

*Professional musician Matt Lanier returns to his hometown in Minnesota farm country after his father's death. When Matt tries to help a neighbor save her farm, he uncovers a large-scale conspiracy that threatens the livelihoods of hundreds of farmers. But the harder he fights to stop the conspirators, the more he puts his own life in jeopardy.*

## **STRAIGHT RIVER**

By CHRIS NORBURY

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**CHRIS  
NORBURY**

Award-Winning Author of *CASTLE DANGER*

**STRAIGHT  
RIVER**

A **MATT LANIER** NOVEL

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## CHAPTER 1

For the third time in the past two weeks, a loud noise jolted Ray Lanier awake from a sound sleep. The metallic, creaking squeal followed by a percussive thump cut through the dead silence around his farm. Jack, his old black Labrador, growled softly at the foot of the bed.

“Now what?” Ray said, groggy and annoyed.

He slid from the bed, groped for his eyeglasses on the nightstand, and shuffled to the window to peer through the lace curtain. Starlit blackness was surrendering to the hints of blue in the east. He pulled his .38 caliber Smith & Wesson revolver from the nightstand drawer, crept downstairs, and moved to the backdoor window. Seconds later, an engine turned over in the distance, but Ray saw no headlights or tail lights. The sound of tires on gravel faded as the vehicle drove away.

“Damnation.” Ray said, then flipped on the kitchen light and dialed 911 for the third time in the past two weeks. He’d initially reported that someone had thrown a rock through a barn window. The second call was to report a fire that torched an old shed. Now this rude awakening. After one ring, the dispatcher answered and made her standard inquiry.

“This is Ray Lanier again, out west of town,” he said. “No emergency. Just heard a strange noise, then a vehicle driving away. I’m startin’ to think it’s not punk kid vandals who are responsible.”

The dispatcher promised to send a patrol car. *Like that’ll stop all this mischief*, he thought. Still, he’d gotten each incident on the record in case something worse happened later.

Because it was close to his regular wakeup time, Ray started a pot of coffee and walked upstairs to dress while he waited for the police.

Returning downstairs, he strode to the back door with his gun poised at waist height. He flipped on the porch light and stared out the west window toward the barn, feed pen, and distant cropland, still fallow in March. Outside the north-facing kitchen window were the dark outlines of the grain silo, two-car garage, and charred remains of the old storage shed. Nothing looked amiss.

For weeks, he'd harbored a mounting worry that all the strange recent events were related to his repeated refusals to sell his farm. Even though it had officially ended a few years ago, the damned Great Recession had left a legacy of still-depressed crop *and* land prices that brought all sorts of land speculators and other vultures into farm country.

One of those vultures was Wayne Hibbert, a local real estate agent who had signed on with some faceless corporation and brokered the purchases of a few farms in the area in the past several months. Ray had resisted, but Hibbert was also trying to scare Ray's friends and neighbors to sell their farms. High-pressure, unsubtle sales tactics too. The lummoX seemed too dense to understand that "no" meant "*No!*"

Ray was suspicious of Hibbert because he never referred to his new associates by name, claiming the principals of the company had sworn him to secrecy regarding their identities. But what had troubled Ray most over the past month was the unnerving sensation of being watched. Another reason to be wary of a bumbler like Hibbert. *Maybe he's resorting to vandalism as a tactic to worry me into selling.*

Within ten minutes, a black-and-white pulled into the driveway. Ray met the officer at the door and explained the situation. The officer circled the entire house and adjacent structures with a flashlight but found nothing unusual, broken, or on fire. Not surprising, since it was too dark to see much. Also, Ray couldn't describe the sound in detail because he'd been asleep when it started. He thanked the officer and returned inside to make another call.

"I don't care if the boy works crazy night hours and travels all the time," he muttered as he dialed. "Gonna keep callin' until he calls back."

After the recorded greeting and the beep, he said, "Matt, it's your father. I know this is the fourth time I've called this week. I promise it

ain't about you takin' over the farm. Somethin's goin' on around here. Makin' me nervous. Smells like grade A pig manure."

He gritted his teeth and sighed to relieve the tension born of asking his son for a favor after so many years of estrangement. "Please call me as soon as you can."

