



**Scattered  
Smothered**



**Covered &  
Chunked**

**CRIME FICTION INSPIRED BY WAFFLE HOUSE**

Edited by  
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Stacy Woodson



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## THE HEART OF DARKNESS by Tammy Euliano

I watch them through the dripping leaves and the pouring rain—my brother and my father—one thinner than he should be, the other thicker, both staring at Mom’s flower-draped coffin, dry under the white tent. It should be black. Funeral tents should be black. Everyone wears black. But then, everyone around my father always wears black. It was a goddam cliché. The mafia boss’s minions all in black. Even now, at a funeral, I know their long black (of course) raincoats disguise an arsenal.

Tommy’s shoulders shake, and Dad puts an arm around him. The twin our father chose. I’d taken more than my share *in utero*—of blood, of space—and owed him forever. Not Tommy’s words, or Mom’s, just Dad’s. Back then, Dad stuck up for the little guy, the down-trodden, like himself.

And then there were medical bills beyond reason to fix Tommy’s heart, and he chose to...diversify. To join the family business he’d promised Mom he would stay out of.

The wind gusts and the tent sways and Dad tightens his grip on my brother.

Small and sickly, Tommy missed school often and hung with Dad at the drycleaners (another cliché) while Mom worked two jobs. The bond they forged left no room for another. Quarterback, valedictorian, college scholarship offers, none of it mattered to Dad. My only role was to protect Tommy, on the playground, in the neighborhood, at school. And in that singular role, I failed. Repeatedly.

In third grade, he fell from the monkey bars and broke his arm. “Where were you?” In eighth, he missed the bus home from a field trip. “How could you leave him?” But the worst was January of our senior year, before National Signing Day. My locker was searched. Drugs were found. They weren’t mine. The principal. Mom and Dad. Police. Handcuffs. My scholarship, my future, everything I’d worked for, evaporating like a mirage.

And then Tommy. “They’re not Jared’s. They’re mine.” Dad furious, Mom in tears.

“You have a future,” Tommy whispered to me as he accepted the handcuffs, large on his bony wrists. Surveillance video proved his innocence, mine as well. The hooded miscreant remained a mystery, but Tommy’s selflessness was one more nail in my coffin to our father.

The priest finishes his words, unintelligible over the thrum of rain and regret. I’d heard them all before, said for cousins and uncles and high school friends who’d fallen for Dad and his promises, or threats. But this was different. Mom was different. She’d begged me to be different, too. To leave for college and never come back.

I accepted a scholarship to play football out-of-state. I wanted Mom and Tommy to move with me, but nowhere was beyond Dad’s reach. She and Tommy would look out for each other while I started a different life.

I planned to become a doctor, like the pediatric surgeon who saved Tommy’s life all those years before.

I hadn’t been home since leaving for college on that hot August day. Mom cried. Tommy accepted a hug. Dad left a note on the driver’s seat of my ten-year-old Honda. “If you drive away now and abandon your brother, don’t ever return.” Anger and sadness warred inside as I drove from the compound, unacknowledged by the guards.

Holidays with the football coach, spring break with teammates, a summer job in the Emergency Room. Secret phone calls from Mom.

I first noticed a change in her voice on a December call, sophomore year. Weaker than before. “I’m tired,” she said. Then the calls were fewer and shorter. It wasn’t until I threatened to drive home that she finally told me. Breast cancer. Nothing to worry about. Dad had arranged the best doctors. She’d be in remission soon. “Please, Jared, do this for me. Stay in school. Do your best. Make me proud. After your finals, we’ll see about a visit.”

She didn’t make it that long. Tommy called the night before my organic chemistry final. “Mom’s gone.” And nothing has made sense since.

Slowly, reverently, the casket disappears from sight. Swallowed into the dark, damp, unyielding ground. First Dad, then Tommy throws in dirt. A gruesome ritual that Tommy barely manages. Umbrellas open and the small crowd moves off, back to black cars and SUVs and Hummers. Tommy walks slowly, haltingly. Mom. Tommy. They needed me, and I let them down again.

