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SUBVIL STEALER

SUBVIL KILLER

SPID 18

MAN CABINET

NICK STONE

THE FIRST MACBETHUS THRILLER

Mr. Clarinet

Nick Stone

HarperCollins (2007)

Rating: ★★★☆☆

Fiction, General, Mystery Detective, Mystery Fiction, Suspense, Thrillers, Suspense Fiction, Mystery, Mystery Detective - General, Fiction - Espionage, Thriller, Private Investigators, Missing Persons, English Mystery Suspense Fiction, English First Novelists, Kidnapping victims, Haiti

Tags:

SUMMARY:

Max Mingus wanted to turn down the case—fifteen million bucks on the table or not. The boy was dead, Max was sure of it. Three years had passed since Haitian billionaire Allain Carver's five-year-old son was abducted. Why bother now? The huge bounty and the resources of the most powerful white family in Haiti hadn't turned up a lead. Sure, Max had been the best detective in Miami once. But that was eight years back. Before he served time for killing a pair of junkie child-murderers. Before his wife, Sandra, died. Plus, he'd heard what had happened to the other PI's sent to Haiti before him—all dead, or their lives permanently screwed up, without ever getting close to finding Charlie Carver. But with nothing left to lose—and for all that money—Max does go down there. The talk of voodoo and black magic is nothing compared to the haunting quiet of his own empty house. What Max doesn't count on is the depth of corruption, manipulation, and greed Haiti breeds in its inhabitants, murky evil worse than death, which can easily swallow a man whole—especially a troubled man like Max Mingus. When the trail to Charlie Carver points to a local myth—"Mr. Clarinet," a spirit figure who for decades is said to have been tempting children away from their families—could the truth be even more shocking than the legend? Max's job suddenly isn't all about finding the boy, his killers, or the money—it's about just staying alive....

Mr. Clarinet

Book Jacket

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Yo byen konte, Yo mal kalkile.
(Haitian saying)

PROLOGUE

New York City, November 6, 1996

TEN MILLION DOLLARS if he performed a miracle and brought the boy back alive, five million dollars if he came back with just the body and another five million if he dragged the killers in with it. Their dead-or-alive status was immaterial, as long as they had the kid's blood on their hands.

Those were the terms and, if he chose to accept them, that was the deal.

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Max Mingus was an ex-cop turned private investigator. Missing persons were his specialty, finding them his talent. Most people said he was the best in the business--or at least they had until April 1, 1989, the day he'd started a seven-year sentence in Attica for manslaughter and had his license permanently revoked.

The client's name was Allain Carver. His son's name was Charlie. Charlie was missing, presumed kidnapped.

Optimistically, with things going according to plan and ending happily for all concerned, Max was looking at riding off into the sunset a millionaire ten to fifteen times over. There were a lot of things he wouldn't have to worry about again, and he'd been doing a lot of worrying lately, nothing but worrying.

So far, so good, but now for the rest: The case was based in Haiti.

"*Haytee?*" Max said as if he'd heard wrong.

"Yes," Carver replied.

Shit.

He knew this about Haiti: voodoo, AIDS, Papa Doc, Baby Doc, boat people, and, recently, an American military invasion called Operation Restore Democracy he'd seen on TV.

He knew--or had known--quite a few Haitians, expats he'd had regular dealings with back when he'd been a cop and worked a case in Little Haiti, Miami. They hadn't had a decent thing to say about the homeland, "bad place" being the most common and kindest.

Nevertheless, he had fond memories of most of the Haitians he'd met. In fact, he'd admired them. They were honest, honorable, hardworking people who'd found themselves in the most unenviable place in America--bottom of the food chain, south of the poverty line, a lot of ground to make up.

That went for *most* of the Haitians he'd met. When it came to people, there were always plenty of exceptions to every generalization, and he'd come face-to-face with those. They hadn't left him with bad memories so much as the kind of wounds that never really healed, that opened up at the slightest nudge or touch.

The whole thing was already sounding like a bad idea. He'd just come out of one tough spot. Why go to another?

Money. That was why.

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Charlie had disappeared on September 4, 1994, his third birthday. Nothing had been heard or seen of him since. There had been no ransom demands and there were no witnesses. The Carver family had had to call off its search for the boy after two weeks, because the U.S. Army had invaded the country and put it on lockdown, imposing curfews and travel restrictions on the whole population. The search hadn't resumed until late October, by which time the trail, already cold, had frozen over.

"There's one other thing," Carver said when he'd finished talking. "If you take the job, it's going to be dangerous.... Make that *very* dangerous."

"How so?" Max asked.

"Your predecessors, they... Things didn't turn out too right for them."

"They're dead?"

There was a pause. Carver's face turned grim and his skin lost a little of its color.

"No...not dead," he said finally. "Worse. *Much* worse."

Chapter 1

HONESTY AND STRAIGHTFORWARDNESS weren't always the best options, but Max chose them over bullshit as often as he could. It helped him sleep at night.

"I can't," he told Carver.

"Can't or *won't*?"

"I won't because I can't. I can't do it. You're asking me to look for a kid who went missing two years ago, in a country that went back to the Stone Age about the same time."

Carver managed a smile so faint it barely registered on his lips yet let Max know he was being considered unsophisticated. It also told Max what kind of rich he was dealing with. Not rich, *rich*—old money, the worst; connections plugged in at every socket, all the lights on, everybody home, multistory bank vaults, fuck-off stockholdings, high-interest offshore accounts; first-name terms with everybody who's anybody in every walk of life, power to crush you to oblivion. These were people you never said no to, people you never failed.

"You've succeeded at far tougher assignments. You've performed--*miracles*," Carver said.

"I never raised the dead, Mr. Carver. I only dug 'em up."

"I'm ready for the worst."

"Not if you're talking to me," Max said. He regretted his bluntness. Prison had reformed his erstwhile tact and replaced it with coarseness. "In a way you're right. I've looked for ghosts in hellholes in my time, but they were *American* hellholes and there was always a bus out. I don't know your country. I've never been there and--no disrespect meant--I've never *wanted* to go there. Hell, they don't even speak *English*."

Then Carver told him about the money.