With nothing to do but wait until sunrise so he could check things in daylight, Ray fixed breakfast: bacon, eggs over easy, and the coffee he'd made earlier. After cleaning up the kitchen, he entered the dining room, hit the light switch, and scanned the mess of papers and file folders spread across the dark walnut table. Based on Hibbert's nervous behavior around him, along with the vandalism of his farm, Ray suspected these piles of research into this real estate business might lead to something much bigger than a few farms in pissant little Straight County, Minnesota. He sorted and filed the papers into the three-drawer metal filing cabinet.

With the sun now well above the horizon, Ray returned his revolver to the bedroom nightstand, donned his Carhartt jacket and gloves, and stepped outside onto the back porch. Jack remained curled up in his bed next to the wood stove, preferring real heat over the weak rays of an early morning March sun.

Inhaling the cold, clean air bolstered Ray's mood. This might be the day that the first aromas of thawing earth reached the area. Temperatures were forecast to hit the forties. Decent for a March day in southern Minnesota. That whiff of dark, rich loam always sparked excitement for the new growing season. He'd once again do his small part to feed the livestock of the nation with his corn and soybeans and, by extension, feed the people of the world.

Gazing around his property, Ray spotted the source of the morning's odd sound. The top hatch of the grain silo was open. Why had the vandal targeted that? He wanted to believe the open hatch was a product of one of his more frequent senior moments. But he would've remembered that activity due to the fear factor of climbing so high. Nevertheless, he needed to investigate immediately for two reasons: to close the hatch and keep the stored corn dry, and to make sure whoever opened the hatch hadn't fallen in or tampered with the crop.

Ray spat onto the remnants of snow in the yard and crossed the barnyard. Unfortunately, spring's promise of rebirth couldn't extend to his old body. His failing eyesight, hearing, joints, and overall vigor were long past rejuvenation. Anxiety radiated from his chest, growing with each step. At the base of the silo, he stared up the ladder to the top. His heart pounded faster. Sweat chilled his gloved hands. His mouth dried up. Here, the distance seemed twice as high as it had from the house.

*Just go up fast, check inside for any sign of vandalism, close the hatch, and come down. Five minutes and you'll be done.* Heaving a deep sigh of resignation, he grabbed a rung and began to climb.

~

Matt Lanier had never been so grateful to return home after a tour. The music had been triumphant, but the traveling had been a nightmare. His trio earned rave reviews and enthusiastic ovations at every venue on the nine-day, eight-performance circuit of some of the best jazz clubs outside of New York or Los Angeles.

Starting with the Dakota Jazz Club in Minneapolis, the group's whirlwind route took them to Kansas City, St. Louis, Columbus, Cleveland, Chicago, and Detroit. In Chicago, a record producer had been so impressed with the group's tightness and musicality that he met them backstage after the show and said he might be interested in signing them. No guarantees, the producer warned, but his people would contact their people next week. That possible deal and the group's inspired playing had made the hellacious trip worth every white-knuckle mile of driving.

The problem had been the unpredictable and often treacherous weather in the Midwest in March—snow, ice, rain, thunder, lightning. They even saw a tornado between Kansas City and St. Louis. The slower-than-expected travel each day cut into precious downtime and two planned rehearsals midtrip. The lowlight was the drive home from Detroit.

Thanks to freezing rain across southern Michigan and Indiana combined with horrendous traffic through Chicagoland, the expected twelve-hour drive back to Minneapolis stretched to sixteen hours. Fortunately, the weather cleared soon after they left Chicago, and the

last leg went smoothly. But the accumulated stress of nightly performances, long drives, living out of a suitcase, and less sleep than usual had Matt feeling like a zombie as he dragged himself the final distance from the elevator to the door of his downtown condominium.

Once inside, Matt checked his answering machine—four messages from his father. “Aww, damnation. Not Dad. Not now.”

He exhaled upward through his extended lower lip as his insides sagged. *I don't talk to the guy for years, and now he pesters me daily with phone calls.* The overwhelming urge to go back out on a music tour, any tour, hit him.

