was only a drunken memory for most.

Find the rest of this book on the author’s website:

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