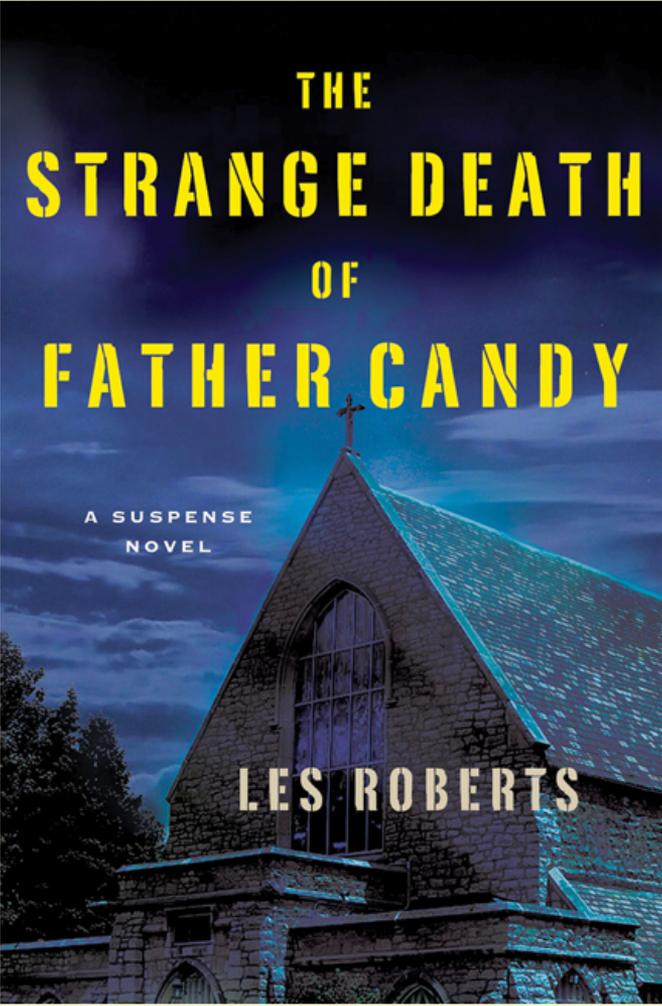


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**THE
STRANGE DEATH
OF
FATHER CANDY**

A SUSPENSE
NOVEL

LES ROBERTS



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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CHAPTER ONE

The high funeral Mass was held during the second week of October—the best-attended funeral service in Youngstown, Ohio, in 1985—and almost every mourner was crying. Even the ones who didn't shed obsequious tears struggled bravely not to. The church was mobbed with almost two thousand people, a larger attendance than most Cleveland Indians games enticed during the 1980s. The overflow—those who arrived too late to be seated in the main cathedral—were shuffled into the auxiliary auditorium of the parish social hall next door, where they could watch the service on closed-circuit television and do their crying in there. The lamenting in both rooms was loud and unabashed, the moaning rumble a counterpoint to sniffles and nose blowing.

At most funerals, the only ones who cry are the close relatives of the dear departed; everyone else simply looks sad, fights boredom, and tries not to sneeze away the fumes of burning incense. But this was no ordinary funeral Mass, because the deceased was not just an ordinary citizen who had lived honorably and religiously and who had died quietly of old age or an incurable disease. This one had perished long before his time, and the bishop himself was up there behind the ornate

podium, droning away as he always did. The silent occupant of the closed casket had deliberately put a pistol in his mouth and blown out his brains.

He was Richard Candiotti—my elder brother.

His death was eating a hole in my liver, but I couldn't do a damn thing about it after the fact. One of the first things a kid learns as he's growing up is that no matter what else, gone is gone—for good. Still, I was one of the few sorrowing churchgoers who didn't cry. Not openly. I wept for Richard alone, inside, where no one could see it.

Richard had been the parish priest of Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows in Youngstown for thirteen years, but older parishioners remembered him as a rangy, tousle-haired kid, growing up in the Italian neighborhood called Brier Hill, living with his two younger brothers and a sister in a tall, skinny mill house. Our parents rented the bilious blue home from the steel company, to which our father trudged to work six days a week, down the hill at Burlington Street with his metal lunch box under his arm, then crossing the road and moving over the walkway into the mill itself and onto the hellishly hot floor.

Brier Hill is a little world unto itself—with several bocce courts, a veterans' social club for Italian-Americans, an Italian Fair every spring, taverns where the bartenders were always named Vinnie or Mario, and an aggressive citizenry that took care of their own, decades before anyone ever heard of a "neighborhood watch." Nobody ever called the cops, because they didn't have to. Whenever a problem arose, we policed ourselves. Some steelworkers from the Hill got old and passed away, but many of them are listed as alive and on the payroll—even five and ten years after their deaths. Runners for the local mob still collect their paychecks.

