

Dangerous Straits puts Matt on the mean streets of Minneapolis at the lowest point of his life. Can he find the courage and desire to mount one last challenge against his nemesis, the ruthless Leland Smythe?

Dangerous Straits (Matt Lanier, #3)

By Chris Norbury

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CHRIS NORBURY

Award-Winning Author of
STRAIGHT RIVER and *CASTLE DANGER*

DANGEROUS STRAITS

A MATT LANIER NOVEL

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ALSO BY CHRIS NORBURY

Straight River (Matt Lanier #1)

Castle Danger (Matt Lanier #2)

CHAPTER 1

If long-dead Ludwig could've heard this street music version of Chuck Berry's rock-and-roll classic "Roll Over Beethoven," he might've clutched the sides of his coffin and refused the command. Nevertheless, the small crowd was digging the sound. Despite the two-man band's unpolished voices and thrift-store instruments, they generated a solid groove and enough energy to get toes tapping and heads bobbing. A pair of well-dressed women seemed ready to bust some moves, and their two toddlers bounced up and down clapping awkwardly.

Matt Lanier had played the song on guitar a hundred times, so his musician's brain was on autopilot. That allowed him to do some people watching behind an impassive "performer's smile." But when he spotted a bald man standing in the audience, his autopilot switched off, and sight-reading mode switched on. Six-two, two-fifty, broad shoulders, no discernible neck, menacing countenance. Uncanny resemblance. Panic-inducing. A twin?

Although *that* man couldn't possibly be *the* man, brutal memories of their last encounter sent his head spinning. Matt's fingers suddenly felt like sausages, and he stumbled on the chords. Hypo, his drummer and lead singer, shot him a puzzled glance but kept playing. Matt silently cursed, refocused, and concentrated on forming each note. An interminable minute later, they ended the song with a rapidly strummed D9 chord over a drum roll and cymbal crash.

He looked up—but away from Baldy—to acknowledge the enthusiastic applause. Unfortunately, his gaze landed on two Minneapolis police officers standing behind the crowd. After seeing the bald man, the cop sighting put him over the edge. His adrenaline rush triggered flight mode. Nodding toward the police, he said to Hypo, "I'm outta here."

Hypo glanced at the cops. His shoulders slumped. "Aww, Jazzman, not *again*." He gestured toward all the people standing in a

loose semicircle around them. “Lunchtime business crowd. Serious coin. We can make us a killin’ here—at least double what we get anywhere else.”

Hypo was right. Lots of paper cash had been tossed into Matt’s open guitar case over the past hour. A few more bills were being added now: primarily singles but at least one five. Almost everyone who’d donated tossed in several coins at minimum.

Matt, known to everyone as Jazzman since he arrived in Minneapolis a few months ago, shook his head. “The money don’t matter, Hypo. You know the deal. I get nervous. We find a new gig.”

“Nervous?” Hypo shot him a frowning glare. “That ain’t nerves, man. More like panic on crack. Makes your ugly white face look like an albino’s.”

Hypo had seen him like this before. After asking what was wrong the first time—and receiving stone-cold silence and an expression that warned, *Never ask me again, or you’ll suffer severe pain*—Hypo had learned not to press the matter. Instead, he smiled and waved at the crowd. “Show’s over, folks. Thank you kindly.”

Their stage was a set of steps in Peavey Plaza outside Orchestra Hall. Today was their debut outdoor performance after they’d perfected their set list in the skyways of downtown Minneapolis in March. The balmy April weather had lured office workers, shoppers, and downtown residents eager to enjoy the outdoors after a long winter. Now they could do so without risk of frostbite, a broken bone from slipping on the remnant winter ice, or a slush bath from a passing bus. It was the Minnesota-human version of emerging from hibernation.