I wait until they’re gone, until I have Mom to myself, then I say goodbye. I apologize for both not being there and for leaving school against her

wishes. Mutually exclusive and mutually damning. I promise to go back after I take care of Tommy.

Parked outside the family compound, I watch the queue of mourners as guards check IDs and examine trunks. The fence is taller, blocking any view of the house. I wonder if Dad has become more important or more despised. Both, probably. I text Tommy to meet. He replies, “WH at MN.” Midnight at our old haunt, the Waffle House where Mom worked. Open 24 hours and they don’t report back to Dad.

I drive to the home of Dr. Arnold, our family physician and the father of my first girlfriend. When I learned of Mom’s cancer, he’d reassured me her oncologist was “the one I’d choose for my wife, God forbid.” I park in the driveway where I’d felt up his daughter. He greets me with, “Jared, I’m so sorry about your mom.”

I thank him because that’s expected. “Can you tell me how she died? Was she in pain?”

He hesitates. A knife to my heart. “She was medicated.” A yes, then. “They do an excellent job at Covenant Hospice. She was well cared for.”

I swallow. “She was in hospice?”

Dr. Arnold cocks his head to the right, like Tommy’s pit bull when we were kids. “I’m sorry, Jared. I thought you knew. A little over a week ago...”

Why had no one told me? Tommy should have told me.

I drive to Covenant Hospice and introduce myself to the receptionist. She eyes me appraisingly when I ask to see Mom’s room.

“I wasn’t able to get here in time. I didn’t know...” My voice hitches. I think that’s what does it. What makes her cave and lead me down a hall to the last room. Large, with picture windows and furniture and décor that feel more bedroom than hospital.

She gestures to a painting of a meadow. “That was her favorite. She said it reminded her of picnics with her son, reading and picking wildflowers.”

Tears burn my eyes. I remember the meadow. Just the two of us after school on Tuesdays. A snack and a book and fresh flowers for the vase I’d painted in kindergarten. Why had our “mommy days” ended? Football. I’d ended them because I chose football over her.

The receptionist hands me a tissue. “Stay as long as you like.”

I sit in the chair, on the bed, on the small sofa. I take in the paintings and try to picture Mom there, staring at the meadow. What memories did it

trigger for her?

In the corridor, I ask to speak with someone who took care of Mom. Reluctance again. I add the hitch in my voice. It's not hard. A middle-aged woman in scrubs approaches, dark-skinned with a professionally practiced smile. "You must be Jared."

I nod.

"She talked about you all the time."

I swallow back tears. "I wish I could have said goodbye."

She glances toward the nurses' station, then continues, "I tried to convince her to let you visit, but she refused. It happens sometimes. Usually, I can change their mind. If I'd had a little more time, maybe." Her shoulders rise and fall.

"She wasn't alone, was she? When she died?"

"She died in her sleep, with her dreams as company."

Dreams as company? Seriously? Did anyone buy this crap? Mom died alone, without me or Tommy.

In the lobby, a young nurse stops me. I can't help but wonder why she would choose such a depressing place to practice. "Jared? I'm Dawn. Your mother was a lovely woman." She holds out a small box with Mom's name on it. "These are a few personal items we found when we cleaned her room."

I thank her, but rather than release the box, she pulls near and whispers, "She was afraid of something. Get her phone and listen to the audio file on it."

Before I can react, she's gone. I blink several times, puzzling out her words, then head out into the gathering darkness. Mom was afraid? It had to be Dad. *Damn him*. But Mom rarely used her phone. She never got the hang of texting and didn't call me from it for fear Dad might check. An audio file? It made no sense.

