

Death's Little Helpers

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“As a husband, he was a lying, selfish prick,” Nina Sachs said, and lit yet another cigarette. Her silver lighter caught the late-April sun as it came through the big windows. She flicked a strand of auburn hair away from her face and blew a plume of smoke at the high ceiling. “And as a father, he’s no better. But he’s our meal ticket, Billy’s and mine, and if something’s happened to him—if the cash is going to stop—I want to know about it sooner, not later.”

Nina Sachs was a few inches over five feet tall, and wiry. Her short straight hair was pulled into a blunt ponytail, away from a pale elfin face that was full of motion. Grins and frowns and ironic twists flickered by, and I saw a lot of her teeth, which were uneven but not unattractive. Her hands were quick and so were her hazel eyes. Nina Sachs was close to forty, but despite the chain-smoking she looked ten years younger.

“What makes you think something’s happened to him?” I asked.

She crossed her legs and uncrossed them and regarded her small bare feet and her toenails, which were painted apple green. She crossed her legs once more and finally tucked them beneath her. She fiddled with one of her silver earrings and picked with a thumbnail at a fleck of paint on her black yoga pants. She took another hit off the Benson & Hedges.

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"I've got a picture of him somewhere," she said, and uncurled herself from the green leather sofa. She crossed the loft with quick steps, opened the center drawer of an ebony desk, and began rummaging.

I didn't need a photograph to recognize her ex-husband. Though he hadn't been on television much lately, anyone who watched the cable business channels over the past few years had seen plenty of Gregory Danes. Still, I let her go on searching. I was happy for the distance. Between the smoking and the fidgeting, she was making me edgy.

"What makes you think something's happened?" I asked again. She pulled the desk drawer out and dumped its contents on the desktop. She sifted through the pile, her back to me as she spoke.

"Five weeks ago—right before he was supposed to pick up Billy for the weekend—he called to say he couldn't make it. He was all pissy about something and said he was taking time off—going away someplace—and had to postpone." A box of paper clips slid off the heap and scattered on the floor. Nina cursed and kept searching.

"He's canceled last-minute plenty of times, so I wasn't shocked. I said *Fine, whatever*, and we rescheduled for three weeks later. So three weeks comes, and we're here waiting for him to get Billy, and he's a no-show. No call, no message—no word at all. I tried his place, but there was no answer. I left messages on his machine and got nothing back." She turned to look at me and took another long drag on her cigarette. "That was nearly two weeks ago. Since then, I've tried his cell phone, his office, left more messages . . . and heard nothing." She ran her fingers across the base of her throat. "Maybe he just doesn't want to come back, or maybe . . . I don't know what. That's why I'm talking to you."

"What did they say at his office?" I asked.

Nina snorted. "At Pace-Loyette? They didn't say shit. All they gave me was a runaround and a weird vibe." Some envelopes and matchbooks joined the paper clips on the floor. She stared at them.

"Weird how?"

Nina turned back to the desk and started picking through the heap again. "My lawyer told me you were a cop before this PI thing," she said.

"I was a sheriff's deputy—an investigator—upstate. What kind of weird vibe did you get from Pace-Loyette?"

Nina Sachs laughed. "Deputy John March, huh? Get out of Dodge by sundown and all that?"

“Just like that. Weird how, Nina?”

“It was . . . I don’t know . . . weird. I called his direct number—figuring I’d get his voice mail or his secretary—and instead I get bounced to some woman named Mayhew, in Corporate Communications, she says, who tells me Mr. Danes is away and I can leave a message with her. When she found out who I was, she got all freaked and transferred me to some legal guy. He started asking questions and finally it dawned on me: They don’t know where Greg is either.” Her cigarette was down nearly to the filter. She squinted at it and stubbed it out in a small metal bowl on the desk.

“He didn’t say anything to you about where he was going?”

Nina shook her head and fished her cigarettes and lighter from a pants pocket. “He doesn’t tell me shit like that.”

“He ever do anything like this before—just take off?”

Nina shrugged. “I guess so.”

I waited for more but it didn’t come. “Care to elaborate?”