It's that kind of a neighborhood. Tony Janiro—a big-deal middleweight fighter from the Brier Hill area—made his mark in the forties, although he never won a championship. They talked about him a little bit in the *Raging Bull* movie, but that

was all about Jake LaMotta, who had nothing to do with Youngstown. But Janiro was Italian, and Youngstowners still sing his praises, even the people who weren't even born when he was fighting professionally.

Damn near everybody from Youngstown could fight professionally if they wanted to. That's how we survived—like my father. In his heart of hearts, he was a gentle man, but his environment, his neighbors, and the 120-degree summertime temperature of the floor of the steel mill at which he earned his living turned him into a guy with a quick temper and a quicker fist.

All us Candiotti kids were too smart to walk in our father's footsteps, and Richard was the sharpest of us. After a survey of careers available to him, he'd enrolled in a Catholic seminary in southern Ohio—bankrolled in large part by the head of an infamous and powerful Italian mob family—and dedicated his life to Jesus. At the time of his death, he'd become more than a priest. He was a neighbor, a friend, a teacher, a listener, and a spiritual guide—and according to all the younger kids who begged him to come outside and play with them on a brisk fall Saturday when the fallen leaves crackled under your feet and almost every house had a comically carved pumpkin on the front porch, he could toss a football a country mile.

That was before he went down into the basement to the game room of the church in the middle of the night and swallowed a bullet.

What makes a relatively young priest do the Dutch act in his own church, the church where he was baptized, confirmed, and accepted into the priesthood? I fretted over that, sitting miserably in the front pew with my remaining brother and sister, trying not to hear the uninspired voice of the bishop of Youngstown babbling about life and death and redemption, ignoring Father Richard Candiotti's method of death and saying he was enveloped in the loving arms of Jesus. Richard had grown up in the same house we had, though he was more pious

and fastidious than the rest of us—even as a child, he always took too damn long in the bathroom every morning combing his hair. Every Sunday, rain or shine, he hassled his siblings about going to church and being devout.

Then he put on the turned-around collar and rode herd on everybody else to be good Catholics, too, until he threw in all his cards.

I would have cried about his death in any event, and I would have showed up for his funeral; he was the only living member of my family I had much to do with. But priests don't kill themselves—ever. It's against the rules of the Church.

I'm Dominick Candiotti—or Nick, as nearly everyone calls me—and I've *never* been a good Catholic. I've not been particularly sociable, either, which I guess makes me one of those loners. I dislike the label, but there's nothing I can do about it. I was a rebel from the beginning, and it was impossible for me to play the game like my three older siblings had.

My next-oldest brother, Alfonso, is a spit-and-polish homicide lieutenant for the Youngstown Police Department—a hypocrite who went through all the Catholic motions without believing them. Shorter in stature than the rest of his family, he learned quickly the art of politics and of power, and never looked back. My sister, Teresa, is a whining, scolding, boring pain in the ass who's raised bitching to a pure art form, marrying early the poor fool who'd stumbled onto her postadolescent virginity and didn't have the sense to back away. Teresa hasn't cracked a smile since she was ten years old.

And Richard—the late *Father* Richard? He was some kind of saint. It's too easy to say that about a Catholic priest, but with Richard it had always seemed well deserved, at least to me. I had feelings for all my family, because that's born into you, but I loved Richard Candiotti with all of what was left of my heart.

So how did he decide to put a cap in the back of his throat?

I didn't know, either.

I'd tried every angle I knew to put the pieces together, and it frustrated me. I was angry as hell—at my brother, who should have talked it over with me before doing anything rash and stupid, and at the city in general. Richard had embraced Youngstown and everything that came with it, while I'd turned my back on it.

Why did I choose not to call Youngstown my home? It's a gritty, no-nonsense Rust Belt city that nourishes all its diverse backgrounds and ethnicities. Most of our citizens work blue-collar jobs, go bowling, drink beer, get into harmless punch-outs in tavern parking lots on a Saturday night, and veg out on the sofa to watch Sunday sports. It's a lot like Cleveland, only smaller.

Yet, sentimental magic came along with a Youngstown childhood, at least while I was growing up. It was a more innocent time, and we kids found our own fun on the streets and in the parks and in the after-school playgrounds. I learned quickly enough that everyone I knew was connected in one way or another to mob crime and civic corruption. It made me squirm, even while the industry that kept the town rocking and rolling, steel, was gasping its last.

