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Stuff to Die For

Don Bruns
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They may see themselves as aging reincarnations of the Hardy Boys, but James ("never Jim or Jimmy") Lessor and Skip Moore are much closer in spirit to Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. Like Tom, James is a dreamer and risk taker. Skip, a born agonizer, has Huck's more practical (and skeptical) worldview, and it is he who spins out this tale of a modest commercial enterprise gone murderously awry.

Inseparable buddies since the third grade (when James, upon meeting Skip, charged him fifty cents to be his "best friend"), the two amigos are now in their early twenties. They share a scuzzy apartment in a bleak Miami suburb and are slowly dying from their dead-end jobs. James is a line cook at Cap'n Crab; Skip half-heartedly attempts to sell home-security systems to people "who don't have anything to secure." Their interactions are sure to remind some readers of the two genial slackers in the 1994 film *Clerks*. Both men have the habit of dropping bits of movie dialogue into their conversations, just to see if the other will detect and identify the source.

It is within this cozy fraternal context that James decides to improve their fortunes by buying a battered Chevy truck and launching a part-time hauling business. Skip's well-to-do girlfriend, Em, connects them with their first (and only) client, a "rich bitch" from North Bay Road, who has tossed out her philandering husband and wants the budding transport moguls to haul away his possessions. As they start to lug the husband's unopened mail into a storage unit, they find a grisly artifact that sets the mystery in motion.

Despite their frantic efforts to extricate themselves from what may be a kidnapping, a homicide or an intricate plot to invade Cuba, circumstances keep pulling the two back in. To aggravate matters, Skip's girlfriend is acting suspiciously, thus thwarting his ability to concentrate on the mundane business of staying alive.

In a narrative populated by colorful characters, none is more intriguing than James and Skip's Bahamian friend, Angel, who hangs out at the nearby Gas and Grocery convenience store, offering cryptic bits of wisdom and providing an additional layer of muscle.

The bizarre nature of South Florida doesn't figure quite as prominently in Bruns' story here as it does in Carl Hiaasen's wild imaginings, but it is still an essential element. James and Skip are no great shakes as detectives, entrepreneurs, or lovers, but they are so puppy-dog endearing and funny that they deserve an encore. Perhaps even a series. Like the Hardy Boys.

EDWARD MORRIS (August 8, 2007)

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