“There were a couple of times. Once, right after we were separated, he split for maybe ten days. And after the divorce was final he did it again, for two weeks. And I guess there was a third time a few years back—not long after the SEC people first called him in—he took off for a week or so.”

“And each of those times he just up and left—with no notice and no word to anyone?”

“He didn’t say jackshit to me, I know that, and he didn’t call either. He just went away for a while, and then he came back.”

“So what’s different about this?”

She shrugged once more. “Maybe nothing, but . . . he’s never been away this long before. And before, he called to cancel with the kid—he’s never just been a no-show.” Nina turned to the desk again and started pushing the mess around. “How’d you get from upstate to down here?” she asked.

I sighed. I’d been through all this two days ago, when her lawyer, Maggie Lind, had phoned me to set up this meet. But what the hell.

“I’m from down here. I came back when I was done with being a cop.”

“How come you’re not a cop anymore?” she asked. “You get into trouble?”

“I quit.”

“I knew it was around here,” she said. She padded across the floor, trailing smoke, and handed me a photograph. She perched again at the end of the sofa.

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It was a Polaroid, ridged and faded, and it showed Nina and Danes side by side at a glass-topped table, under a big striped umbrella. There were palm trees and leafy plantings and part of a swimming pool in the background. Danes was dressed in canvas pants and a guayabera, and Nina wore a gauzy caftan over a wet tank suit. Her hair was longer and her face was fuller and less interesting—more conventionally and forgettably pretty.

Danes looked much as he did on television, the same wayward straw-colored hair, the same regular, somehow unfinished features, the same shadowed eyes and thin lips and vaguely mocking smile: the same overall impression of precocity and arrogance. His hand was on Nina's shoulder and she didn't seem to mind, and I figured the photo was at least ten years old—taken before the divorce, before Danes had become the head of equity research at Pace-Loyette and ubiquitous on the business channels, before his long slide down. I looked at Nina.

"How about his friends or family?" I asked. "Have you been in touch with them?"

"I wouldn't know who to try," she said. "He didn't have a lot of friends back when we were married, and I bet he has less now. And I sure as hell don't know any of them.

"And as far as family goes, Billy and me are pretty much it. Greg's old man died when he was five. His mother remarried, but she and the stepfather died just after Greg got out of B school. He's got a creepy half brother somewhere in Jersey, but I don't know when Greg last spoke to him." She smiled and blew out some smoke. "Pathetic, isn't it?"

"You said he sounded *pissy* the last time you spoke. Any idea what about?"

She shook her head again. "We don't exactly confide in each other, you know? We don't have that kind of relationship."

"What kind of relationship do you have?" I asked.

Nina got no farther than a smirk when a cell phone chirped. She cursed and tracked the sound to the kitchen, beneath some sections of the *Times* that were spread on the counter. She bent her head and spoke in low tones. I got up and stretched.

Windows covered one wall of the loft, from floor to ceiling. The metal-framed glass was thick and clouded, and some of the panes opened on a pivot. I pushed on one, and a small breeze came in. Sachs's place was in Brooklyn, on the third floor of an old factory building off Water Street,

tucked between the Brooklyn and the Manhattan bridges and near enough to the Brooklyn–Queens Expressway that I could hear the rush and rumble of traffic. The outside air was warm, tinged with exhaust and soot and the sour, salty smell of the harbor and the East River. Even so, it was better than the heavy cloud of cigarette smoke and paint and old food that hung inside. I took a deep breath and looked down at the cobbled streets. They were quiet on a Monday morning. The loading docks across the way were empty.

Once upon a time, I'd roamed this neighborhood on a regular basis. It was twenty years ago, and I was in the eighth grade and hanging with a kid named Jimmy Farrelly. Jimmy lived in Brooklyn Heights, in a brownstone near the Promenade, and we'd ride the subway from Manhattan after school and walk to the river from the Clark Street stop. If the neighborhood had a name back then we didn't know it, and if any artists lived there we didn't care. We were drawn by the derelict factories and abandoned warehouses, by the rotting piers and the lattice of stone and ironwork overhead, and by a consuming interest in smoking dope, drinking beer, and learning, from Jimmy's neighbor Rita and her friend Angela, the finer points of French-kissing.