In a room at the Super-8 Motel by the interstate, I take a deep breath and open Mom's box. On top is a loose photo, my arm around Tommy's skinny shoulders, both of us with the snaggle-tooth grin of childhood. We'd been happy then, oblivious to the life Dad had planned. Several other photos follow, mostly of me, and not on the field or stage but at the beach, or curled up with a book, or on the floor with the dog. I drop each on the bed, eager for the next. The last photo is of Mom and me at the Waffle House,



sitting close together in a booth. We're both in our church clothes, caught mid-laugh.

I touch her face, which brings my watch into view. *Shit, I'm late.*

The glass door of the Waffle House still chimes, and the aroma takes me back—waffles and vanilla and maple syrup and coffee and bacon. All the scents of stolen moments with Mom and my twin. Tommy already ordered and our food arrives seconds after I sit across from him in our old booth in the back. I'd skipped dinner, and lunch for that matter. Funerals and hospice visits have a way of blunting the appetite, apparently.

For the first time in memory, the All-Star Special looks daunting. Tommy's lonely waffle would more than suffice.

"What's going on with you?" I begin.

He chews slowly. "What do you mean?"

"Come on Tommy. What's up with your health? You look awful."

He chuckles. "You do get right to the point."

The eggs aren't as good as I remember. "The hospital I work at has great cardiologists." I don't actually know if they're better than his, but it would give him an excuse to leave.

He shakes his head. "Dad's consulted a dozen specialists and they all say the same thing. I need a new heart."

Since high school, we'd known this would eventually be the case, but so soon?

"I'm on the transplant list, but they say it'll be tough to find a match."

"I'm sorry."

"Not your problem."

"It is now. With Mom gone..."

He snorts. "What? Are you going to take care of me now, big brother?"

Ouch. "I can take you away from here. Away from Dad."

He shakes his head. "I can't leave my doctors."

"No offense, but it doesn't seem like they're doing so well for you."

His smile is smug, like Dad's. "I'm anemic, that's all. They're looking for a new donor."

Blood transfusions. Our family's rare blood protein combination limits viable donors. I gave dozens of times, except during football season when Mom took over. Mom. My cheeks warm. How had I not considered Tommy's transfusions when Mom got cancer? "I didn't think...Why didn't you tell me?"

“And interrupt your celebrated football career?” A slap to the face would have hurt less. “When Mom got sick, they started using other donors. I now have antibodies to everything.” His cold, distant eyes don’t belong to my brother.

It had been almost two years since I’d been forced to endure the needles and exhaustion and constipating iron supplements. A small price to pay for my brother’s health. “I’ll donate tomorrow.”

His skeptical grunt sounds exactly like Dad.

I change the subject. “Why didn’t you tell me Mom was in hospice?”

He swallows a tiny bite of waffle. “She told me not to. She was afraid you’d come running, ready to save the world.”

I press my lips together to keep from arguing. Wrong place, wrong time.

He leans back, confrontation averted. “She wouldn’t let me visit either, so there was no point telling you.”

I don’t agree. “When’s the last time you spoke with her?”

“The day she went into hospice.”

“Seriously? Not even a phone call?”

He shakes his head. “They gave so much pain medication, she was out of it.”

“Dad told you that?” More accusation than question. “Her nurse says Mom talked about us the day before she died.”

Tommy’s thin eyebrows rise.

“Dad lied,” I say.

“Or the nurse did to make you feel better.”

“Better? Mom was afraid, and we weren’t there.”

His eyes spark. “Afraid of what?”

I don’t answer and his voice flattens. “It doesn’t matter. She didn’t want us to remember her like that. We followed her wishes.”

Maybe. Maybe not. “What if Dad had something to do with it?”

Tommy shakes his head, but slowly, considering. “If he did, it was out of kindness.”

Ha. Not a chance. Kindness is not in our father’s considerable repertoire.

I lean forward. “Do you have her phone?”

“Mom’s?” He shrugs. “She hardly ever used it.”

“I’d like to see it.”

His eyes narrow with what looks a lot like suspicion, but he doesn’t ask why. Instead, he says, “When are you going back?”