Even though his father was usually asleep at eleven o'clock at night, Matt considered calling back immediately. Except his old man hadn't said the problem was life or death. Something that “smells like grade A pig manure” registered about midway up Ray Lanier's paranoia scale. Whatever his father wanted to discuss could wait until morning. Matt reluctantly set his alarm clock for seven a.m. because sleeping until noon would be selfish considering the repeated requests for help. He'd tell a white lie when he called and say he'd just walked in the door from a tour. Hell, after eight days, what was another eight hours?



## CHAPTER 2

The next morning, Matt called his father immediately after waking. The old man didn't answer then or after a second call twenty minutes later. Annoyed, Matt showered and dressed, then went out for breakfast at his favorite breakfast joint. He returned home an hour later and was shrugging off his coat when the phone rang.

"Hello?" he said after picking up, expecting to hear his father's voice.

"Mr. Lanier, this is Sergeant Gebhardt of the Straight County Police Department."

A spark of recognition flickered in Matt's brain. "Are you the Clay Gebhardt who grew up in Straight River?"

"Yes, I am. Sorry about the formality. I wasn't sure you'd remember me."

Matt hadn't connected the name to his brother's childhood best friend until Gebhardt's diction, speech patterns, and rhythms recalled old memories. And his voice was a lot deeper, a *basso profundo* now, Matt thought.

"How could I forget?" he said. "What can I do for you, Clay?"

"I have some news about your father. Are you able to drive down to the Straight River Hospital now?"

A tight knot of dread clogged Matt's throat. "What happened?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm not at liberty to say."

"Come on, Clay, we go back to grade school. I think I know what the news is. I'd rather have you tell me now."

After a pause, Gebhardt said, "Okay. He fell into his grain silo yesterday and died from suffocation."

Matt recoiled as if he'd been gut-punched and stared incomprehendingly at the wall. He'd sensed the worst, but the cause

of death caught him off guard. As did the fact Ray had called him for the first time in years yesterday, and with an urgent message no less.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Gebhardt said. "A neighbor became concerned when he couldn't get ahold of Ray yesterday afternoon. He checked all over the farm and finally found him early this morning. The coroner needs you to identify his body."

Vague numbness flowed downward from Matt's brain. If he'd arrived home a day sooner and called back right away, events might have changed enough to have kept the old man from climbing a silo. *No. Dad's a stubborn old cuss. He'd have gone up there no matter what I said.*

Gebhardt broke the long silence. "You okay, Matt?"

"Oh, uh, yeah. Sorry. I'll come right down."

~

Matt drove south to Straight River in a daze. He had long expected his dad would die from natural causes, so a farm accident shocked him. Silo deaths weren't uncommon among farmers, nor were deaths caused by overturned tractors or machinery dismemberments. But something didn't make sense. His father had always been a stickler for safety. He would've either harnessed up and had someone spot him or enlisted a younger neighbor like Dave Swanson to do the chore.

At the hospital, Matt identified the body, filled out the necessary forms, and wandered out of the small basement morgue up to the hospital lobby.

Gebhardt was waiting for him and stood when he approached. He reached into his pocket and removed a business card and a piece of paper. "Here's my card and the contact names and numbers for your dad's church and the funeral home. Call me anytime if I can help in any way."

Matt muttered a toneless, "I will."

He took the information and stared at it, seeing nothing but a vision of his father half buried in a pile of yellow corn. Numbness lingered under his skin. He struggled to maintain his composure.

"I still can't believe Dad climbed up there without someone to spot him."

“The safety harness was untouched,” Gebhardt said. “It’s possible he slipped before he was able to hook up. Hard to say. Might’ve been senility or vertigo. Pretty common in old folks.”

Ray was seventy years old, but Matt had assumed the old guy would live well past ninety. He’d rarely gotten more than a head cold, quit smoking when Matt was a kid, and didn’t drink much. Farm work had kept his body lean. He’d always been the picture of health, at least up until the last time they’d seen each other. Maybe his mind *had* faltered.

“If there’s nothing else you need,” Gebhardt said, “I’ll get back to work.” He patted Matt’s shoulder. “My condolences again.”

“Thanks, Clay. I appreciate that *you* called me. Means a lot.”