Hypo grumbled something unintelligible, then began packing his drum set—five-gallon bucket, two-gallon bucket, five-quart ice cream pail, and a cymbal scrounged from a discarded child’s toy drum set that was barely thicker than heavy-duty aluminum foil. His drumsticks looked as if they’d been carved into shape by mice. He flipped the largest bucket over, nested the other two inside the first, and slid his drumsticks inside. Then he removed the cymbal from its stand, wedged the stand into the nest of plastic cylinders, and laid the cymbal on top like a makeshift lid.

Matt scooped up the paper money, shuffled the bills into a foldable order, and shoved the thick wad into his pants pocket. He gave the coins to Hypo. After encasing his guitar, he shouldered it by the makeshift strap he'd made from a length of rope, then picked up his battery-operated mini amplifier.

"Thanks for comin', sisters," Hypo said to two women Matt vaguely recognized from another gig he and Hypo had recently played.

"See ya next time, Lefty," Hypo said to an older man, bent and frail, dressed in blue jeans that had the shine of months-old street grime. Lefty smiled and waved from his perch on a nearby half-wall.

The duet walked away from the police, using the dispersing crowd as a visual buffer. Matt repeatedly glanced over his shoulder until they'd turned the corner and were out of sight.

Limping alongside him, Hypo sipped from the silver flask he always kept in his pocket. "I know you got serious issues in your head," he said, "but for a pair of shitty musicians, we were cleaning up. Almost had that crowd writin' checks to us."

"Speak for yourself, Buddy Rich," Matt said, half kidding.

Hypo was a decent amateur musician. He kept a steady, unflashy beat and could reel off a solid drum break. He might have been wedding-band good on a standard drum kit. With proper training, his clear, strong tenor voice could've earned him a living as a singer. He sang melody and harmony equally well. Because Matt was a baritone and his voice didn't project as much as a tenor's, Hypo usually sang lead. Unfortunately, his phrasing and singing diction were only average, which doomed him to be a decent semi-pro at best. His biggest asset with street crowds was effortless, good-natured banter between tunes. He could always persuade the listeners to chuck a few more coins or a bill or two into Matt's open guitar case. The man would've made an excellent used-car salesman.

"Where you wanna set up now?" Hypo asked.

Matt shrugged. "Not in the mood anymore."

"Aww, come on, man. Let's do another hour somewhere." Hypo had switched on his whiny voice, the one that clenched Matt's teeth with its metallic edginess. "I gotta pay my rent this week. My monthly don't come 'til the day after rent's due, so I'm a little tight."

They were approaching Loring Park from West Grant Street. The grassy areas were still wet and cold, so all the benches were occupied. The duo could have set up and played there, but the lunch hour was over, which meant paying listeners would be scarce.

Distracted by the sight of a woman and child sitting on a bench twenty yards away, Matt stopped and said, “Tell you what. Take my share.”

Hypo pulled up and gave him the fake double-take expression Matt knew was the prelude to a torrent of feigned gratitude. “You sure? Don’t wanna be takin’ food outta your mouth. But I sure appreciate it, brother.”

Matt waved him off. “I haven’t donated any plasma lately. Maybe I’ll go down to the center and give a couple times this week. Maybe I’ll check out the day labor place too. Should be some landscaping or yard work I can get now that the snow’s gone.”

“*Maybe* don’t help you today, Jazzman. You got enough for now?”

Even though *enough* was a relative term, Matt nodded. He’d be able to eat modestly for a few days. Making sure they weren’t being watched by any would-be muggers, he reached into his pocket for the wad of paper currency he’d stashed earlier. After peeling off a five, he slapped the rest into Hypo’s hand.

“Thought you were giving me all your share,” Hypo said.

“Changed my mind.” Then Matt remembered the hand-scrawled note on a scrap of paper someone had tossed into the cash pile. He gave it to Hypo. “Okay, now we’re square.”

Hypo read the note aloud. “Don’t quit your day job.” Frowning, he crumpled the note and tossed it into a nearby trash can. “Muthafuckin’ comedian.”

Matt slung his guitar case over his shoulder and grabbed his amp. “See you later, partner.”

