

Hanging Softly in the Night



Hanging Softly in the Night:
A Detective Nick Larson Novel

by Maria Elena Alonso-Sierra

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A Small Note from the Author

The Sixteenth Police Precinct in New York City does not exist. Neither do the characters who work in it. Everything is imagination and creation.

New York City is, well, New York.

Acronyms, however, are part and parcel of police work and report writing. It is a type of shorthand used because the names they replace are entirely too long to keep rewriting. Some may already be familiar to the reader, others not so much. So, in order to facilitate things, below is the list of acronyms used in the novel and their meanings.

ABFO – American Board of Forensic Odontology ruler used in investigations

AEW – All Elite Wrestling

AF – idiomatic expression meaning “As F*ck”

AFIS – Automated Fingerprint Identification System

ASL – American Sign Language

ATI – All Things Internet

BOLO – Be on the Lookout

CCTV – Closed Circuit Television

DA – District Attorney

DAS – Domain Awareness System

DB – Dead Body(ies)

DIY – Do-It-Yourself

DMSO – Dimethyl sulfoxide

DMV – Department of Motor Vehicles

DNA – Deoxyribonucleic acid

DUMBO – Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass

EMS – Emergency Medical Services

EMT – Emergency Medical Technician

FID – Forensic Investigations Division

GC-MS – Gas chromatography-mass spectrometry

GMOs – Genetically Modified Organisms

HEA – Happily Ever After
HIPAA – Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act
HR – Human Resources
IIT – Irresistible Impulse Test
IND – Independent Subway System subway line
IoT – Internet of Things
IRT – Interborough Rapid Transit Company subway line
IT – Information Technology
LIE – Long Island Expressway
LIRR – Long Island Rail Road
MASPEC – Mass Spectrometer
ME – Medical Examiner
MIA – Missing in Action
MJ – marijuana
MMA – Mixed Martial Arts
MO – modus operandi
MOD – Manner of death
Nixle – Real-time alert system used by law enforcement to inform communities on public safety and emergency issues
NYPD – New York City Police Department
OCD – Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
OCME – Office of Chief Medical Examiner
PBA – Police Benevolent Association (union)
PCL-R – Hare Psychopathy Checklist – Revised
PCR – Polymerase Chain Reaction
PDQ – Pretty Damn Quick
PIO – Public Information Officer
PT – Personal Time
PTO – Personal Time Off
RTCC – Real Time Crime Center
SAT – Scholastic Assessment Test
SCME – Suffolk County Medical Examiner
SNL – *Saturday Night Live* (TV comedy show)
SOS – Morse Code distress signal

STIF – Scandinavian Therapy Industry Franchisees (I made this one up)

TOD – Time of death

TXA – Tranexamic Acid

VPN – Virtual Private Network

WWE – World Wrestling Entertainment

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep...*

*The New England Primer based on Joseph Addison's essay in
The Spectator 1711.*

CHAPTER ONE

Monday, January 6

THE SCENT OF decaying flesh, human excrement, and hopelessness assailed Detective Nick Larson as he stood at the entrance of the elegant foyer of the Upper East Side brownstone.

Nick's nostrils flared in offense. He gagged. Death was a smell he never got used to.

"Ah, shit."

The vapor from Nick's words hung in the frigid January air. Another body. Just what the department needed after a week from hell. Definitely not what Nick needed, not after barely two hours of sleep.

He grabbed a couple of booties from the box laid next to the doorway, covered his shoes, and stepped inside the foyer, followed closely by Vic Sacco, his partner for close to six years.

Sacco coughed. "A bit early for the dead to be so..."

"Pungent?" Nick interjected. His face was probably an unhealthy shade of white already. He felt clammy, his skin tight with an inner cold that had nothing to do with the outside temperature. "I could have brought my car, not hitched a ride in yours," Nick muttered, covering his nostrils with his hands as best he could.

Sacco patted Nick's shoulder in commiseration. He was used to Nick's squeamishness even when they turned up a dead body. The smell from decomposition always did Nick in, the reason he always stowed a small bottle of Febreze in his car trunk to spray on the cheap dust masks he kept in the glove box. Without it now, Nick would probably dry-heave throughout the entire investigation, or worse, throw up someplace where he wouldn't contaminate the scene.

Sacco passed him by, widening the front door. The gap acted like a vacuum cleaner, with frigid air slicing the men as it escaped. Larson panted through his mouth, his teeth a painful reminder against the miasma rushing at him in the sudden crosscurrent.

Somewhere inside the foyer a "Goddamn it!" exploded simultaneously with Nick's.

"Close the damn door." The yell came from Tish Ramos, NYPD's Forensic Investigation Division guru, who kept tagging evidence a few feet away. "It's twelve fucking degrees out there!"