It also made me squirm that everyone knew the town was controlled and actually run by two rival Italian mob gangs, and that no matter who you were, you had to go along to get along. If you didn't, you were hip-deep in trouble.

I couldn't handle any of that. It was like living in some kind of twisted fairy tale where the wicked witches and child-eating giants were the winners. So I ran, first to the military—a huge mistake—and then to a big city, Chicago. It was every bit as corrupt there as it was in Youngstown, but most Chicagoans were busy with their own affairs and didn't have the time to care. Besides, all Chicagoans knew that the civic leaders were openly corrupt, and they considered the graft they pocketed just another tax that had to be paid to keep the buses and trains running and the snowplows clearing off the streets all winter.

Richard loved his hometown, loved being atop the pinnacle on which every local Catholic had installed him, kissing his hand and his ring in the process—and probably, in their heads, kissing his ass, too. So he happily stayed where he'd been born.

He was the only human being to whom I could ever open up completely, because I was too young to connect with my parents or my other siblings. I didn't always follow Richard's advice, but I never failed to consider it seriously. Now I was furious enough over losing my brother and friend and mentor and adviser to make somebody suffer for it. I know how to do that. When I was in Vietnam in the early seventies, I made a living from that particular skill. And my brother's death, which everyone assumed was a suicide, was what brought me back to Youngstown. Not to snifle and moan at his funeral, but to exact revenge from whatever guilty party had caused it.

But who was I going to hurt anyway? Hardly the bishop, who yammered away to the weeping survivors. He didn't deserve pain—only a strong suggestion to speak less, which I was sure he'd ignore. My octogenarian uncle Carmine, at the far end of the first row in a wheelchair, was gasping loudly through the plastic tubing he wore under his nose, connected to the oxygen tank he lugged all over town with him to counteract the sixty-five years of his life that he'd smoked. Some woman behind us in the church, a woman I'd never even met, was moaning and weeping as loudly as a wounded yak. I didn't know which way to turn, but my urge to injure was more frustrating than the incessant mourning.

The bishop, mindfully aware that the local media was videotaping his eulogy for inclusion on the six o'clock news and expanded coverage in the following morning's newspaper, was trying to convince us that only God understands the reasons a Catholic takes his own life and that no one should be judging Father Candiotti. This was a radical change from recent days, when a Catholic suicide was a mortal sin that denied the victim a formal funeral Mass and burial in sacred ground. Now,

though, the Church hierarchy in Youngstown was thinking differently about it. In fact, Richard's grave had been dug a few hours after one of the church cleaning ladies found him dead on the floor of the basement, not too far from the Ping-Pong table.

I'm the only Candiotti besides Richard who attended college, studying art and creative design and ringing up a degree from Youngstown State. After graduation, the U.S. Army sent me to Vietnam in 1972, after rushing me through OCS and anointing me a second lieutenant in the Army Corps of Engineers. For whatever reason, I was coerced—or shanghaied—into Special Forces, given a green beret, and sent off into the fetid in-country jungle to perform covert tasks I never shared with anyone, missions that invariably involved the extinction of one or more human lives. The things I did in Southeast Asia, which still haunt me as the nightmares that wake me up screaming in the middle of the night, eventually earned me a major's gold oak leaf—but I never gave a damn for the rank.

When the Vietnam sort-of war ended in a wasteful draw, leaving more than 58,000 American soldiers dead, and more than twice as many forever maimed, and damn near every one of them who breathed Vietnamese air haunted by the way they'd lived, I turned my back on everything Youngstown and went to work for a construction company in Chicago, designing higher-end suburban homes. After three years, I bought half the business and moved into a smart condo two blocks from Lincoln Park and four from Lake Michigan.

I didn't weigh the knowledge that I'd rarely seen my family anymore. My parents had both died suddenly in a wintertime car crash, leaving us orphans. I never had anything significant to say to arrogant, self-important Al, and less to Teresa. I nurtured true fondness only for Richard. My wartime experience frightened away whatever faith I had left and drove the final nail into the coffin of the Catholicism I'd never really accepted. But I idolized Richard as a human being and not a man of God, and we talked at least twice a month by phone. I always listened

to my answering machine when his call missed me, beginning with “Hi, it’s Richard on the telephone.” The “God bless you” always came at the end of the message, too. I didn’t care about that “God bless” part, but it was a requirement for a priest.