He waved goodbye to Hypo and walked toward the woman and child—a girl—on the bench. They had sallow skin, haggard expressions, and eyes devoid of alertness. The woman’s hair was brown and shoulder-length. The girl’s hair was shorter, curly, and dishwater blonde. Both looked in need of a shower. They wore nondescript blue jeans and T-shirts under nylon jackets. Their clothes

were frayed, torn, and stained. The girl, maybe five years old, played listlessly with a small teddy bear. The woman's expression turned wary, and she sat up straighter.

Matt smiled. "Hi."

She studied him, tight-lipped, greeting him with only a slight lift of her chin.

He extended the five-dollar bill in his hand. "Buy some lunch for the kid, okay?"

Her eyes grew wider as the bill got closer. She might have been pretty years ago, before whatever bad shit happened that led to her sitting here with her presumed daughter on a pleasant weekday afternoon in April. Now she looked twenty years older than her actual age—he estimated mid-twenties.

"What you want for it? Head? Hand job? Talk dirty to you?" The distrust in her voice was unmistakable. "Whatever you want gotta be quick because that Uncle Abe only pays for a few minutes of my time."

Matt fought down the urge to scream that not all men were slimeballs. She noticed his tension and shied backward a few inches. He put as much calm into his voice as he could muster and said, "Buy some lunch for your daughter. That's all."

She relaxed and snatched the bill from his hand, then stood and said to her daughter, "Up, baby. Time for lunch."

The child stood, clutching her bear, staring blankly at Matt. *She's almost past hope too*, he thought. But he smiled when she noticed his guitar case and eyed it as if it were an object from outer space. *Still a little bit of wonder in her mind*.

The woman grabbed her daughter's hand, and they trudged toward the neighborhood convenience store. There was a fifty-fifty chance she'd buy any healthy food like milk or fruit. At least they'd stave off hunger for a few more hours.

From behind him, Hypo said, "Man, you one sorry white-ass sucker for a sob story."

Matt formed a *Mona Lisa* smile and walked past him, heading downtown.

Seconds later, Hypo exclaimed, "Hey, sister. Hold on."

Turning, Matt watched Hypo limp toward the mother and child, his bucket rhythmically slapping against his thigh until he caught up to them. The woman stopped but clasped her daughter at the sight of the wiry stranger approaching them. Her eyes widened when she noticed his prosthetic foot and the two missing fingers on one hand. Hypo thrust some cash into the woman's hand and said something Matt couldn't hear. When she took the money, Matt chuckled and shook his head. *Sorry black-ass sucker for a sob story.*

He resumed his walk to the plasma donation center on Washington Avenue, moving east on Grant Street until it veered northeast and became Second Avenue. After a few blocks, he turned left toward Marquette Avenue but entered an alley between the two avenues to cruise the back-door areas of restaurants between Ninth and Fifth Streets. Many times before, he'd scored tasty leftovers of food that was prepared but not served to anyone and couldn't be saved for the dinner crowd. America's wasteful obsession with throwing out food because it wasn't either perfect or up-to-the-minute fresh was disgraceful. But it was a godsend to hungry people who struggled to eat every day. It helped that many kitchen workers were themselves only a missed paycheck away from landing on the street. They showed remarkable compassion for the street folks who were regular dumpster divers. Sometimes, all it took was a knock at the back door for a sympathetic dishwasher or line cook to "find" a burger that had been "dropped" on the floor, a piece of toast that was "burnt," or the dregs of a soup pot that held less than a whole serving.

Between Tenth and Fourth Streets, Matt scored a bagel, two slices of cold pepperoni pizza, and a cardboard cup of tomato bisque. As he sipped the soup, he wistfully recalled the days when he could afford to come to that restaurant and buy not only the bisque but also a complete lunch or dinner when he performed at Orchestra Hall with the Minnesota Orchestra.

Simultaneously refueled and dejected, he resumed his trek until he arrived at City Hall. Made of rose granite and topped with a green copper roof, the building stood out like an old, short, dumpy member of a tall, lean basketball team of modern skyscrapers. If not for the

clock tower soaring more than 300 feet into the air, the squat building would be invisible in the downtown skyline.