A lot of artists had moved to the area since those days, looking to homestead after being priced out of places like SoHo and TriBeCa and the East Village. The developers had followed them, and then came the realtors—who bestowed a name on our old playground: DUMBO, for Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass. With the name had come immaculate art galleries, like the one downstairs, sleek coffee bars, like the one across the street, and designer grocery stores, like the one around the corner. The march of progress.

If she hadn't been an early homesteader, then Nina had paid a fortune for her place. She had an entire floor—an easy 4,000 square feet—with good light and a swatch of downtown Manhattan skyline in sight, if you craned your neck. The walls were unadorned brick, faded to a warm rose color, and the floors were cement, finished and sealed so that they were smooth and wet-looking. The high ceilings were hung with new ductwork.

The loft was divided into four distinct areas. At one end, behind white Sheetrock walls, were bedrooms and a bath. Next to these was an open kitchen, with pale wood cabinets, steel counters, and an armor-clad oven. Tatami mats defined the living area, which was dominated by a sleek L-shaped leather sofa, some matching chairs, a green glass coffee table, and

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tall freestanding shelves. The other end of the loft, walled off by unpainted Sheetrock and a white fabric scrim, was Nina's studio.

The space was impressive and also a mess. Besides the small havoc Nina had created around the desk, there was a collapsed stack of dog-eared art journals near the sofa and another on one of the chairs. There was an empty bottle of merlot on the coffee table, with two sticky-looking glasses beside it. Two more bottles were on the kitchen counter, along with the remains of several meals. The sink was full of dirty dishes, and everywhere the ashtrays were brimming. A mess—but a grown-up one.

I walked slowly around the living room, and nowhere did I see traces of Billy. There were no schoolbooks or comic books, no video games or backpacks, no sneakers or skateboards. And while there was clothing strewn about, on the backs of chairs, on countertops, and crumpled at the base of an overloaded coatrack, none of it seemed to belong to a twelve-year-old boy.

Nina was still muttering into the phone, and I drew back the white curtain and stepped into her studio. It was a larger space than the living room, and more sparsely equipped. A big drafting table and two elaborate easels stood in the center of the room. Three metal trolleys were parked nearby, laden with brushes, tubes of paint, solvents, palettes, and other tools of her trade. There was a steel utility sink along the opposite wall, and to one side of it some metal shelves and more supplies. A gilt-framed mirror—eight feet high at least—leaned against the wall on the other side. A commercial fan and two reflecting lights stood in one corner, near a scruffy armchair and a pint-sized stereo.

By comparison with the rest of the place, Nina's studio was immaculate. The supplies on the shelves and trolleys were organized and tidy. The floor was bare and clean. The sink was empty but for a half-dozen brushes drying in a precise row at its edge.

Some pencil sketches were taped to the Sheetrock on my right: two of a female nude draped in an armchair, a third of the same figure kneeling, with head inclined, and two more of something that looked like the Flatiron Building, set on a bluff over a churning sea. They were nicely done, with a sure delicate touch. There was a canvas on one of the easels, and I walked around to take a look.

I'd done a little online homework before my meeting with Nina and knew she had enjoyed some success as an artist. She'd had exhibitions in New York and Boston and London that were—insofar as I could decrypt the reviews—well received. Her work had been acquired by some notable

private and corporate collections, and recently she'd been picked up by museums in Chicago and Dallas and LA. But I'd not actually seen any of her paintings, and I didn't know what to expect.

It was striking. The canvas was about three feet high by two feet wide, and the painting was in oil, with blues and grays predominant. I recognized the subjects from the sketches on the wall. The triangular building was at the right of the picture, set back, and the angry sea swirled in the foreground and to the left. The bowed kneeling figure appeared in a window, halfway up the side of the building.