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Max hadn't made a fortune as a private detective, but he'd done OK--enough to get by and have a little extra to play with. His wife, who was a qualified accountant, had managed the business side of things. She'd put a fair bit of rainy-day money away in their three savings accounts, and they had points. The L Bar, a successful yuppie joint in downtown Miami, run by Frank Nunez, a retired cop friend of Max's. They'd owned their house and two cars outright, taken three vacations every year, and eaten fancy restaurants once a month.

He'd had few personal expenses. His clothes--suits for work and special occasions, khakis and T-shirts at all other times--were always well cut but rarely expensive. He'd learned his lesson after his second case, when he'd got arterial spray on his five-hundred-dollar suit and had to surrender it to forensics, who later handed it to the DA, who recycled it in court as Exhibit D. He sent his wife flowers every week, bought her lavish presents on her birthday and at Christmas and on their anniversary; he was also generous to his closest friends. He had no addictions. He'd quit cigarettes and reefer when he left the force; booze had taken a little longer but that had gone out of his life too. Music was his only real indulgence--jazz, swing, doo-wop, rock 'n' roll, soul, funk, and disco; he had five thousand CDs.

vinyl albums, and singles he knew every note and lyric to. The most he'd ever spent was when he dropped four hundred bucks at an auction on an autographed original double ten-inch vinyl copy of Frank Sinatra's "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning." He'd framed it and hung it in his study opposite his desk. When his wife asked, he lied and told her he'd picked it up cheap at a house-registry sale in Orlando.

All in all, it had been a comfortable life, the sort that made you happy and fat and gradually more and more conservative.

And then he'd gone and killed three people in the Bronx, and the wheels had come off and everything had skidded to a loud, ungainly stop.

Postprison, Max still had the house and his car in Miami, plus \$9,000 in a savings account. He could live on that for another four or five months tops, then he'd have to sell the house and find a job. That would be hard. Who would employ him? Ex-cop, ex-PI, ex-con--three crosses, no ticks. He was forty-six: too old to learn anything new and too young to give in. What the fuck would he do? Bar work? Kitchen work? Pack shopping bags? Construction? Mall security?

True, he had some friends and people who owed him, but he'd never called in a favor in his life, and he wasn't about to start now that he was on his knees. It would be tantamount to begging, and that went up against his every rule. He'd helped people out because he could at the time, not for what they could do for him later, not for points in the karma bank. His wife had called him naive, marshmallow-soft under the concrete-and-razor-wire carapace he showed the world. Maybe she'd been right. Maybe he should have put self-interest before others. Would his life have been any different now? Probably, yes.

He saw his future, clearly, a year or two from now. He'd be living in one of those one-room apartments with stained wallpaper, tribes of warring roaches, and a set of dos and don'ts on the door, handwritten in semiliterate Spanish. He'd hear his neighbors arguing, fucking, talking, fighting; upstairs and downstairs, left and right. His life would be one chipped plate, a knife, a fork, and a spoon. He'd play the lotto and watch the results go against him on a portable TV with a shaky picture. Slow death by gradual extinction, one cell at a time.

Take Carver's job or take his chances in the postcon world. He had no other choice.

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Max had first spoken to Allain Carver over the phone in prison. They didn't get off to a good start. Max had told him to fuck off as soon as he'd introduced himself.

Carver had been pestering him pretty much every day of the last eight months of his sentence.

First came a letter from Miami: "Dear Mr. Mingus, my name is Allain Carver. I greatly admire you and everything you stand for. Having followed your case closely..."

Max stopped reading there. He gave the letter to Velasquez, his cellmate, who used it to make a joint. Velasquez had smoked all of Max's letters, except for the personal ones. Max nicknamed him "The Incinerator."

Max was a celebrity prisoner. His case had been on TV and in all of the papers. At one point, almost half the country had had a strong opinion about him and what he'd done, a sixty-forty split, for and against.

During his first six months behind bars he'd had fan mail by the sackful. He'd never replied to any of it. Even the sincerest well-wishers left him cold. He'd always despised strangers who corresponded.

with convicted criminals they'd seen on TV, or read about in the papers, or met through those fucked up prisoner pen-pal clubs. They were the first to demand the death penalty when the boot was on the other foot and that foot had stomped one of their loved ones to death. Max had been a cop for eleven years. There was a lot of it left over in him. Many of his closest friends were still on the force, keeping these very same people safe from the animals they wrote to.

When Carver's first letter arrived, Max's mail was down to letters from his wife, in-laws, and friends. His fan base had moved on to more appreciative types, like O. J. Simpson and the Menendez brothers.

Carver met Max's silence over his first letter with a follow-up two weeks later. When that, too, elicited no response, Max received another Carver letter the next week, then two more the week after that, and, seven days later, two more again. Velasquez was pretty happy. He liked Carver's letters because the paper--thick, water-marked cream stationery with Carver's name, address, and contact numbers embossed in the right-hand corner in emerald-foil letters--had something in it that reacted fantastically with his weed and got him more stoned than usual.

Carver tried different tactics to get Max's attention--he changed paper, wrote longhand, and got other people to write in--but no matter what he tried, everything went by way of The Incinerator.

So, the letters stopped and the phone calls started. Max guessed that Carver had bribed someone high up, because only inmates with serious juice or imminent retrials were allowed to take incoming calls. A guard brought him from the kitchens and took him to one of the conference cells, where a phone had been plugged in, just for him. He spoke to Carver long enough to hear his name, think he was English from his accent, and tell him what was what and never to call him again.

But Carver didn't give up. Max would be interrupted at work, in the exercise yard, at meals, in the shower, during lockdowns, after lights-out. He dealt with Carver as he always did: "Hello," he'd answer Carver's voice, hang up.

Max eventually complained to the warden, who thought it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. Most inmates griped about hassles on the *inside*. He told Max not to be such a pussy and threatened to put the phone in his cell if he bothered him again with this bullshit.

Max told Dave Torres, his lawyer, about Carver's calls. Torres put a stop to them. He also offered to dig up some information about Carver, but Max passed. In the free world, he would have been curious as hell; but in prison, curiosity was something you gave up with your court clothes and your wristwatch.

The day before his release, Max had a visit from Carver. Max refused to see him, so Carver left him his final letter, back on the original stationery.