Matt had a few blocks to go, but when he saw the parked police cars and several uniformed officers entering and exiting the law enforcement side of the building, his gut clenched, and a wave of panic flooded through his veins. He thought he'd be able to run this gamut, having seen police on the streets almost daily and realizing they barely noticed him. But with this many cops—especially the higher-ups mixed in with the front-line officers—a flush of sweat chilled his forehead. Sergeants, lieutenants, and plainclothes detectives were much more likely to be on the lookout for fugitives, even those brazen enough to walk past their headquarters.

Although Matt looked nothing like the photo of him that every law enforcement officer in the state had probably seen, irrational fear overwhelmed him. Certainly, one of these cops would see through his “disguise”: a long, scruffy beard, faded and torn blue jeans, a work shirt frayed at the collar, and a grimy Twins cap pulled low on his forehead. When that sharp-eyed cop sounded the alarm, twenty others would instantly descend upon the man wanted for allegedly killing one of their own. Despite being broke, living in the wild, in homeless shelters, doing odd jobs, and now playing music on the street for spare change, he'd survived and lived to fight another day for the chance to reclaim his real identity. The trouble was another day had become another week had become another month and was rapidly approaching another year. Calming his trembling body with a shaky breath, Matt turned and retreated.

CHAPTER 2

The free clinic on Franklin Avenue was a forlorn structure befitting the neighborhood. Downtown gentrification had yet to reach this far south, nor had it spread northward from über-trendy Uptown. The standard look of the buildings was peeling paint, cracked windows covered with perma-layers of grime, and crumbling concrete stoops. More trash lay on the sidewalks and in the gutters than was typical in other parts of the city. Subtle hints of rotten garbage, sewer gas, and general decay tainted the air.

Matt had walked straight to the clinic from City Hall. Seeing the bald man at Peavey Plaza brought back the headaches and anxiety he'd suffered from ever since he arrived in Minneapolis. Even though the bald man wasn't Witt—because Witt was dead—the resemblance was close enough to trigger nightmarish memories.

The medical staff provided essential services for the local indigent population who couldn't afford health insurance and were willing to wait as long as needed for free medical treatment. When Matt entered the cramped waiting area, his spirits fell. All the chairs were occupied. A few men leaned against what little wall space was available. A quick scan of the room yielded a half dozen mothers with children in tow. They'd take twice as long to be helped as the adults, who got to the point and knew going in what meds or treatments they wanted. Most hoped to score any pain relief strong enough to numb whatever ailment was causing them the greatest distress that day.

Opioid addiction and abuse were common in the neighborhood. Therefore, many patients tried to convince the medical staff that their intense suffering was due to something unmeasurable, such as back pain or whiplash from a fall or a fender bender. The better actors had perfected their moaning and looks of suffering to levels worthy of an Academy Award. Quite annoying when several waiting room habitués were competing for the title of “Most Deserving of the Hard Stuff.”

To their credit, the medical staff was stingy about dispensing opioids. They quickly learned who the worst abusers were and gently steered them toward treatment. Unfortunately, homeless folks and the working poor couldn't afford the kind of rehabilitation facilities that boasted high success rates. They might get into a program run by the county, but most did the revolving-door act of sobering up for a month or so, then succumbed to temptation and got hooked again.

Because of the warm weather and poor ventilation, the crowded waiting room smelled of unwashed bodies and dirty diapers. Thankfully, the clinic director had instituted a number system for busy times. People checked in at the desk and were given a numbered plastic poker chip that would be called when it was their turn to see a professional. Matt got his chip, multiplied the number of waiting parties by ten minutes, and went to a nearby coffee shop for a doughnut and a cup of coffee. Lattes, espressos, and cappuccinos were not in his budget. Hell, neither was coffee, but he allowed himself an occasional cup to reminisce about better days when he lingered in trendy coffee shops, sipping lattes, and enjoying pastries for breakfast.