“I’m not.”

“But Mom—”

“If I go back now, I’ll blow my finals, then I’ll be ruled ineligible and lose my scholarship, not to mention torpedo my chances for med school.”

He waits.

“If you won’t move away with me, I’ll find a place here and get a job.”

Tommy is about to argue.

“Just until you get your heart. When you’re back on your feet, I’ll finish school.”

He shakes his head. “It’s not just a semester, Jared. It could be years.”

Looking at him, I didn’t think he had years.

“I can get money from Dad to pay for your school,” Tommy says. “He doesn’t have to know.”

“I don’t want his money.” Short-sighted? Stupid? Probably.

Pressing on the table, Tommy stands. “I have to get back. Dad sends people to check on me every few hours.”

Not something I have to worry about. I wave away his cash and promise to donate blood first thing in the morning, then poke a little more at my cold, somewhat-less-than-All-Star Special. Tommy had always been Dad’s son, and I was Mom’s. Twins essentially separated at birth. Now my parent is dead because of his. I have no doubt. That’s what she was afraid of, but Tommy will need proof. I need Mom’s phone.

Back at the motel, I return to Mom’s box and pull out a stack of cards. Mother’s Day cards, more than a dozen of them, maybe every one I’d ever made or sent. She’d kept them all. I open one made of construction paper. Stick drawings of Mom and me with big smiles, holding hands with misshapen red hearts floating around us and a backward E in LOVE.

I reach back into the box, but that’s it. No secret note blaming Dad for her death. No final goodbye explaining why she stopped calling. No loving advice for me or her future grandkids. I pick up the stack of photos and lay back on the bed, fighting the tears that threaten to overflow. I stare at the top one, the one of eight-year-old Tommy and me. We would never be that close again. Were any brothers once they reached adulthood?

I jolt upright and shuffle through the photos. They’re back in order. When I looked at them earlier, I placed them face up on the bed. Didn’t I? They should be in reverse order. Right? Someone broke into my room and went

through the photos. It had to be Dad. Had there been something else in the box? Something he didn't want me to see? *Dammit.*

The blood bank opens at seven and I'm first in line. After, I text Tommy that it's done and call Covenant Hospice to see whether Dawn is working. I want to ask her about the contents of the box. If she's not there, I hope to wrangle her last name from the receptionist, but the woman's voice is strained, and she sobs when I ask after Dawn, and I know before I check the local news. Dawn Stafford was found dead of an apparent overdose.

Furious, pulse pounding behind my eyes, I speed to the compound and demand entry. Calls are made, my car is searched, and the gate lumbers open. A guard I don't recognize searches me at the front door, then I'm led to the library, to the chair of my memories, smaller now. I demand to speak with my father, and suddenly he's there. He appears old and weak, but I know better. I stand to confront him, and the guard steps forward. My father waves him away. "Leave us. I need to talk with my son."

My son? What the hell? He hasn't called me his son since...ever. And I don't want to hear it now. I tell him what I know—he killed Mom, then had her nurse murdered for helping me, and stole the evidence she'd provided. He says nothing. Just stands still while I shout like a lunatic until at last I give up.

"Are you through?" He sits on the loveseat and gestures for me to take a seat. I don't.

"I did not kill a nurse or your mother. I loved her. It was her dying wish that I reunite our family." He looks at me, really looks, for maybe the first time in my life. "I wish she could have lived to see it."

*What the ever-loving fuck?*

"I promised your mother I would clean up so you could be a part of our family. I'll pay your tuition, housing, books, whatever you need."

I stare, open-mouthed, then, "I don't believe you."

He nods. "I'll tell Covenant and her doctors to give you her records. Whatever it takes to prove I didn't kill her."

"I want her cell phone, her journal, everything she had with her."

"Done." Dad pulls out his phone. "Tommy collected her things. I couldn't go back there. I'll have them brought to your hotel."