What was left of the once-vital Candiotti clan, now impotent without our leader, sat like wax dummies in the front row of Our Lady, close to the coffin, which had not been opened for viewing. None of us understood a word the bishop said, but we weren’t listening anyway. His well-packaged eulogy and quick addendum about the priest who had worked at his elbow was making him nervous and causing him to rush.

There was a stirring down at the end of the front pew, and I leaned over to watch Uncle Carmine stick himself with the tiny lancet of one of those glucose monitors he carried with him at all times to check his sugar level for diabetes. I found out later that he did it about ten times per day.

I wouldn’t look behind me, but I knew the Severino family was paying tribute—the old man, Paolo Severino, his wife, Ruth, and his son, Paul junior, whom everyone called “Polly.” Every Sunday morning, they sat where we were sitting now, in the front pew, which had become their right of rank and power—but on this special day, they graciously accepted the second row to make room for Richard’s closest relatives. Nobody smoked inside Our Lady, but I could actually smell the fine cigar smoke that hung all over the Severino men.

The scent of crime, too.

Don Paolo Severino ran the rackets on the west side. Money laundering, loan-sharking, prostitution, gambling, and drugs were under his control. What everyone knew about, of course, was his casino.

This emporium never observed antigambling laws in Ohio, which, apart from Cleveland and Youngstown and Toledo, has always been a conservative, uptight state. This illegal club was owned and operated by Paolo Severino, and no one ever men-

tioned to him that he was breaking the law. No one dared. Like my father, Paolo was a man of temper and violence—but he never committed any himself. The people in his employ did it for him.

I wasn't angry at the Severino family. I just wanted to get away from them before they asked me for a favor that *would* make me mad enough to do something stupid.

Lucy Waldman was at the far end of the Severino pew, her eyes wet from crying over Richard's passing. About fifty but looking at least fifteen years younger, she'd managed Severino's casino for eight years. In her best days, she was Paolo's number-one extramarital squeeze, taken out to more places and parties to be shown off hanging on the old man's arm than were ever dreamed of by Mrs. Severino. Before that—long before, when Lucy was a kid just turning nineteen and was very beautiful indeed—she was a top-of-the-line Youngstown hooker.

Prostitutes don't often fare well as they age. Even the gorgeous ones wind up dead, broken, or used up. When the future disappears before their eyes, they marry one of their kindhearted johns—if they're lucky. The truly smart ones, like Lucy, not only find a rich and powerful client like old man Severino but maneuver their way into comfort and wealth of their own, too. Paolo rewarded her with 10 percent of the casino, and she plowed the rest of her money into blue-chip stocks. Now she's a rich, pleasant, good-humored woman—one of the uncrowned genuine duchesses of Youngstown, even in a working-class city where middle-aged whores are rarely treated like royalty.

Lucy Waldman sitting in the same row as the Severino family was apparently all right with Paolo's wife, Ruth, who knew of Lucy's history and position. But Ruth, nearly Paolo's age and running to obesity, didn't seem to care anymore.

I stole a glance over at the left side of the church. In the first pew, all wearing canonical black and looking determinedly grim, sat the bishop of Cleveland, the northeast Ohio auxiliary

bishop, Richard's friend and mentor Monsignor Danny Carbo from Youngstown, and several other prominent Catholic clergy from all over the Ohio and western Pennsylvania area, invited to make the funereal turnout one local Catholics would recognize and respect.

Behind them, in the second row, was the wealthy Mangione family. They were entitled to the front left-side pew at Sunday Mass, in thanks for their generous donations to the parish and Mrs. Mangione's tireless volunteer work, but today they nobly moved one row back to make room for all the heavyweight Catholic clergy, just as the Severinos, on our side, had given up their front pew for us. As always, the Mangiones glared across the aisle at the Severinos, their sworn enemies. Both Italian clans were Youngstown natives, but the Severinos were connected through blood and business to the organized-crime bosses in Cleveland, ninety miles west, while the Mangiones were in open league with the Pittsburgh mob to the east.

Just as Youngstown citizenry's football loyalty is split—half the citizens plump for the Pittsburgh Steelers, while the other half roots for the Cleveland Browns—so was their fealty divided between the Mangiones and the Severinos.

The two families had feuded sixty years or more, although few remembered why it started in the first place—but there were many things far more important than who got to sit in the front pew at Sunday Mass. Crime and intimidation were primary colors on both their palettes, and in their single-minded competition, they splashed their hues all over Trumbull and Mahoning counties, touching every local cop and politician. I wondered whether either family had confessed their transgressions to my brother.

Richard hadn't grown up an innocent, but even in the confession booth he must have been occasionally shocked by the Severinos and the Mangiones. Those sins were lulus.



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