But the final renderings were very different from the sketches. On canvas, the building was taller but more delicate and somehow resembled an ocean liner. The sea was more muscular and aggressive, and it merged without horizon into an empty, icy sky. The sea took on another aspect as well, of a roiling complex of city streets into which the building might at once sink and crumble. The kneeling figure was different too, more sinuous and sexual, and something—in the set of her shoulders or the angle of her head or the fall of her hair—left you certain she was crying.

Nor could the sketches hint at what Nina did with color and light. Her ocean was as threatening as a funnel cloud, and her sky as desolate as winter twilight. The yellow corona around the kneeling figure was as bleak and forlorn as a bare lightbulb.

"You find what you were looking for? Or you want to go through my underwear drawer too." I hadn't heard Nina come in. She was standing by the drafting table, her cell phone in one hand, a smoldering cigarette in the other. She was stiff and angry.

"This is nice," I said, gesturing toward the painting.

"Great. Swell. Next time, wait for an invitation. I'll be off the phone in a second—now get the fuck out of here." She did not wait for a reply but returned quickly to the kitchen and her conversation.

"I'll say it again: I don't do the installation shit. You got questions, talk to Nes, not me, okay?" Nina watched me as I walked into the living room. I stood by the windows. "I don't know—I'm not the answering service, either. Call the gallery and leave a message."

She snapped the phone shut and tossed it on the counter. She took a drag and looked at me through the smoke.

"You're a nosy bastard, aren't you?"

"It's part of what you're paying for," I said. "But maybe we should rethink that." Nina stared at me for a while, and then the tightness went out of her jaw.

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“Okay, I was a little raggy. Sorry. All right?”

I looked at her for a couple of beats and nodded. Nina smiled. She came back into the living room and sat on the sofa.

“Armed truce,” she said. She saw my puzzlement and smirked. “You asked me before what kind of relationship I’ve got with Greg, so I’m telling you: It’s an armed truce.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning we deal with each other when we have to but neither of us likes it. You know what I think of him; well, he feels pretty much the same way about me. He doesn’t like the way I live or the people I hang out with. He doesn’t like me. But we deal with each other anyway—for the kid.”

“You have joint custody?”

Nina took another drag and cast about for an ashtray. “Basically,” she said.

“What does that mean?”

Nina scowled and looked like she was going to bite, but she shook it off. “We have an informal kind of deal. Technically, I’ve got custody and he’s entitled to monthly visitation. But we arrange things between us and he ends up seeing Billy more than that—when he doesn’t cancel.”

“He pay child support?” Nina nodded. “Alimony?” Another nod. “Everything current?”

“Until about a week ago, when the check didn’t show.”

“If he’s in violation of your settlement agreements, you can take that to court. They might even help you find him.”

Nina’s mouth puckered and she shook her head. “You sound like my lawyer, for chrissakes. But trust me, court battles are definitely *not* the way to deal with Greg.”

I nodded and thought for a while. “You said he doesn’t have many friends. How about enemies? Does he have any of those?”

She laughed out loud. “Only a zillion or so. Being as fair as I can, John, I got to say that Greg is just not a likable guy. Smart, yes—even funny, in a nasty sort of way—but not likable. And besides the people who know him and don’t like him, there are all those people who followed his stock advice. I don’t expect they’re too happy with Greg either.”

Nina had a point, and I laughed a little too.

“Maggie told me you had good references,” she said. I nodded. “She said she didn’t know you personally but everyone she talked to gave you high marks for smart and persistent.” I didn’t disagree. Nina went on. “I hired a PI once before, you know, in the divorce. He was about twice your

age and twice your size, and I had to talk real slow around him and use small words.”

“What did he do for you?”

“Pictures, credit card receipts—the usual divorce stuff. He did his job.”

“So why didn’t you call him for this?”

“Because I didn’t trust him as far as I could throw him. Plus, his liver’s probably given out by now.” She stubbed out her cigarette and looked at me. “So how about it—are you going to do this for me?”

I looked back at her. “Why haven’t you talked to the cops?”

“The cops?” Nina Sachs looked appalled. “Why the hell would I do that?”

“Because they have a whole bunch of people who have nothing to do but work missing persons cases, and they have resources and access that I don’t. If you really think something bad has happened to Greg, the cops are the way to go.”