His conciliatory act doesn't fool me, and I know he'll filter what I see, but it's a start. I drive to Covenant House and express condolences to the red-eyed receptionist. She is surprisingly solicitous and provides Mom's

visitor log. Dad's is the only name on it. He visited every day, including the day before she died. The receptionist also provides a copy of her hospice records.

I review them at the desk in my hotel room. The admission note is typed and legible, if not understandable without the help of Dr. Google. Mom's cancer had spread to her bones. She was in pain and "no further treatments were likely to affect the course of the disease. Desires Hospice care."

Nearly all the nursing notes are in only two different scripts and are virtually identical each shift—she ate little, slept a lot, and required increasing doses of morphine. I skimmed ahead to a note in a new precise cursive. "Patient alert. Appears agitated. Refused pm meds." It's signed by Dawn.

Mom died that night. An unwitnessed death. Found at shift change the following morning.

One of Dad's black-clad minions arrives with a cardboard box. I take it and he leaves without a word. One box. On top, I'm surprised to find Mom's journal. I want to lose myself in her familiar handwriting but resist the temptation. For now. I flip to the end, just before her admission to hospice. Despite her pain, she wrote beautiful, flowing prose about life and love and her hopes for me and Tommy. She apologizes for not living to meet her grandkids and begs us to forgive one another and hopefully one day become a family again.

I stare at the words, analyze the handwriting, the ink, search for clues to coercion. I find nothing, yet, but I will.

The rest of the box is well-worn paperbacks, some I recognize from her nightstand years ago, a few photo albums from my childhood, another of newspaper clippings from my football days, and a picture of me on National Signing Day. My coach, rather than my parents, at my side. Still no cell phone.

I phone Tommy and meet him at the blood bank. They fast-tracked my donation in light of his failing health. He closes his eyes while they start the infusion, and I skim an organ and blood donation pamphlet. Dismayed to read barely half of Americans are registered organ donors, and hearts are the most difficult because the donor has to be brain dead but not dead-dead, and within a few hundred miles, and a match.

"Dad should donate his heart," I say.

One of Tommy's eyes pops open. "You gonna make that happen?"

I wait for him to smile or laugh or say, “Just kidding.” He doesn’t.

“Maybe you don’t hate him as much as you think.”

I drop the pamphlet on the small table between us.

He nods at it. “The numbers don’t look hopeful, do they?”

“Let’s move,” I say. “We’ll go where more hearts are available.” A big city, probably, where young people with healthy hearts suffer violent crime that leaves them brain dead. My stomach flips that such an image could appeal.

“It’s not that easy, Jared.”

“It is. You’d keep your place in line.”

He looks at me with a combination of frustration and sadness. “You know I can’t leave.”

Equally frustrated, I groan. “Dad wants you to get a heart. He’ll understand.”

Tommy snorts. “Right. He’ll definitely understand. Just like he understood when Mom wanted us to watch your state championship game, or when she wanted to help move you into the dorms, or surprise you for Christmas? Very understanding.”

My heart pounds against my chest. Dad did all those things? I hate him, with the heat of a thousand suns, I hate my father. “Understand or donate, his choice.”

Tommy’s grin is a little disturbing. “Do you know how? Hypothetically, of course. How would someone cause brain death without damaging the heart?”

I can’t believe we’re having this discussion, but: “Hypothetically, someone would have to cut off oxygen supply to the brain.”

“But not to the heart,” Tommy says.

“The heart handles it better.” Or so the ER docs told me when they recovered a heartbeat in a drowning victim, but the guy never woke up.

When the talk turns to drowning vs strangulation vs drugs vs a bullet to the brain, I’m a little bit horrified. And yet I keep talking, in the hypothetical. I tell Tommy about an anesthesiology drug that paralyzes patients for surgery. I don’t recall the name and wouldn’t tell him if I did. He’s looking a little deranged. I move on to CPR and how to save someone whose heart has stopped. That discussion feels far better.