Max gave it to Velasquez as a going-away present.

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After he got out of jail, Max was all set to go to London, England.

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The round-the-world tour had been his wife's idea, something she'd always wanted to do. She'd long been fascinated by other countries and their cultures, their histories and monuments, their people. She was always going off to museums, lining up to get into the latest exhibitions, attending lectures and seminars, and always reading--magazines, newspaper articles, and book after book after book. She tried her best to sweep Max along with her enthusiasms, but he wasn't remotely interested. She

showed him pictures of South American Indians wearing pizza plates in their bottom lips, African women with giraffe-like necks fitted with industrial springs, and he really couldn't begin to see the attraction. He'd been to Mexico, the Bahamas, Hawaii, and Canada, but his world was really just the USA, and that was a world big enough for him. At home, they had deserts and arctic wastes and pretty much everything in between. Why go abroad for the same shit only older?

His wife's name was Sandra. He'd met her when he was still a cop. She was half Cuban, half African American. She was beautiful, clever, tough, and funny. He never called her Sandy.

She'd planned for them to celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary in style, traveling the globe, seeing most of the things she'd only read about. If things had been different, Max would probably have talked her into going to the Keys for a week, with the promise of a modest foreign trip (to Europe or Australia) later in the year, but because he was in prison when she told him her plans, he wasn't in a position to refuse. Besides, from where he was, getting as far away from America as possible seemed like a good idea. That year out would give him time to think about the rest of his life and what best to do with it.

It took Sandra four months to organize and book the tour. She arranged the itinerary so they'd arrive back home in Miami exactly a year to the day they'd left, on their next wedding anniversary. In between they would see all of Europe, starting with England, and then they'd move on to Russia and China, followed by Japan and the Far East, before flying on to Australia, New Zealand, and then on to Africa and the Middle East, before closing out in Turkey.

The more she told Max about the trip during her weekly visits, the more he started looking forward to it. He took to reading in the prison library about some of the places they'd be visiting. In the beginning, it was a way of getting him out of one day and into the next, but the more he began to delve into the stuff of his wife's dreams, the closer he got to her, perhaps closer than he'd ever been.

She finished paying for the trip the day she died in a car crash on U.S. 1, which she appeared to have caused by inexplicably and quite suddenly switching lanes straight into the path of an oncoming truck. When they performed the autopsy, they found the brain aneurysm that had killed her at the wheel.

The warden broke the news to him. Max was too stunned to react. He nodded, said nothing else, left the warden's office, and went about the rest of his day pretty much as normal, cleaning the kitchen surfaces, serving at the counter, feeding the trays through the dishwasher, mopping the floors. He didn't say anything to Velasquez. You didn't do that. Showing grief or sadness or any emotion unrelated to anger was a sign of weakness. You kept those things well hidden, bottled up, out of sight and sense.

Sandra's death didn't sink in until the next day, Thursday. Thursday was her visiting day. She'd never missed one. She'd fly in the night before, stay with an aunt who lived in Queens, and then, the next day, she'd drive up to see him. At around two p.m., when he'd usually be finishing off in the kitchen or bullshitting with Henry, the cook, he'd be called out to the visiting room over the PA system. Sandra would be waiting for him on the other side of the booth, behind the glass partition and the wall between them. She'd always be immaculately dressed, a fresh layer of lipstick on her mouth, big smile on her face, eyes lighting up, just like she was on a first date. They'd talk about this and that, how he was feeling, how he was looking, then she'd give him back-home news, tell him about herself, tell him about the house, talk about her job.

Henry and Max had an arrangement. Henry would work around Max on Thursdays, giving him things he could finish up quickly so he could get out as soon as his name was called. Max always helped

Henry out in the same way on Sundays, when Henry's family--his wife and four kids--came to see him. They got on well enough for Max to ignore that Henry was doing fifteen to life for an armed robbery that had left a pregnant woman dead, and that he ran with the Aryan Brotherhood.

On the outside, it was business as usual that Thursday. Only, Max had woken up with a heavy, aching feeling in his chest and a sense of emptiness that opened up into a numb void as the morning went on. He kept on hearing a peculiar rush of air in his ears, as though he was stuck in a wind tunnel, and the vein in his forehead began to wriggle and twitch under his skin. He wanted to tell Henry his wife wasn't coming that week and then let him know why the following week, but he couldn't bring himself to say anything, because he knew the minute he did he'd lose control of his words and most likely crack up.

He didn't have enough to do in the kitchen to keep his mind busy. He had the almost-spotless stove to wipe down. The stove had a clock set in the middle of its controls. He tried to stop himself, but he kept on staring at the clock, watching the black hands move in clicks, stepping up to 2:00.

He replayed the previous week's visit in his mind, every single second of the last time they were together. He recalled every word she'd said to him--about the surprise discount she'd managed to get from one airline, the free nights at a luxury hotel she'd won in a contest, how impressed she was with his knowledge of Australian history. Had she ever said anything about migraines, or headaches, or dizzy spells, blackouts, nosebleeds? He saw her face again through the bulletproof-glass partition they met through; the glass was smeared with the ghostly fingerprints and lipmarks where a million convicts had touched and kissed their loved ones by proxy. They'd never done that. They agreed it was pointless and desperate. It wasn't as if they'd never get to do the real thing again, was it? He wished they had now. It would have been better than the absolute nothing he was left with.

"Max," Henry called over from the sink. "Time to play husband."

It was a few clicks away from 2:00. Max started taking off his apron, right on cue, then stopped.

"She's not coming today," he said, letting the straps of the apron fall to his side. He felt a hot surge of tears geyser up to his eyes and mass around the edges.

"Why not?"

Max didn't answer. Henry came over to him, wiping his hands on a dishcloth. He saw Max's face about to crack wide open and spill. He looked surprised. He even backed off a step. Like almost everyone else in the joint, he thought Max was a tough motherfucker--an ex-cop in General Population, who'd held his head up and hadn't once flinched from meeting violence with violence on at least five occasions that he knew of.

Henry smiled.

He could have smiled out of mockery, or the sadistic delight in the misfortune of others that passes for happiness in prison, or plain simple confusion. Tough guys didn't cry--unless they were pussies and along, or worse, in mid-meltdown.