The coffee was weak, and the doughnut was dry and flavorless, but they satisfied Matt's appetite. He nursed his coffee and loitered for two hours before taking the subtle, non-verbal hint from the owner that he'd overstayed the welcome he'd rented with his three-dollar purchase. He left and ambled to a nearby pocket park to sit in the shade before returning to the clinic five minutes before he was called to see the doctor.

Fifteen minutes later, he left with a plastic vial full of Tylenol 3—a combination of acetaminophen and codeine. He'd had the drug prescribed to him before. It was only marginally better than any over-the-counter pain reliever. Still, it would dull the pain to a bearable degree. But in the depths of his heart and mind, he knew that pills only treated the symptoms. They never addressed the cause of his pain. And with all that had transpired in the past year, curing his pain was impossible.

Matt trudged east on Franklin, turning a few blocks later down a residential street lined with old brownstone duplexes and once-stately three-story Tudors and Victorians. Most of the mansions had been

subdivided into multiple units, typically a small bedroom with a retrofitted bath and equipped with a rudimentary kitchenette—hotplate, microwave, mini-refrigerator, and maybe a sink for dishes. Some of the people he'd met on the street had told him about those units and how the rent was sky-high for a place that barely qualified as an efficiency apartment.

Because Matt had no income other than from what he earned playing music on the street for spare change, the occasional day labor job, and donating plasma, he was relegated to living in a homeless shelter for men. Located in one of those three-story Victorians, its ten bedrooms had been split into twenty. Each floor had a bathroom to be used by the six or seven residents per floor. When he reached his building, he walked up to his third-floor hovel and flopped onto the single bed with the saggy mattress. After kicking off his boots, Matt popped two of the Tylenol 3s into his mouth and washed them down with the tepid water in the bottle standing on his only other piece of furniture—a two-drawer nightstand. Heaving a long, tired sigh, he lay down and stared at the brown water stains on the ceiling.

It was only late afternoon, but he was more mentally than physically tired. He wanted to sleep but didn't expect it to come quickly. Instead, the memories projected themselves onto the grimy ceiling. Somewhere down that painful memory lane, Matt drifted off to sleep, and the nightmare clicked on like a horror movie in his subconscious.

~

He walks down the street toward his car on that rainy April afternoon in the Riverside neighborhood. A chilly drizzle is falling. The air smells of spring—fresh, earthy, energetic. Head down, he reaches the corner and starts to cross the street. Hears an engine revving, a car approaching. Zach Perez yells from behind him, "Look out!" Matt looks up, sees the Mercedes-Benz barreling toward him. He freezes. The driver's face comes into focus. Ugly. Snarling. Twisted smile. Pure evil. Charlie Witt. Looming above Witt is Leland Smythe, the untouchable puppet master, far above the scene, urging Witt onward.

Dangerous Straits

This time, Zach can't push Matt to safety. Matt's legs sink into the now-liquid asphalt, which instantly hardens to concrete. Witt speeds up. His face looms in Matt's vision as large as if it were on an IMAX movie screen. Matt screams. Braces for impact. The car hits him square on. He's flattened onto his back. The pain is excruciating. Witt stops, backs up. Matt springs back to vertical like a kid's inflatable punching bag. Witt runs him over again. Matt screams again. Feels the agony again. Feels his body shatter again. The scene repeats a third time, then a fourth. Each impact racks Matt's body. His bones must be crushed to shards by now. Each time he returns to an upright position, he desperately tries to free his legs and run. But he can't. And Witt never stops. And Smythe floats above it all.

CHAPTER 3

The Duluth public library on Superior Street was almost empty of patrons. The building—designed to resemble a Great Lakes cargo ship, a Laker—featured a long row of windows that curved around what would've been deck level on a real Laker. The windows were angled downward to overlook the streets below. It was a bright, comfortable place to read or study on a sunny day. But on this cold April night, with recently plowed snow still lining the streets and a bitter east wind blowing in off ice-encrusted Lake Superior, the spacious facility exuded a bleak, lonely feeling.