We’re both silent a long moment. I change the subject to Mom’s journal and what isn’t in the box, like her cell phone. He promises to look. After the

transfusion, he says he feels great. “It’s that superstar blood of yours.” Whatever that means.

His color is better and his gait faster and steadier. He leads me to the Emergency Room where he introduces me to an administrator-friend of his. Tommy says I’m an experienced scribe interested in a job, which is true, but I can find my own damn job. Still, I fill out the application. They’re short-staffed, and the director knows my brother, and he calls my boss at University, and I’m hired on the spot, pending a background check. Tommy’s expression is the smug one that reminds me of Dad.

An hour later, I have a badge and a computer login and am scheduled to work the next day. I thank Tommy.

“Hey, brother, you gave me blood. I wouldn’t be here without you.”

Just before my shift, Tommy calls. He has Mom’s phone. “You were right, Jared. It was Dad.” My face heats and my stomach clenches.

I knew it.

I press the phone to my ear and hear a recording of Mom’s voice. “He’s going to kill me. I’m not afraid to die, but I’m scared for you.” Mom was scared, and I wasn’t there for her. Tears threaten.

Tommy’s voice shakes. “With or without you, I want him dead.”

I agree.

He will bring Dad to an isolated location near the hospital and arrange for transport to the ER after. I’ll collect the necessary drugs and supplies to kill him and then bring him back. I know what we’re doing is wrong, but Mom’s frightened voice echoes in my head. The man does not deserve to live.

I slip from the ER on my break and retrieve the backpack of supplies I’d hidden outside earlier. I’ll be back before the ambulance carrying Dad arrives. That’s my cover. My heart pounds and my hands sweat, and I’m appalled at what I’m about to do and absolutely certain it can’t be on Tommy’s conscience. He loves Dad, or did.

I reach the abandoned storefront first and enter through the unlocked back door, just as Tommy promised. I fill a syringe with the paralyzing drug and cap the needle. Nearby, I place the equipment to bring him back, the defibrillator and the automatic CPR machine.

The door swings open. Dad and Tommy enter. Dad has the nerve to smile at me. “Thank you for meeting with me, Jared.” He stretches out a hand to shake mine. This man who murdered my mother wants to be friends?

I take his hand, rotate it backward and force him to his knees.

He cries out. "Jared? No."

"You killed her." My voice is high and nearly unrecognizable. "Play the message, Tommy. She was terrified of you." I have the syringe in my hand, the cap off, ready to stab it into his thigh. Tears stream down my face as Tommy fumbles with his phone.

"I didn't, Jared. I swear I didn't." He groans.

I shake uncontrollably.

"Do it Jared," Tommy says. "It's him or me. One of us has to die."

My thumb won't cooperate on the plunger. My mind is reeling. I let the syringe drop from my trembling hand. "I can't."

"I can."

I hear a gunshot, and Dad's head explodes. Frozen, I stare for a moment, then am suddenly back in the moment. Dad is dead. We have to save his heart for Tommy. I roll him to his back, kneel beside him, and start chest compressions. "Get the defibrillator."

Tommy brings it and the CPR machine. As I continue chest compressions, I feel a sharp prick in my thigh, then pain, like an injection. The syringe in Tommy's hand is empty, his smile now truly deranged.

"Some doc you would have been," he says. "Dad's heart isn't a match, you moron, only you and Mom, and she got cancer before I could take hers. I did practice on her, though."

I try to get up but fall to the side. My eyelids slide closed and won't open again. Breathing becomes hard.

He pushes me onto my back. "You're right about the drug. It's way better than suffocation with a pillow, all that screaming and thrashing." He lifts my shirt and places the cold gel pads of the defibrillator on my chest. "Hey, want to hear the rest of Mom's message?"

Her voice again, close to my ear. "I'm not afraid to die, but I'm scared for you. Stay away from Tommy. He wants your heart."

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