Max, buried fifty feet deep in grief, read mockery in Henry's face.

The roaring in his ears fell still.

He punched Henry in the throat, a straight, short jab powered in with his full weight, which went straight to the windpipe. Henry's mouth dropped open. He gasped out for air. Max smashed a right hook into his jaw and busted the bone in two. Henry was a big, tall guy, a daily free-weight freak, who

could press three-fifty clean without breaking a sweat. He went down with a huge thud.

Max fled the kitchen.

It was a bad move, the worst. Henry was high up in the Brotherhood, and their main source of income. They dealt the best drugs in Attica. Henry's kids smuggled them in for him in the cracks of their asses. The Brotherhood would want blood, a face-saving kill.

Henry was in the infirmary for three days. Max ran the kitchen in his absence, all the while waiting for payback. The Brotherhood weren't random killers. They liked to come in packs of four or five. The guards would know about it in advance. Tipped-off and paid-off, they'd look the other way, as would everyone in the vicinity. Inside, where he hurt most, he prayed they'd stick him clean, straight through a vital organ. He didn't want to wind up a free man in a wheelchair.

But nothing happened.

Henry claimed he'd slipped on some stray grease on the kitchen floor. He was back running the kitchen by Sunday, his jaw tightly wired. He'd heard about Max's loss, and the first thing he did when he saw him again was shake his hand and pat him on the shoulder. This made Max feel worse about hitting him.

Sandra's funeral was held in Miami, a week after her death. Max was allowed to attend.

She was laid out in an open casket. The undertaker had dressed her in a black wig that didn't suit her. Her real hair had never been that straight or that black; she'd had a russet tinge to it in places, brown in others. The makeup was all wrong too. She'd never needed much when she was alive. He kissed her cold, rigid lips and slipped his fingers between her folded hands. He stood there staring down at her forever, feeling her a million miles away. Dead bodies were nothing new to him, but it was very different when it had belonged to the most important person in his life.

He kissed her again. He desperately wanted to flick her eyes open and see them one last time. Besides, she'd never closed her eyes when they kissed, ever. He reached out and then noticed that the overhanging white lilies from the massed display had shed their pollen onto the collar of the dark blue pinstriped business suit she'd been dressed in. He wiped it clean.

At the service, her youngest brother, Calvin, sang "Let's Stay Together," her favorite song. The last time he'd sung it was at their wedding. Calvin had an incredible voice, mournful and piercing like Ray Charles's. It busted Max up. He cried his fucking heart out. He hadn't cried since he'd been a kid. He cried so much his shirt collar got wet and his eyes swelled up.

On the way back to Attica, Max decided he'd take the trip Sandra had spent the final part of her life organizing. It was partly to honor her wishes, partly to see all the things she never would, partly to live her dream, and mostly because he didn't know what else to do with himself.

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His lawyer, Dave Torres, picked him up outside the prison gates and drove him to the Avalon Rex, a small hotel in Brooklyn, a few blocks away from Prospect Park. The room was functional--bed, desk, chair, closet, bedside table, lamp, clock radio, and phone--and there was a communal bathroom and a trough-like sink on the top floor. He was booked in for two days and nights, after which he was taking a plane to England from JFK. Torres handed him his tickets, passport, \$3,000 in cash, and two credit cards. Max thanked Torres for everything and they shook hands and said good-bye.

First thing Max did was open his door, step out of his room, walk back inside, and close it behind him.

He liked it so much he did it again and again half a dozen times until he'd taken the shine off the novelty of being able to come and go as he pleased. Next thing he did was take off his clothes and check himself out in the wardrobe mirror.

Max hadn't seen himself naked in a mirror since he'd last been a free man. Seven years on, he looked good from the neck down, dressed in just his two tattoos. Big shoulders and bulging biceps, chunky forearms, a short, wide neck, a six-pack, thick thighs; put him in trunks and body oil and he could have won a Mr. Penitentiary award. There was an art to working out in prison. It wasn't about vanity and fitness; it was about survival. It was wise to be big--if you cast an impressive shadow, people thought twice about fucking with you, and usually kept out of your way--but you didn't want to get too big, in case you stood out and became a target for young first-timers out to get a rep; there was nothing more ridiculous-looking than a cellblock hulk dying from a toothbrush shiv rammed in his jugular. Max was very fit before he'd gone into prison. He'd been a three-time Golden Glove middleweight boxing champion in his teens, and he'd stayed in shape running, swimming, and sparring at a local boxing gym near Coral Gables. Exercise wasn't a quantum leap to him; he had the built-in discipline that comes from learning to swallow a punch whole. He'd been allowed half an hour in Attica. He'd hit the weights six days a week, upper body one day, legs the next. He'd done three thousand push-ups and crunches in his cell, every morning, five hundred at a time.

Although still attractive in the blunt and brutal sort of way that deceptively appealed to women with a taste for rough men and kamikaze relationships, his face wasn't too handsome. His skin was tight, but it was wrinkled and waxy pale, almost ghostly from the lack of sunlight. The needlepoint scars around his lips had faded. There was a new meanness in his blue eyes and a sour downturn to the ends of his mouth, which he recognized from his mother who, like he, had been left alone at the onset of his autumnal years. And as had happened to her at the same age, his hair had gone completely gray. He hadn't noticed the transition from the dark brown he'd been on the day of his incarceration, because he'd stayed bald in the joint, to appear more forbidding. He'd let his hair grow out in the last few weeks leading up to his release--a mistake he intended to rectify before he left town.

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The next morning he went out. He needed to buy a warm winter coat and jacket, and a hat, too, if he was going to lose his old-man's hair. It was a bright, freezing-cold day. The air burned his lungs. The street was swarming with people. Suddenly he was lost and didn't know what he was doing or where he was going. He'd walked slap-bang into the middle of rush hour, everybody on their way to earn money and take shit with a thank-you and a smile, and build up a backlog of grudges and resentments in the process. He should've known better and prepared himself for it, but he felt as if he'd been beamed from another planet against his will. A seven-year stretch of time slipped its leash and rushed at him with jaws wide open, belly empty. Everything had changed--clothes, hairstyles, walks, faces, brands, prices, languages--too much to take in and absorb and break down and analyze and compare. Too much to process soon after prison, where everything stayed the same and you were on at least face terms with everybody you saw. Now he was straight in at the deep end. He could float but he'd forgotten the strokes. He plodded along, keeping two steps behind the people in front of him and two steps in front of those behind, chain-gang style. Maybe no matter how free we think we are, we're all prisoners in our own way, he thought. Or maybe he just needed time to wake up and get with the program.