After Gebhardt left, a sudden weariness overcame Matt. He ran his hand through his hair, then headed for his car and back to Minneapolis. He was in less of a daze now, but his mind whirled with thoughts of how to handle the funeral, the estate, and adjust his teaching and performing schedule to allow enough time to manage the responsibilities. Getting organized couldn’t happen until he was sitting in his recliner listening to Keith Jarrett’s *The Koln Concert*—on vinyl—and making a to-do list.

At home, Matt closed the door and leaned against it for a moment before walking to the sliding glass door to his deck. Swirling snow partially obscured the Minneapolis skyline. In the distance, the Mississippi River resembled a faint brownish-gray stripe of emptiness.

He turned on his sound system and cued up Jarrett’s album, then went to the liquor cabinet, poured two fingers of Jim Beam Black—his dad’s favorite—and silently toasted his memory. At that moment, the full impact, the finality, of his father’s passing hit him like he’d been blocked by a football tackle clearing a path for his running back. He slumped into a chair, dog-tired. Jarrett’s music resonated with him, helped to focus his thoughts, relaxed him with its effortless, meditative flow. He let the sublime piano music wash over him for a few minutes before readying a notepad and pen.

Reality number one took precedence—funeral arrangements. Mild panic flared Matt’s nerves. He was the sole surviving family member.

His mother, Arlene, had died of cancer when he was twelve. When his brother, Mark, a corporal in the Marines, was killed overseas fifteen years earlier, his father, also a veteran, had handled the arrangements. Was there a will or final instructions that stated his father's last wishes? First thing Monday he'd call his father's long-time attorney, John "Max" Maxwell, and ask for some initial guidance if not major assistance in how to proceed.

Reality number two—deal with the farm. Planting season was imminent. Ray more than likely carried some debt, so Matt didn't think he could afford to let the acreage lie fallow for a year. He jotted a note to check his dad's business ledger. He expected to sell the farm eventually, but that might take years. More headaches. A throbbing knot of anxiety had already formed behind his forehead.

Working the farm himself was out of the question. Matt had less interest in farming than he did when he was a kid. Most importantly, he had his own full-time music career to maintain—rehearsals and performances with the Minnesota Orchestra, giving private lessons to ten double bass students at the University of Minnesota, and sporadic club dates around town for the next several weeks. And now, a possible recording contract might consume any remaining free time.

Reality number three—settle Dad's other financial affairs. Was there a business succession plan? A mortgage? Corn or soybean futures contracts that were in place to hedge against the farm's expected production? He jotted down another note to remember to check with his father's financial advisors if any existed. More time, more cost, more phone tag. Dealing with lawyers, accountants, government officials, red tape, searching for records. Those thoughts soured his stomach. He contemplated the bottle of Beam he'd placed on the kitchen counter. *What the hell. A man's father only dies once.* Matt poured another shot, walked to the living room window, and sipped the booze as the sun struggled to pierce the March gloom.

## CHAPTER 3

Wayne Hibbert pulled a plastic flask from his coat pocket and took a swig of the contents. With closed eyes, he savored the familiar, rough burn of vodka in his throat. Shivering, he flipped the heater switch to *high* in his idling, eleven-year-old Lincoln Town Car.

“Global warming, my ass. Anyone who believes that crock oughta come to Minnesota in March.” The dashboard clock read 9:45. “Come on, old man, finish your damn beer. Time to go home.”

After wiping the condensation from his window, Wayne focused again on the entrance to the Straight River Eagles Club, one of the fraternal organizations in town. None of the few patrons going into or coming out of the club seemed to notice him. A quick swirl of the flask indicated it was almost empty. He gulped the rest in one swallow, shuddered, and tossed the flask onto the back seat. *That’ll steady my hands.*

The club door opened, spilling light and noise into the dreary night. A little old man limped into the parking lot, bent forward against the wind-driven snow flurries. Wayne got out of his car and hunched his own shoulders against the icy chill. As the man approached, Wayne tensed. “Well, well, fancy meeting you here, Helmer.”

Helmer Myrick glanced up without breaking stride and said in his thick Swedish accent, “What da hell do you want? I told ya this afternoon I ain’t interested.”

Wayne stepped into Myrick’s path. “Not so fast. We made a deal.”

Myrick stopped and peered down his bulbous, hooked nose at Wayne. “I didn’t sign nothin.’ I thought you was gonna make a

serious offer. My lawyer said it was da same deal as last time, only with different words.”