Ben Nowitzki sat back from the study carrel he occupied and checked his watch. Closing time. He yawned and stretched, then tossed the copies he'd made of several old newspaper and magazine articles into a manila folder marked *SMYTHE*. This data was too old to have been available via computer and needed to be scanned and copied from microfiches.

Ever since his fateful encounter with Matt Lanier two months ago, Ben had become obsessed with learning more about Leland Smythe, a Twin Cities millionaire real estate developer. Smythe's connection to Lanier was simple yet complex. The simple part? Smythe wanted Lanier dead. The complex part? Smythe had hired Ben for the hit job.

However, Ben hadn't known Smythe's true identity until after he'd tried and failed to kill Lanier. Somehow, Lanier had outwitted him, then overpowered him. But to Ben's amazement, Lanier had spared his life. That's when Lanier informed him that the man Ben had known only as "Mr. Jones" was actually Leland Smythe. Although Smythe had painted Lanier as a cold-blooded killer of as many as six people, there was something about Lanier that belied Smythe's claim. Sparing Ben's life for starters. What cold-blooded killer doesn't kill someone who tried to kill him? What cold-blooded killer rescues an injured man in the wilderness and drags him ten miles to safety? What cold-blooded

killer saves a woman and her son from a bastard of a husband? Ben's desire for the truth had gradually overpowered his desire for a lucrative payday.

He wasn't proud of the fact that he'd fallen so far from grace in less than five years. He'd been a fast-rising Minneapolis Police Department officer who became one of the youngest detectives in department history. However, accepting a bribe to look the other way on an arrest cost him his badge. He'd taken the bribe and the hit job only because of his salient weakness—valuing money above morals. After he'd been fired, he slunk back to his hometown of Duluth and hung out his private investigator shingle. Although his investigative skills remained sharp, he struggled to earn a living because of his tarnished reputation. Smythe's six-figure contract on Lanier seemed like the best way to keep his business afloat for at least two more years, so he'd jumped at the offer.

On the drive home, Ben weighed the pros and cons of his possible plans. Smythe wasn't aware that Ben knew his identity. Putting aside any obligation he felt toward Lanier, he might be able to leverage that knowledge for some serious cash. The big negative for pursuing a double-dip into Smythe's money was Lanier's insistence that Smythe was ruthless, powerful, and showed little regard for human life, especially the lives of his enemies.

By the time he arrived at his duplex in the West End, Ben had decided on a strategy that allowed him the most options as it unfolded. If he played his cards right, the giant payday he'd dreamed of would come soon ... possibly within weeks. But first, he needed to know if Lanier was still alive, and if so, where he was hiding.

Tracking Lanier back to the Minneapolis-St. Paul area was Ben's prime lead. During their last encounter in Castle Danger, on Minnesota's North Shore of Lake Superior, Lanier had virtually guaranteed he was intent on revenge when he said: *Tell Smythe I'm coming after him.*

Maybe that statement was boastful anger, but Ben heard enough sincerity in Lanier's voice to be confident Lanier at least wanted to try to stop Smythe—legally or not. After all, Smythe had destroyed the man's life. Why should Lanier worry about dying or going to jail for

crimes he claimed not to have committed? He might as well have a legitimate reason to fear imprisonment or death.

Minneapolis was the logical place to start a search. Lanier had recently owned a condominium there and been a member of the Minnesota Orchestra until he went on the run. Additionally, he'd performed around the area with his jazz trio and as a first-call bassist when big-name jazz singers and performers came to town and needed a backup band.

Of course, Lanier might be anywhere else in the world too—within reason. With little money—and fearful of revealing his identity to anyone—Lanier wasn't likely to travel to a strange place to be a fugitive. Easier to hide in a familiar area. A relative or friend might shelter him for a while, but Lanier had no close relatives, and his friends would be reluctant to hide someone with a price on his head and a bullseye on his back.