He slipped out of the crowd and snuck into a small cafe. It was packed with people getting a caffeine fix before hitting their offices. He ordered an espresso. It came in a cardboard cup with a holder and a warning printed on the side that the drink was VERY HOT. When he tasted it, it was lukewarm.

What was he doing in New York? It wasn't even his town. What was he doing even thinking of traveling the world when he hadn't been home, got his bearings, and readjusted himself to freedom?

Sandra wouldn't have wanted him to do this. She would have said it was pointless, running away when he'd have to come back eventually. True. What was he scared of? Her not being there? She was gone. He'd just have to get over--and move on the best he could.

Fuck it. He'd go back to Miami on the first plane out.

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In his hotel room, Max called up the airlines. All flights booked solid for the next two and a half days. He got a seat for the Friday afternoon.

Even though he didn't have a clue what he'd do when he got to Miami, he felt better now that he was heading somewhere familiar.

He thought about taking a shower and getting something to eat, and maybe that haircut if he could find a place.

The phone rang.

"Mr. Mingus?"

"Yes?"

"Allain Carver."

Max didn't say anything. How had he found him here?

Dave Torres. He was the only one who knew where Max was. How long had he been working for Carver? Probably since Max had asked him to stop the calls he was getting in prison. Instead of going to the authorities, Torres had gone to the man himself. Double-dealing scumbag never missed an opportunity to make a buck.

"Hello? Are you still there?"

"What's this about?" Max said.

"I have a job you might be interested in."

Max agreed to meet him the next day. His curiosity was back.

Carver gave him an address in Manhattan.

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"Mr. Mingus? I'm Allain Carver."

First impression: imperious prick.

Carver had stood up from behind an armchair when Max had walked into the club. Instead of coming over, he'd taken a few steps forward to identify himself and then stood where he was, arms behind his back, in the style of royalty meeting an ambassador from a former colonial state, now hopeless and impoverished and in dire need of a handout.

Tall and slender, dressed in a well-tailored navy blue wool suit, light blue shirt, and matching silk tie. Carver might have strolled in off a 1920s-set musical where he'd been cast as an extra in a Wall Street scene. His short, blond hair was slicked back from his forehead and parted down the middle. He had

strong jaw, long, pointed face, and tanned skin.

They shook hands. Firm handshake, soft, smooth skin unperturbed by manual labor.

Carver motioned him to a black-leather-and-mahogany tub chair set in front of a round table. He waited until Max had sat down before he took his place opposite him. The chair was high-backed and finished some two feet above his head. He couldn't see to his left or right without leaning all the way forward and craning his neck out. It was like being in his own booth, intimate and secretive.

Behind him was a bar that stretched the width of the room. Every conceivable spirit seemed to be lined up there--green, blue, yellow, pink, white, brown, clear, and translucent bottles glinting as gaily as plastic-bead curtains in a well-heeled brothel.

"What would you like to drink?"

"Coffee, please. Cream, no sugar."

Carver looked over to the far end of the room and raised his hand. A waitress approached. She was fashion-model thin, with high cheekbones, pouting lips, and a catwalk strut. All the staff Max had seen so far looked like models: both the barmen had that slowburn, stubbled seducer look advertisers use to sell white shirts and cologne, while he could have seen the receptionist in a clothes-store catalogue and in another life, the security guy monitoring the CCTV screen in a side office might have been the Diet Coke break guy on the construction site.

Max had almost missed the club. It was in an anonymous five-story townhouse in a cul-de-sac off Park Row, so anonymous that he'd walked past it twice before he'd noticed the number 34 stamped faintly into the wall near the door. The club was three flights up in a mirrored elevator with polished brass handles running around the middle and reflections accordioneing to infinity. When the door opened and he'd stepped out, Max thought he'd arrived in the lobby of a particularly luxurious hotel.

The interior was vast and very quiet, like a library or a mausoleum. All over the thickly carpeted floor black tub chairs sprouted like burned-out oak stumps in a desecrated forest. They were arranged so you only saw their backs and not the people in them. He'd thought they were alone until he saw clouds of cigar smoke escaping from behind one of the chairs, and when he looked around more closely, he saw a man's foot in a beige slip-on beyond another. A single framed painting adorned the wall nearest to them. It was of a young boy playing a flute. He was dressed in a ragged, Civil War-era military uniform a good ten years too big for him.

"Are you a member here?" Max asked, to break the ice.

"We own it. This and several similar establishments around the world," Carver replied.

"So you're in the club business?"

"Not particularly," Carver answered with an amused look on his face. "My father, Gustav, set these up in the late fifties to cater for his best business clients. This was the first. We have others in London, Paris, Stockholm, Tokyo, Berlin--and elsewhere. They're a perk. When individuals or their companies do over a certain amount of net dollar business with us they're offered free lifelong membership. We encourage them to sponsor their friends and colleagues, who of course pay. We have a lot of members and turn a good profit."

"So you can't just fill out a form?"

"No," Carver chuckled.

"Keep the peasants out, huh?"

"It's just the way we do business," Carver said dryly. "It works."

There were traces of East Coast WASP wrinkling Carver's otherwise crisp English accent, an unnatural reining in of some vowels and an overexaggeration of others. English school, Ivy League diploma?

Carver resembled a matinee idol manque, looks fading agreeably. Max placed him as his own age maybe a year or two younger; balanced diet-healthy. There were lines on his neck and crow's-feet etched at the ends of his small, sharp blue eyes. With his golden skin he could have passed for white South American--Argentinean or Brazilian--bloodlines going all the way back to German. Untouchably handsome but for his mouth. That let him down. It resembled a long razor cut where the blood had just started to bubble but not yet run over.

The coffee came in a white porcelain pot. Max poured himself a cup and added a measure of cream from a small jug. The coffee was rich and strong, and the cream didn't leave a greasy slick on the surface; it was connoisseur stuff, the kind you bought by the bean and ground yourself, not the average brews you picked up in the supermarket.