Despite the cold, blustery wind, Wayne’s forehead was damp with sweat. That annoying pain in his temples was back. The door to the club opened again. Wayne struck a pose of nonchalance until the old man who came out crossed the lot, got in his car, and drove away. Then he threw up his hands and spoke in an angry stage whisper. “Damn it, Helmer, why’d you back out?”

“I want enough money for my wife to live on when I’m gone. With this deal, once I pay off my bank loan, there’s hardly anything left.”

“But you’re forgetting the—”

Myrick burst into an unintelligible rant in Swedish, then switched back to English. “You God damn vultures. All you want is to rob us farmers blind, take our land, pave it over, make yer precious money, and da rest of da world be damned.”

Shaking with frustration, Wayne took a step forward and rose to his full height. “Do you know what my boss is gonna say when he finds out you screwed him over?”

“I don’t care what yer boss says.” Myrick snorted and thrust a gloved finger at Wayne. “Dat’s your business.”

Wayne’s boss had issued an ultimatum a few days ago: “Produce another sale by next week or you’re history.” The only sales he’d closed in the past six months were one here in Straight County and two in an adjacent county. Myrick, a second-generation immigrant, was his last hope. Should’ve been a slam dunk. Eighth-grade education, poor health, married, no living children. The lone possible successor was a nephew who showed little interest in taking over his uncle’s farm. A textbook motivated seller.

Wayne leaned forward and poked his finger into Myrick’s chest. “You’re damn right it’s my business. Big business. Big players. Big money.” He resisted the urge to grab the old man’s throat and squeeze until he agreed to the deal. “We don’t give a shit about penny ante dirt farmers like you.”

Myrick sniffed the air, wrinkled his nose, and leaned back. “Yer drunk. Git da hell outta my way.”

He started to leave, but Wayne grabbed his arm and spun him around. "I'm not through with you, asshole. We. Had. A deal."

The old man wrenched free, ashen-faced. "If'n ya don't leave me alone, I'm callin' da police." His voice trembled as he tried to retreat to the Eagles Club.

"Call anyone you want after I kick your ass." Wayne caught Myrick by the collar, intent on connecting his fist with the man's nose. He swung but lost his balance and grazed Myrick's temple. The old farmer tried to back away but stumbled and fell. Wayne hauled him to his feet and delivered a solid blow to his midsection.

Myrick doubled over in pain and squeaked out, "Help."

The gusty wind swallowed his cry.

Wayne shoved him to the iced-over asphalt and gritted his teeth, trying to contain his anger. "You have any idea how much you're costing me? Commission's one thing, but I'll get canned if I don't make my quota. You were that quota."

"Please," Myrick said, groaning. "Leave me alone." He attempted to stand but only made it onto one knee before he clutched his chest and stared upward with a contorted expression on his face. Gasping for air, he collapsed onto the ground.

"Jesus, Helmer, you okay?" *Is he faking? I barely touched him.* Small wisps of breath escaped from Myrick's lips. Wayne gaped at the stricken man, then knelt beside him.

Myrick groaned louder, tried to raise himself up, then made a frantic, choking sound before collapsing again with a soft thud.

"Helmer!" Wayne shook Myrick's shoulder, then took off a glove and felt Myrick's neck. His trembling hand couldn't find a pulse.

Wayne shook his head and tried to clear his mind. That last slug of vodka must've put him over the edge because fog now shrouded his brain. His breath came in rapid-fire huffs. *Is he dying? I've never seen anyone die.* Wayne stood and gripped the side of a car while he waited for the earth to stop spinning. His heartbeat thundered in his ears.

From behind, a deep, raspy voice said, "What's the problem?"

Wayne gasped and froze, startled that the stranger had gotten so close without him noticing. His first urge was to flee. Then again,

running might cause the stranger to call the cops on him. Or maybe this guy *was* a cop. Risking a slow turn to face the man, he mentally scrambled for a way to explain the situation. *Think, damn it.*

A huge silhouette loomed between Wayne and the streetlight. Squinting to get a glimpse of his face, Wayne could only discern the man's shiny bald head. He wore dark trousers and a dark jacket that appeared to be leather. *At least he's not a uniformed cop.*

"Ah, my friend here, he's drunk," Wayne said, trying to sound matter-of-fact. "Had a little too much and passed out."