Lanier would be too easily noticed in predominantly minority neighborhoods like the North Side—primarily black—and the East Lake Street neighborhoods populated by many Hispanics, Southeast Asians, and Somalis. So Ben decided to focus his search on the South Loop—roughly bordered by Loring Park on the west, Franklin Avenue on the south, Interstate 35 on the east, and downtown Minneapolis on the north. Also possible was the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, which extended parallel with Franklin Avenue toward the Mississippi. Still a sizeable geographic area but manageable in Ben's estimation.

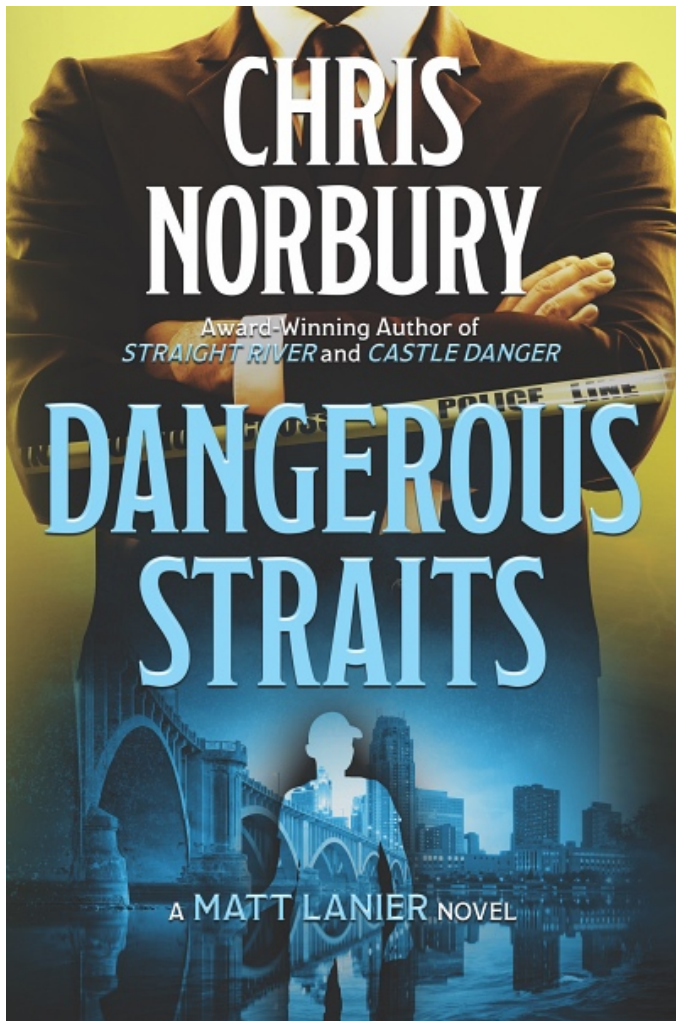
His first priority would be to comb the free clinics and homeless shelters, then hit the streets. As long shots went, it wasn't quite as foolish as a bet on the hundred-to-one horse in the Kentucky Derby. And if he got no hits on his "wanted poster" or from checking the shelters and clinics after a week or two, he'd figure out a new plan of attack.

What gave him hope was that he'd tracked down Lanier on the North Shore in less than a week using the same reasoning he was employing with this search. Lanier wasn't a hardened criminal or crafty fugitive. He made mistakes, and his biggest mistake was he kept things simple. Easy to understand why. If Ben had been an experienced hit

Dangerous Straits

man and hadn't tried for the doubled fee for making Lanier's death seem accidental, Lanier would have died in Castle Danger.

Ben reserved a room in a budget motel in Northeast Minneapolis—his old neighborhood when he worked for the Minneapolis PD. Then he packed a suitcase and assorted investigative gear, weapons, and ammunition, prepped his research data and laptop, went out to his car, and drove to the Twin Cities.



Dangerous Straits puts Matt on the mean streets of Minneapolis at the lowest point of his life. Can he find the courage and desire to mount one last challenge against his nemesis, the ruthless Leland Smythe?

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