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TITLE INFORMATION

THE BAIT MAN

D.L. Havlin

Taylor and Seale Publishing (274 pp.)

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BOOK REVIEW

An action-mystery, set in breezy Florida, stars a former Marine.

Chessie Partin is a 34-year-old ne'er-do-well living in her hometown of Vero Beach after a four-year stint with the Marines, now studying archaeology. She lives with her brother, Reading, a police officer on suspension for arresting the wrong person—someone with higher-up political connections. Hootie Barnes, who runs a deep-sea fishing rig, offers Chessie a part-time job as a mate on the boat, cleaning the vessel and helping tourists with their rods. The money's good, but Chessie soon discovers the downside to the job: dealing with the bait man, Rooster Cocker, who delivers chum to the outfit every week. Rooster is a gruff man who reeks of chum—a vile smell—and scared off Mary Perez, the last ship's mate, with his unwanted sexual advances. He takes the same sort of liking to Chessie, who immediately despises him. She believes that something may have happened to Mary—the word about town is that she eloped with her beau, but nobody's heard from her—because of Rooster. Chessie's suspicions are confirmed when she sees what appears to be a human jawbone in one of the blocks of chum. Using her archaeological skills and with some help from her brother, she starts to gather information on Rooster, tailing his truck and digging into his business. All of her investigating snowballs into something much bigger than she could've imagined, involving a shadowy ranch out in the boonies and a smuggling operation run by men even scarier than Rooster. Havlin (*Bully Route Home*, 2015, etc.) writes in a brisk, conversational style with loads of affection for the sunny Florida setting and an abundance of humor. Lewd jokes and snappy comebacks abound, although some of the quips—about Chessie's breasts, for instance—get repetitive. While Rooster and Chessie are memorable, fully developed characters, many of the supporting players lack depth, leading to some predictability. But the cast takes a back seat to the fast-paced plotting, as the author is skilled at teasing out new revelations and keeping the entertaining novel suspenseful.

A well-spun yarn with plenty of love for its salty environs that should satisfy beachgoers and conspiracy theorists alike.

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