"I heard about your wife," Carver said. "I'm sorry."

"Me too," Max countered curtly. He let the subject die in the air, then got down to business. "You said you had a job you wanted me to look at?"

Carver told him about Charlie. Max heard the basics and flat-out said no. Carver mentioned the money and Max quieted down, more out of shock than greed. In fact, greed didn't even enter into it. While Carver was talking numbers, he handed Max a manila envelope. Inside were two glossy black-and-white photographs, a headshot, and a full-length bodyshot--of a little girl.

"I thought you said your *son* was missing, Mr. Carver?" Max said, holding up the picture.

"Charlie had a thing about his hair. We nicknamed him Samson because he wouldn't let anyone get near it. He was born--somewhat unusually--with a full head of the stuff. Whenever anyone tried to sneak up on him with a pair of scissors he *screeched*--this *deafening* howl. Quite terrifying. So we let it alone. I'm sure he'll outgrow the phobia eventually," Carver said.

"Or not," Max said bluntly, deliberately.

Max thought he saw Carver's face change for an instant, as a shadow of humanity stole away a fragment of his all-business composure. It wasn't enough to make him warm up to his potential client but it was a start.

Max studied the headshot. Charlie didn't look anything like his father. His eyes and hair were very dark and he had a large mouth with full lips. He wasn't smiling. He looked pissed off, a great man interrupted in the middle of his work. It was a very adult look. His stare was intense and stark. Max could feel it prodding at his face, humming on the paper, nagging at him.

The second photograph showed Charlie standing in front of some bougainvillea bushes with almost the same expression on his face. His hair was long all right, bow-tied into two drooping bunches that poured over his shoulders. He was wearing a floral-patterned dress, with frills on the sleeves, hem, and collar.

It made Max sick.

"It's none of my business and I ain't no psychologist, but that's a sure-as-shit way to fuck a kid's head up, Carver," Max said, hostility upfront.

"It was my wife's idea."

"You don't seem the henpecked kind."

Carver laughed briefly, sounding like he was clearing his throat.

"People are very backward in Haiti. Even the most sophisticated, well-educated sorts believe in all kinds of rubbish--superstitions--"

"Voodoo?"

"We call it *vodou*. Haitians are ninety percent Catholic and a hundred percent *vodouiste*, Mr. Minguet. There's nothing sinister about it--no more than, say, worshipping a half-naked man nailed to a cross, drinking his blood and eating his flesh."

He studied Max's face for a reaction. Max stared right back at him, impassive. Carver could have worshipped supermarket carts, for all he cared. One person's God was another person's idea of a good joke, as far as he was concerned.

He looked back at the photograph of Charlie in his dress. You poor kid, he thought.

"We've looked everywhere for him," Carver said. "We ran a campaign in early 1995--newspaper ads, TV ads, billboards with his picture on them, radio spots--everything. We offered a substantial reward for information, or, better still, for Charlie himself. It had predictable consequences. Every lowlife suddenly came out from under a rock and claimed they knew where 'she' was. Some even claimed they'd kidnapped 'her' and made ransom demands, but it was all--the sums they wanted were trivial, *way too small*. Obviously, I knew they were lying. These peasants in Haiti can't see past the ends of their noses. And their noses are *very flat*."

"Did you follow up on all the leads?"

"Only the sensible ones."

"First mistake right there. Check everything out. Chase every lead."

"Your predecessors said that."

Bait and hook, Max thought. Don't go there. You'll get drawn into a pissing contest. Still, he was curious. How many people had already worked on the case? Why had they failed? And how many were out there now?

He played indifferent.

"Don't get ahead of yourself. Right now we're just having a conversation," Max said. Carver was stunned, brought down to a level he usually didn't frequent. He must have been surrounded by the sort of people who laughed at all his jokes. That was the thing about the very rich, the rich born and bred: they swam in their own seas and didn't breathe the same air as everybody else; they lived parallel, insulated lives, immune to the struggles and failures that shaped character. Had Carver ever been forced to wait until next month's paycheck for a new pair of shoes? Been turned down by a woman? Had property repossessors knocking on his door? Hardly.

Carver told him about the danger, brought up the predecessors again, hinted that bad things had happened to them. Max still didn't rise to it. He'd gone into the meeting a third of the way determined

not to take the job. Now he was almost at the halfway mark.

Carver clocked his indifference and switched his talk to Charlie--when he'd taken his first steps, how he had an ear for music--and then he went into a bit more detail about Haiti.

Max listened, feigning interest with a fixed look, but behind it he was going away, back into himself delving, working out if he could still cut it.

He came up strangely empty, unresolved. The case had two obvious angles--financial motive or some possible voodoo bullshit. No ransom, so that left the latter, which he knew a bit more about than he let on to Carver. Or maybe Carver knew about him and Solomon Boukman. In fact, he was certain Carver *did* know about that. Of course he did. How couldn't he, if he had Torres on his payroll? What else did Carver know about him? How far back had he gone? Did he have something stored up, ready to spring on him?

Bad start, if he wanted to take it farther. He didn't trust his future client.

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Max ended their meeting telling Carver he'd think about it. Carver gave him his card and twenty-four hours to make up his mind.

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He took a cab back to his hotel, Charlie Carver's photographs in his lap.

He thought about ten million dollars and what he could do. He'd sell the house and buy a moderate apartment somewhere quiet and residential, possibly in Kendall. Or maybe he'd move out to the Keys. Or maybe he'd leave Florida altogether.

Then he thought about going to Haiti. Would he have taken the case in his pre-con prime? Yes, certainly. The challenge alone would have appealed to him. No forensics to fall back on and corners with, just pure problem-solving, brain work, his wits pitted against another's. But he mothballed his talents when he'd gone to prison, and they'd quietly wasted away with inattention, sans as any muscle. A case like Charlie Carver's would be up the hill backwards, the whole way.

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Back in his room, he propped the two photos up on his desk and stared at them.