Nina shook her head vigorously and dug in her pocket for another smoke. “No—fucking—way. Cops! That’s all I need. You know what Greg would say if I brought them into his business, snooping around? As torqued up as he is about his reputation? Jesus—he’d go ballistic.”

I held up a hand. “You may not have much choice in the matter. His employers could file a report—if they haven’t already—or a friend or neighbor could. Or the press might get hold of it. On a slow news day, they’d love a story like this.

“If something *has* happened to him, he might be grateful that you called the cavalry. Either that or he’ll be beyond caring. And so what if he gets pissed at you for calling the cops; what do you care? You don’t seem to like the guy much anyway.”

Nina fired up another cigarette and shook her head some more. “I may not like him, but I’ve got to deal with him, for chrissakes. He’d make my life miserable over something like that—mine and Billy’s both. Trust me.” She took a drag. “If the cops get into this, let it be on account of somebody else, not me.” Nina looked at me, waiting for an argument, but I wasn’t going to give her one.

While I’d meant what I said about the police, I also knew what they were likely to tell Nina, or anyone else who filed a report: that there was nothing illegal in a grown man going missing, and nothing particularly unusual about it either; it happened every day, all across the country, and only rarely was foul play involved. They would take down the facts, and, as

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the guy had a history of disappearing for weeks at a time and there seemed no reason to suspect wrongdoing, the case would join a lot of others on a very big pile. There were many things the cops could do that I couldn't—at least not as easily, or legally—but there was something I could do that they wouldn't: make finding Gregory Danes my highest priority.

“So, how about it?” Nina asked again. “You going to do this or what?” I looked at her and nodded, and she gave me a quick, crooked smile.

I had a few background questions for Nina and she answered them and I was about to wrap up when we heard a key in the lock. The front door swung open and a dark-haired woman and a boy came in.

The woman was five-ten and supple, with cat-black hair precisely cut to shoulder length. It was parted on the side and fell in a glossy wing across her forehead. She had a long face, olive skin, and large almond eyes that were dark and vigilant. Her nose was straight and strong, and there were lines around her wide mouth and in the gap between her brows. I put her age south of forty, but not far south. I thought she might be Latin or Asian or both.

She wore a green silk suit with a simple cut and a thick gold chain on her neck. She fingered the chain absently as she looked around the apartment. She smiled at Nina, and the somber traces went out of her face. The smile disappeared when she looked at me.

The boy, I knew, must be Billy. He was small—five foot zero—and slight. His hair was very short and auburn, like his mother's, and he had her thin face too, though not her pallor. His eyes were watery blue and smudged-looking like his father's, and his mouth was thin-lipped. But there was none of Gregory Danes's mocking superiority in his son's face, at least not yet. Instead there was petulance and anger.

He wore sneakers that looked like bowling shoes and baggy jeans and a navy-blue parka, too heavy for a warm spring day. He shrugged it off and left it where it fell. Underneath, he wore a black T-shirt, too large for him, with part of a song lyric printed in white across the chest. *Like sittin' on pins and needles/Things fall apart, it's scientific*

It was unattributed, but I recognized it: Talking Heads, “Wild, Wild Life.” Everything old is new again. Billy's gaze skated across his mother and me and never paused. He headed for the kitchen, his skinny freckled arms stiff.

Nina stood and looked at the dark woman, who closed the door and returned a heavy key ring to her green leather handbag.

“The doctor see him?” Nina asked.

The dark woman glanced at me and nodded. “She saw him and said he is fine. She said he had no fever; it may be a virus that is going around.” The woman’s voice had a nice timbre, and her English was quick and exact but heavily accented. Spanish. “He is fine to go to school—even this afternoon if he likes.” Her dark eyes flicked toward the kitchen.

“He doesn’t like,” Billy said, in a reedy voice. His head was buried in the refrigerator. The dark woman raised an eloquent brow. Nina jammed her cigarette into an ashtray. Billy leaned on the open door of the fridge and stared inside. Nina put an awkward hand in his short hair.