Sacco ignored the order.

"Ramos, I don't care if it's fifty below," Sacco said. "It's either blue balls or my clothes smelling like shit all day. Guess which I prefer?" His bull-like head jerked in Larson's direction. "Back to work."

n't had time to shave or dress neatly, as was his habit. After shift, he'd fallen face down on the couch and hadn't moved until the call had come through twenty minutes ago. For once, he'd be grateful for the call. It had interrupted a recent, recurring nightmare.

"What are you doing here?" Ramos asked. "You're not on call and this isn't a domestic."

"Another flu casualty," Nick croaked, gagged, and rubbed his eyes. He watched as one of the most meticulous women in their Forensic Investigations Division neatly deposited evidence into the department euphemistically called doggy bags. As usual, Ramos looked sterile, dressed in white, and breathed sterile.

"Captain's tired of juggling the domino meltdown with personnel calling in sick," Nick told her. "We're it for a while, unless we fold. Not that I mind, but why the personal touch here, Ramos? This call came in as suicide."

"The first responder thought so—at first." Ramos uncurled from her crouch, all five feet of her, and gestured toward the rear of the townhouse. "Stan worked with me on a similar case. A supposed suicide about two months ago. When he saw the victim, his instinct kicked in. She is dead. No evidence of thrashing. No rope burns."

Nick stared at Ramos, hoping for a denial and knowing he wouldn't get one.

Thrashing.

Rope burns.

Ramos stared back. Regret was there in her chocolate eyes, underscored with a wallop of pain. Nick recognized the look, having known Ramos for three years now, ever since she'd come to work for FID. She knew there was only one type of incident that affected Nick after the death of his wife, Angela, his ex-wife. Only one. The main reason Nick's captain avoided giving him suicides for the department. That is, until Nick got his shit back together.

"Hanging." Nick's voice sounded rough.

Ramos nodded.

Sacco cursed.

"Who called it in?" Nick asked. Anything to delay the inevitable.

Ramos's chin jerked toward the uniform. Nick recognized him. Stan Horowitz had fifty years under his belt and was a staple at the Sixteenth Precinct. Always dependable, detail oriented, especially, experienced.

Horowitz studied his clipboard and, without prompting, began giving details.

"911 called in the possible 10-29 at oh four hundred from a neighbor across the backyard, Sacco. Witness is a Pradeep Mansoor. His bedroom gives him a bird's eye view of the crime scene. He called it in after he realized what he was looking at."

"Witness coming or going?" Nick asked.

"Yoga before work," Horowitz replied.

"Bet you the sight fucked up his Pranayama," Ramos commented and immediately held up her hand. "And before you give me your usual wise-ass quip, Sacco, that's a Yogi term for breathers. Expand your vocabulary."

Nick's lip twitched. Sacco blew Ramos a kiss.

"Let's start canvassing the area, Stan." Nick turned to Horowitz. "Have two uniforms search the area for evidence. We'll need to interview the witness, Pradeep Mansoor."

he attached sunroom at the rear of the brownstone. “Eyeballing it, the victim was probably gagged and placed in the noose like a rag doll. cursory exam on the neck doesn’t show significant trauma. Totes will tell us more once he gets the victim on the slab.”

Christopher Millsap, affectionately known as Totes, was medical examiner for New York City. Several years ago, some wise-ass had come up with a brilliant syllogism after a fire on the scene. Amid the chaos on the scene, where sixteen people had been trampled and seven had died from smoke inhalation, the Office of Chief Medical Examiner had toted body bags to the morgue for hours until the scene had been cleared. To everyone’s misfortune, though, whoever had come up with the affectionate moniker had made it stick, which had truly pissed off Millsap. And he didn’t piss off Christopher Millsap, ME. Soon after, Totes returned the favor by baptizing every person in the precinct with ridiculous nicknames. Now, when anyone was pissed, they used those nicknames to piss everyone else off. Just a wonderful tit-for-tat, piss-off game at the Sixteenth

Ramos paused on the threshold and looked at Nick. “Ready?”

Nick’s body tautened. Past whispered conversations teased the recesses of his mind.

Come to me, Nicky. Save me.

You don’t want to be saved, Angie. You want to rip and drag me to your level. I’m tired of your shit. Go bleed someone else.

His stomach heaved, and he broke out in a sweat despite the cold settling through the door into the tiled hallway. He clenched his jaw and his fists. He was Angela’s legacy: a pathetic mirror of himself, corroded by guilt and scarred by recrimination. Pathetic, he knew, but he was powerful enough to top it for the moment.

Ramos stepped through the open French doors into the sunroom.

“It’s hotter than hell in here,” Sacco said, taking stock of the room as he stepped inside. Within moments, he opened his coat and flapped it.