The bald man jerked his thumb to the side. "Outta my way."

Wayne stepped aside as the stranger crouched next to Myrick and pulled out a small flashlight. He shone the beam on Myrick's body for a few seconds, felt for a pulse, then stood and reached into his pocket.

*Damn! This yutz is an undercover cop, and I'm busted.* The sinking sensation that gripped Wayne's core was intensified by an image of the man cuffing him and throwing him into the back of an unmarked police car.

The man pulled out a cell phone, tapped the screen a few times, and put the phone to his ear. "Sorry to bother you this late, sir, but we have a situation. Hibbert confronted Myrick."

The man glared at Wayne as if he'd tracked dog shit all over his new carpet, then backed away out of earshot.

Wayne's body spasmed as he fought the urge to flee, but he didn't dare run because the man's intimidating stare had paralyzed him. Despite the thirty-degree temperature and gusty wind, sweat ran down Wayne's back, chest, and face. He glanced at Myrick, the club door, Myrick, the bald man.

A blown sale had spiraled out of control into a major fuck up. *Even though it wasn't my fault.* Lost commission. Lost job. Lost hope for the future of his business. The business his father had built for thirty years. The business Wayne had driven to the brink of bankruptcy in less than ten years. He turned away and took a quick hit from a flask of peppermint schnapps he'd stashed in his coat pocket.

The stranger returned and pocketed his phone. "He got a car here?"



Wayne peered at the man in the dim streetlight and shivered. The yellow tint of the light gave the man's white skin a waxy appearance, like that of a beige candle. Sloped forehead. Cold, cruel eyes. Screw-the-world expression cemented to his lips and chin.

"I don't know," Wayne said. "I—"

"Think fast before someone else walks by. Let's assume he does. Find his keys."

Wayne searched Myrick's pockets until he found a set of keys. He held them up to the man. "Who are you? Why are you here?"

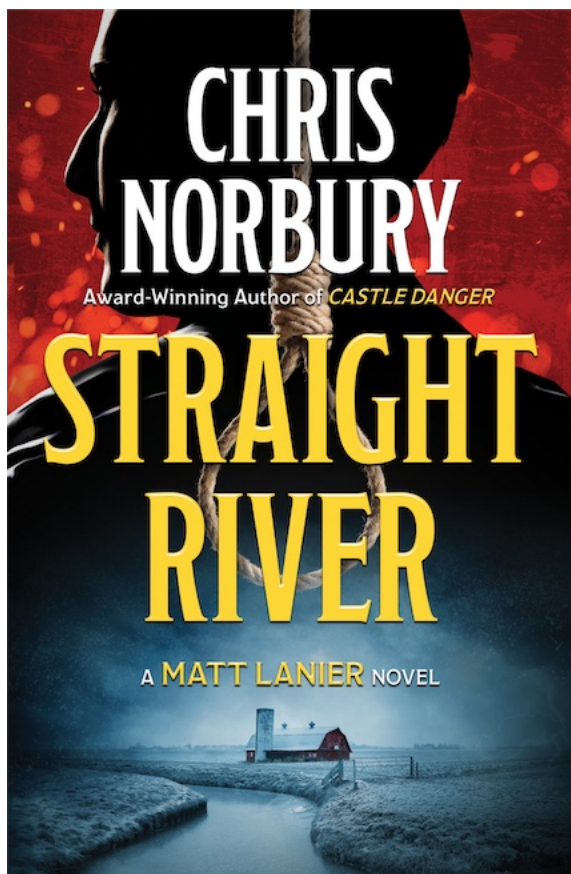
The man thrust himself into Wayne's personal space. "I'm Witt. Think of me as your supervisor."

Wayne recoiled from Witt's hot, sour breath and swallowed the few drops of saliva left in his mouth.

"Sure, sure. Supervisor." He pawed at the sweat trickling down his face.

"Just in case you're stupider than you look," Witt said, "give me your cell phone."

Wayne did so, and Witt shoved it into his coat pocket. "If you want to live to see tomorrow, do exactly as I say."



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