“C’mon, honey, Nes will fix you something—or we can order in—and then I’ll run you over to school. You don’t want to miss another day.”

Billy twisted away from her, his shoulders hunched. “I don’t want anything and I’m not going to school,” he whined. “I still feel like shit.” He took a last disgusted look in the refrigerator and disappeared into the bedrooms. Nina closed the refrigerator door and looked after him. The dark woman sighed heavily.

“He is just—,” she began, but Nina cut her off.

“Don’t say it, Nes. I know what he’s *just*—he’s just a moody son of a bitch.” She shook her head and followed after Billy. I heard doors opening and closing and tight, muffled voices.

I turned to the dark woman, who was looking around the room. She stared at the mess on the ebony desk and pursed her lips. She put her green bag down and took off her suit jacket and somehow found a spot for it on the coatrack. Her ivory blouse was sleeveless and her arms were sinewy. She sniffed the air and wrinkled her nose. She flicked a wall switch; somewhere a big fan whirred and air began to move and freshen in the loft.

She picked up the desk drawer, slid it halfway into the desk, and swept the pile on the desktop inside. She knelt and scooped up the paper clips and envelopes and matchbooks, tossed them into the drawer, and closed it. Then she turned to the coatrack.

Her movements were quick and efficient and practiced. Clothes were plucked from the floor and the furniture and folded or hung. Journals were stacked on a shelf. Tables were cleared, counters were cleaned, and dishes scraped, rinsed, and put in the dishwasher. Her heels made hard sounds as she moved about the loft. She spoke not a word and paid me less attention than the furniture.

With her advent and Billy’s, I felt as if I’d suddenly become audience

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to a piece of theater—something contemporary and far-off-Broadway—staged not so much for my benefit as for that of the actors themselves. My business with Nina was done for the moment and I could simply have left, but I didn't. I was curious; I wanted to see it play out. I got up and gathered a few full ashtrays and carried them into the kitchen. The dark woman was at the sink and looked at me.

"Garbage?" I asked.

She looked at me some more and finally pointed. "Under there," she said.

I emptied the ashtrays in the trash and went out to get some more. When I returned, the dark woman was drying her hands on a dish towel.

"I was rude. I apologize. It was a very hectic morning." She put out a hand. "I am Ines Icasa. You are the detective, no?" Ines—Nes.

"John March," I said.

Her grip was firm. "Come, sit," she said, and I followed her into the living room. She retrieved her purse and we sat on the sofa. She took a gold lighter and a blue package of Gitanes from her bag and dug in the package for a cigarette. It was empty.

"*Mierda*," she said softly, and crumpled the pack. There was a fresh box of B&Hs on the coffee table, and Ines slit it open with a sharp well-tended thumbnail. She drew out a cigarette, tamped it down, pinched off the filter, and fired up the ragged end.

"You have settled things with Nina? You will look for Gregory?" I looked at Ines but said nothing. She didn't seem to mind. She ran a hand through her hair and over her neck, and I saw a scar on her smooth right arm, on the inside, just below the elbow. It was wide and shiny and flat.

"It is enormous trouble to go through," she said. She exhaled a great cloud and watched the draft carry it away. "As busy as she is—she should not waste her energies." Ines turned her vigilant eyes on me. "But this is not your concern, I know," she said.

A door opened and closed and Nina Sachs stood in the kitchen. She leaned against the counter and rubbed her forehead with the heel of her palm and sighed. Ines went into the kitchen and stood very close to her and spoke softly. After a while, Nina bowed her head and rested it against Ines's breast. Ines stroked her hair and neck, and Nina ran her fingers up Ines's bare arm, from elbow to shoulder and back again. Then she leaned away slightly and turned her face up and they kissed.

They kissed slowly and for a long time, and when they finished they

stood entwined, looking at me. Ines was without expression; Nina wore a smile that was strangely like her husband's.

“You still here?” she said. “I thought we were done.”

I nodded. “I’ll call in a couple of days,” I said. “Sooner, if I learn anything.” They turned away from me and back to their soft conversation. I let myself out.