“Thermostat set at ninety-two,” Ramos answered.

“For whose benefit? The plants or the victim?” Nick asked.

Ramos smiled. “Watch out where you step. Floor’s slippery.”

Nick entered the pentagonal sunroom. Breathed minimally. Gagged some more. Concentrated on a visual catalog of the area. During daylight, the room would absorb light through the rectangular panels of tempered glass. Now, brightness from environmentally correct lights bounced around generously, spotlighting expensive rattan furniture and tropical plants in an attempt at faux cheer. But the imitation sunshine failed to dispel the smell of tragedy. Camouflaged the body of a petite woman, dressed in a peach spaghetti-strapped nightgown, lying in the middle of this greenhouse like meat in a butcher’s freezer.

“Ramos,” Nick’s chin jerked toward the body, his voice hoarse. “You’re all goddamn considering.” Unreasonable demand, he knew.

“Hey, take your frustration out on someone else,” Ramos’s eyes reproved. “Totes hasn’t been solved yet.”

Nick’s bile rose. He tasted the acid on his tongue, and his throat muscles convulsed as he looked at the woman’s body. It was rocking gently from the breeze generated by an overhead fan, and further helped by the soft hand of the rotating earth. Nick wished, and not for the first time, he hadn’t hitched a ride with Sacco. His partner didn’t even carry a jar of Vicks VapoRub, which would at least camouflage the smell.

ed like Siamese twins, and every backyard watched a mirror image of itself barely ten y. *No privacy*. He'd rather hide within the solid walls of his apartment than be exposed , with spying or curious eyes lurking ten feet away behind tasteful window treatments.

Nick squinted, focused. "Son of a bitch." The witness was glued to his window, his silhouette a ghostly dark image against the brightness behind.

"Horowitz."

The officer's head popped around the doorway. "Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Get a uniform to the witness's apartment. Now, Horowitz. Have him close the damn blinds whatever the hell else the man has on those windows. I want him blind to what is happening at the crime scene."

Horowitz nodded and was about to disappear when Nick stopped him. "Have the uniform check through his phone. Confiscate it if you find any photos or videos."

"He's probably tweeted the fucking universe already." Ramos's words dripped with an air of criticism.

"Ramos, buck up," Sacco said. "Live video, emojis, hashtags, podcasts, and selfies are the norm now."

"More like the bane of our existence," Nick said, making a mental note to check for posts on Instagram. He simply didn't understand the hedonist (or narcissist society, take your pick) through which the world muddled, with phones as an added extra appendage, its regurgitated content more valuable than privacy or morality. There was no filter for the violent, coarse, or vulgar. Like the woman's suicide...

"By the way, first unit found a suicide letter." Ramos's tone suggested she wasn't buying. Sacco gestured, palms up, to the limp body. "First. Tell me what you see."

Nick tried to keep his composure but failed miserably, his mind substituting twisted memories for reality. His eyes registered the victim's curtain of blond hair, but his brain superimposed shoulder-length chestnut hair over it. Hazel eyes, bulging with fear and confusion, replaced the closed eyelids of this dead woman. A small mouth, howling like Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, replaced the almost peaceful lips on the now-waxy face of the woman as she lay away.

His stomach burned. His mind supplied the acid.

Nicky, I need you.

You don't need, Angie. You butcher.

If you don't come back, I'll kill myself. I swear it, Nicky. I'll kill myself.

Nick clenched his jaw. This moment proved Life was a bitch with an agenda, eager to screw you at every opportunity. His body shuddered. He wondered for the thousandth time if he'd ever be normal again.

He needed a drink.

He needed his Febreze.

He gagged.

"Here, buddy." Ramos banged a plastic Ziploc bag onto Nick's chest. "Heave away. Just make sure to lock it tight after you're done."

Sacco nodded. "That's all, Horowitz. Ramos."

Nick concentrated. The real victim came into focus. She hung like a potted plant from a crane hook hooked from the slanting ceiling. Her feet limply pointed to a dining room chair placed feet below her purpling toes. There was no sign of struggle, no evidence of that primitive instinct of survival that rears up as air is choked off. No wonder Ramos was suspicious.

Both he and Sacco put on their latex gloves.

“Unless that rope has retractable properties we don’t know of,” Sacco said, pointing to the space between the victim’s feet and the chair. “Someone helped her.”

Nick studied the woman’s bare arms. “Definitely not a do-it-yourselfer. She doesn’t have the upper body strength to hang like a monkey, place that rope around her neck, and then drop.”

“Damn uncomfortable way to commit suicide, not to mention unreliable,” Sacco agreed.

Nick turned to Ramos. “Any evidence of scraping?”

“The chair?” Ramos shook her head. “That thing hasn’t moved a millimeter since it was placed there. She doesn’t have scratches around her neck, either.”