He didn't have any children. He'd never cared for kids all that much. They tried his patience and frayed his nerves. Nothing would piss him off more than being stuck in a room with a crying baby its parents couldn't or wouldn't shut up. And yet, ironically, many of his private cases had involved finding missing children, some mere toddlers. He had a hundred-percent success rate. Alive or dead, he always brought them home. He wanted to do the same for Charlie. He was worried that he couldn't that he'd fail him. Those eyes, sparkling with precocious rage, were finding him again, all the way across the room. It was stupid but he felt they were calling out to him, imploring him to come to his rescue.

Magic eyes.

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Max went out and tried to find a quiet bar where he could have a drink and think things through, but everywhere he passed was full of people, most of them a generation younger than he, most of them happy and loud. Bill Clinton had been reelected president. Celebrations everywhere. Not his scene. F

decided to buy a bottle of Jack Daniels at a liquor store instead.

While he was looking for a store, he bumped into a guy in a white puffy jacket and ski hat pulled down almost to his eyes. Max apologized. Something fell out of the man's jacket and landed at his feet. A clear plastic Ziploc bag with five fat joints rolled tampon-style. Max picked it up and turned to give it to the man, but he was gone.

He slipped the joints into his coat pocket and carried on walking until he found a liquor store. They were out of Jack. They had other whiskeys, but nothing came close to a hit of Jack.

Of course, there was always the reefer.

He bought a cheap plastic lighter.

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Back in the day, Max Mingus and his partner Joe Liston had liked nothing better than to unwind with a little reefer they got off a snitch dealer called Five Fingers. Five'd feed them certified busts and throw in a few free ounces of Caribbean Queen--a very potent strain of Jamaican grass he used himself.

It was the best shit Max had ever had, way better than the year-old garbage he'd just smoked.

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An hour later, he sat on his bed, staring intently at the wall, vaguely aware of the lurchy feeling in his stomach.

He lay back and closed his eyes.

He thought of Miami.

Home sweet home.

He lived near Hobie Beach, on Key Biscayne, off the Rickenbacker Causeway. On a good evening, he and Sandra used to sit out on the porch and watch downtown Miami in all its hypnotic, neon-lit splendor, the smell of Biscayne Bay wafting in on the cool breeze, fish and boat oil mixed in. No matter how many times they took in the view, it was always different. Manhattan had nothing on his hometown on a good day. They liked to talk about the future then, right then when life was good and he'd promised to get better. To Sandra, the future meant starting a family.

Max should have told her about the vasectomy he'd had a few months before they'd met, but he'd never had the--yeah, he'd never had *the balls*.

How could he bring children into the world after seeing what was left of the ones he found in his line of work, the ones he had to pick up and reassemble piece by piece? He couldn't. He'd never let his kids out of his sight. He'd lock them up and throw away the key. He'd stop them going to school and playing outside and visiting friends, in case they got snatched. He'd run background checks on all his relatives and in-laws in case they were hiding pedo convictions. What kind of life would that be--for them, for his wife, for him? None at all. Best to forget having a family, best to forget continuing the cycle, best to shut it down completely.

1981: that had been a bad time for him, a shit era. 1981: the year of Solomon Boukman, a gang leader from Little Haiti. 1981: the year of the King of Swords.

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Sandra would have understood, if he'd been honest with her from the start, but when they'd first started

dating he was still in his confirmed-bachelor mode, lying to every woman he met, pretending he was long-term prospect, telling them whatever they wanted to hear so he could fuck them and run. He had plenty of opportunities to come clean with her before they got married, but he thought he'd lost her. She came from a big family and loved children.

Now he regretted not reversing the vasectomy when he'd had the chance. He'd thought about it a year into his marriage, when being with Sandra had started changing him for the better and, with it, little by little, changing his attitudes toward starting a family. It would have meant everything to him to still have something of her left behind, even a trace he could love and cherish as he had loved and cherished her.

He thought about their house again.

They had a large kitchen with a counter in the middle. He used to sit there at night, trying to get his head around a case that was keeping him awake. Sometimes Sandra would join him.

He saw her again now, dressed in a T-shirt and slippers, hair pillow-frazzled, a glass of water in one hand, Charlie's headshot in another.

"I think you should take this case, Max," she said, looking across at him, her eyes all puffed up with broken sleep.

"Why?" he heard himself ask.

"Because you got no choice, baby," she said. "It's that or you know what."

He woke up with a start, fully dressed on the bed, staring at the blank ceiling, his mouth dry and tasting of rotted beef.

The room stank of stale reefer, taking him right back to his cell after Velasquez had taken a nightcap hit before saying his prayers in Latin.

Max stood up and staggered over to the desk, twenty jackhammers busting out of his cranium. He was still mildly stoned. He opened the window and the freezing-cold air tore into the room. He took a few deep breaths. The fog in his head retreated.

He decided to take a shower and change his clothes.

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"Mr. Carver? It's Max Mingus."

It was nine a.m. He'd gone to a diner and eaten a big breakfast--four-egg omelet, four pieces of toast, orange juice, and two pots of coffee. He'd thought things through one more time, the pros and cons, the risk factor, the money. Then he'd found a phone booth.

Carver sounded slightly out of breath when he answered, as if he was cooling down from a morning run.

"I'll find your son," Max said.

"That's great news!" Carver almost shouted.

"I'll need the terms and conditions in writing."

"Of course," Carver said. "Come by the club in two hours. I'll have a contract ready."

"OK."

"When will you be able to start?"

"Assuming I can get a flight, I'll be in Haiti on Tuesday."

BACK IN MIAMI, Max took a cab from the airport to his house. He asked the driver to take the long way around, down Le Jeune Road, so he could check out Little Havana and Coral Gables to get a feel for how far his hometown had come in seven years, check the pulse beating between the poles, from barrio to billionaires' row.

Max's father-in-law had been looking after the house. He'd picked up the bills. Max owed him \$3,000 but that wasn't a problem, because Carver had given him a \$25,000 cash advance in New York when he'd signed the contract. He'd played dumb and brought Dave Torres with him to read through it and witness it. It had been funny watching Torres and Carver pretend they'd never met. Lawyers are great actors, second only in talent to their guilty clients.