Nick looked at his partner. Suicides by hanging were never static. Momentum, jerking, twisting, always dispersed or overturned anything within a radius of several inches. Most importantly, people jumped from their temporary platforms, not hanged themselves above them.

Ramos pointed. “Take a look.”

Sacco held the wobbly ladder Ramos had placed next to the body. Nick climbed.

“The plastic protecting the metal on that hook is ripped,” Ramos continued. “Bet the victim roped first, the cord later looped through and pulled, using the thing as a fulcrum. Lab will determine if there are traces of plastic on the rope itself. After she was hanged, the rest of the room was staged.”

Nick studied the area to which Ramos had pointed. The hook was the type used to hang heavy objects, like boats or bicycles in storage or garage areas. The plastic protector at the well of the hook, the plastic twisted, as if someone had squeezed in opposite motions, like a mop.

“Could the damage have been done previously?” Nick stepped off the ladder and held it as Sacco climbed to take a look. Staff from the medical examiner’s office began parading into the room, two of them rolling a gurney between them, mumbling excuses for their late arrival.

“Don’t think so,” Ramos said, acknowledging the newcomers with a bob of her head. “The other hook sports the same damage.”

“You take that side,” Nick said to Sacco as he stepped down.

Both men roamed the area, weaving around the furniture and the techs in the area. Nick checked the wells of all the other hooks dotting the rafters, saw signs of water damage on some, discoloration from iron rub-off on others, but nothing similar to what had happened to the victim’s hook. He caught Sacco’s attention, but his partner shook his head. He’d found nothing.

“Oh, and that’s not the best,” Ramos said, understanding the silent communication between the men. “Look at the left front leg of the chair, near the floor.”

Nick inched closer and crouched carefully. There was a clear, doughnut-like ring circling the leg. “Is that ice?” His tone was incredulous.

“Ice,” Ramos confirmed.

They stared at each other, wondering how the hell ice had wrapped itself around a suicide victim in a room steaming worse than a decaying tropical bathhouse.

"I've been working here for half an hour. The house was toasty until you clowns tilted the temperature to freezing. How on earth could ice form at the base of that chair? You're the genius detective. You tell me."

Nick interrupted before the banter between these two got out of hand. "Outage?"

Millsap maneuvered around the growing number of live bodies filling the area and headed for the body, spouting apologies for the bitch traffic on Thirty-Fourth.

"Possible, but doubtful," Ramos said. "Even if Con Ed short-circuited around the area, there's simply no time for bodily fluids to congeal that quickly."

Nick made a notation to contact Con Edison for electrical outages nearby. "When was TO-100?"

"By my thermometer," Millsap told the room in general, knowing everyone would pay attention to his voice. "She's been gone for several hours." He took the liver probe out of the victim and swabbed at the growing perspiration on his brow with a forearm. "But then, here in the room, damn Amazon hell, her body temp read will be off. Will let you know later."

Ramos crooked her finger so the men would follow her. They stepped into the colder for the body. "Even if there were power hiccups," Ramos continued, "a cursory glance doesn't show any environmental particles inside the ice. As a matter of fact, the material is too clear." She walked to the evidence collection kit, bent, and retrieved a sheet of paper cradled inside a plastic evidence bag.

Nick reached out. "Is that the suicide note?"

"Read it and weep." Ramos relinquished the plastic baggie.

*Lies. All liars.
time to sleep.*

"Cheerful," Sacco said. "And can't spell worth shit."

Nick shook his head.

"It was taped on the outside of the closed doorway." Ramos picked her camera and showed the men the digital photograph she'd taken earlier. "I'm hoping for some fingerprint evidence."

"Print the plant pot by the body, as well." The overflowing basket with blossoms of wisteria looked to Nick like impatiens had been carefully retrieved from its hook, placed neatly on an end table at the edge of the sunroom nearest the victim, and replaced by another, more macabre centerpiece.

"Telling me my job, GQ?" Ramos quipped. Her mouth jerked a bit upward.

Nick smiled. "Me? Never, Kit Kat. A man knows when to stop imminent castration."

"Such cloying sweetness," said Sacco. "Don't make me puke. We all know you are neither hard, tasty, nor soft, Ramos."

"Ah, there's the rub. Wouldn't *you* like to know?" Ramos said.

"Oh, yes, he would," Millsap said, jerking his chin toward Sacco while zipping the victim into a temporary travel bag. "Everyone's betting on when you'll finally do the horizontal dance with twenty bucks in the office pool."

Nick's eyes followed her. Through the open doorway, activity continued at a respectful deference to the victim. Flashes from cameras cataloguing everything at the scene lit the air from time to time. The body was bagged and ready to go.

They would be processing the scene for hours. And it wasn't even six o'clock in the morning.