Max stared out of the passenger window but not much was getting through. Miami: Seven Years Later was passing him by in a glistening blur of cars, more cars, palm trees, and blue sky. It had been raining when the plane touched down, one of those almighty Sunshine State soakings where the raindrops hit the ground so hard they bounce. The downpour had stopped a few minutes before he'd walked out of the airport. He couldn't focus on the outside when there was so much going on within. He was thinking about returning to his old home. He hoped his in-laws hadn't decided to spring a surprise welcome-back party on him. They were good-hearted, always well-intentioned people, and he was just the sort of good-hearted, well-intentioned shit they'd pull.

They'd passed Little Havana and Coral Gables and he hadn't even noticed. Now they were on Vizcaya main highway and heading for the Rickenbacker Causeway.

Sandra had always met him at the airport when he'd been away on a case, or out of town to meet a potential client. She'd ask him how it had gone, although she could always tell, she said, by looking at him. They'd walk out of the Arrivals section and she'd leave him waiting outside the terminal while she went and got the car. If things had gone well, he'd do the driving. On the way home, he'd tell her what had happened and what he'd done to make it so. By the time they'd reached the front door, he'd have talked the case dry and the subject would be closed, never to be mentioned again. Sometimes he'd come out into Arrivals beaming, triumphant, vindicated, having flown out someplace on a wild hunch that had turned up one of those golden leads that bring a case to a swift and happy conclusion. Those occasions were few and far between, but they were always Occasions. They'd go out dancing, to dinner, or down The L Bar if there were other people to thank. But two times out of three Sandra'd do the driving, because she'd have read failure in Max's body language, resigned despair in his face. She'd make light small talk while he sat and brooded in silence, staring out at the sky through the windshield. She'd sprinkle domestic trivialities in his thought stream, stuff about mended curtains and cleaned carpets and new household appliances, stuff to let him know that their life went on despite the deaths he'd uncovered and had to report back to a hoping-against-hope spouse or relative or friend.

She'd always been there, waiting at the barrier, the face for him.

He'd looked for her, of course, when he'd come through Arrivals. He'd looked for her in the faces of the women who might have been waiting for men, but none of them looked as she always had.

He couldn't go back to the house. Not now. He wasn't ready for that museum of happy memories.

"Driver? Keep driving, don't take the turn," Max said as he heard the indicator lights go on.

"Where we goin'?"

"The Radisson Hotel, North Kendall Drive."

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"Hey Max Mingus! Wassappenin' wit'chu?" Joe Liston's voice boomed down the phone when Max called him from his hotel room.

"Good to hear your voice, Joe. How you been?"

"Good, Max, good. You home now?"

"No. I'm staying at the Radisson in Kendall for a few days."

"What's wrong wit' your house, man?"

"Sandra's cousins are there," Max lied. "I thought I'd give them the run of the place a while longer."

"Yeah?" Joe said, chuckling. "They got ID?"

"ID?"

"You're a big fuckin' hero 'round here, Mingus, don't you go spoilin' it," Joe said, losing the chuckle. "Ain't *no one* at your house, man. I've been sendin' a patrol car up and down your street on the hour every hour since Sandra passed."

Max should have known better. He felt embarrassed.

"I ain't gonna be thinkin' more or less of you 'cause you're hurtin'. I *will* think less of you if you start playin' me for some fool that just got off the bus from Retard City, Ohio," Joe said, admonishing him as he probably did his children, cutting the reproach with a guilt-inducer.

Max didn't say anything. Neither did Joe. Max heard the sounds of office life going on through the receiver--conversations, phones ringing, doors opening and closing, pagers. Joe was probably used to his children apologizing about now, and then crying. Joe would pick them up and squeeze them and tell them it was OK, but not to do it again. Then he'd give them a kiss on the forehead and put them down.

"I'm sorry, Joe," Max said. "It's been hard."

"*No es nada, mi amigo,*" Joe said, after a deliberate pause meant to make Max think he was evaluating his sincerity.

"But it's gonna *stay* hard for you as long as you keep runnin' away. You got to go to the mountains otherwise that sucker's gonna go for you," Joe said. Probably what he told his kids when they complained about their homework being difficult.

"I know," Max said. "I'm working on it right now. In fact, that's one of the reasons I was calling. I need a couple of favors. Records, old files, anything you've got on an Allain Carver. He's Haitian and--"

"I know him," Joe said. "Missin' son, right?"

"Yeah."

"Came in here a while back and filed a report."

"I thought the kid went missing in Haiti?"

"Someone reported they'd seen him here in Hialeah."

"And?"

"That someone was some crazy old lady claimed she had visions."

"Did you check it out?"

Joe laughed--big and hearty laughter, but dry and cynical too--classic cop's laugh, the way you get after more than two decades on the job.

"Max? We started doin' *that* we'd be lookin' for little green men in North Miami Beach. That ole lady from Little Haiti. That kid's face is everyplace--stuck on everythin'--walls, doors, stores--I bet it's the water they drink, too--his face and the fiddy-thousand-dollar reward for information."

Max thought about Carver's initial campaign in Haiti. The Miami version had probably yielded the same results.

"You got an address for the woman?"

"You takin' the case, right?" Joe said. He sounded worried.

"Yeah."

"Main reason Carver came to see me was he wanted to get in touch wit'chu. I hear you played hard get? What changed your mind?"

"I need the money."

Joe didn't say anything. Max heard him scribbling something down.

"You'll need a piece," Joe said.

"That was the second favor."

Max was banned from owning a gun for life. He'd expected Joe to refuse.

"And the first?"

"I'll need a copy of everything you've got on the Carver kid, plus his family."

He heard more scribbling.

"No problem," Joe said. "How about we meet at The L tonight, say 'round eight?"

"On a *Friday*? How about someplace quiet?"

"The L's got this new lounge bar? Away from the main one? It's so quiet you can hear a flea fart."

"OK." Max laughed.

"It'll be good to see you again, Max. *Real* good," Joe said.

"You too, Big Man," Max said.

Joe was going to say something and then stopped. Then he tried again and stopped again. Max could hear it in the slight sucking noises he was making as his mouth opened and he took in the right amount of air to launch the words massed at the back of his throat.

They still had it, their old telepathy.

Joe was worried about something.

"What's bugging you, Joe?"

"You *sure* you wanna go to Haiti?" Joe asked. "'Cause it ain't too late to back out."

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