

FREE SAMPLE

SOULS *for* SALE II

Power. Secrets. Survival.

Book Two of the Souls for Sale Series

WILL JONES

Three chapters, complete and unedited.

*A house has a soul the same as a person. So does a
block. So does a name. And anything with a soul can
be bought, if the right hands decide it's for sale.*

a saying in Bethany

CHAPTER 01

GATHERING

Morning came through the brownstone slow. Light slid across the hardwood and caught the dust before it settled on the shelves. Old trophies still lined the wall next to family pictures that hadn't moved in years. Nothing in the house looked different, and that almost made it worse.

J was dressed before the sun hit the windows. Black suit, cut close through the shoulders, expensive without trying to say so. Too clean for most of Bethany this early. The gold chain sat outside his collar against his chest, heavier than he was used to. His father had clasped it around his neck before he left Westchester and told him not to take it off. J still didn't know what to make of that, but he felt it every time he moved.

He stood up there another second before he went down.

His mother was at the kitchen counter pouring tea into her favorite mug. She moved slower than she used to, more careful, but she still carried herself like nothing had changed. Mariah was always good at that. Making tired look like order. Making pain mind its business when company was coming. "You got a long day," she said.

"Yeah."

She nodded without turning all the way around. Unopened mail sat by the sink next to a dish towel folded too neat for a morning like this. Her hand stayed on the counter a little longer than it needed to before she picked up the mug. J caught it but didn't know what to do with it. Before he could say anything, somebody knocked at the front door, sharp and familiar. J opened it and barely had time to brace before Tiana crashed into him.

“Unc J!”

He caught her easy, one arm around her while she laughed into his chest like he’d only been gone a couple weeks instead of years. Behind her, Nia stopped in the doorway and studied him before she said anything. “Uncle J?”

“Yeah,” he said. “That’s me.”

She tilted her head, still deciding. Then she walked up and wrapped both arms around his waist once she made up her mind. J closed his eyes for a second and held onto it longer than he meant to.

Ashley came in behind them in a fitted black dress that looked more built for church than for chasing kids. Her braids hung loose around her shoulders, and even this early she carried herself with the kind of awareness Bethany taught women young. Her eyes moved through the house quick before they landed on the kitchen.

Tiana was already gone. “Grandma!”

Mariah turned this time, smiling even with the tiredness sitting under it. “Well, look who decided to show up early.”

The word fit because Mariah had earned it. In Bethany, family didn’t always wait on blood to make it official. A woman fed you, watched you, corrected you, loved you, and one day she was Grandma because the kids knew the truth before grown folks finished explaining it.

Nia stayed closer, standing by her sister near the kitchen table while Ashley set her bag down by the couch.

“Are you coming with us?” Tiana asked.

Mariah shook her head. “I don’t think I’m up for all that today.” Nia frowned. “You always tired.”

For a second the kitchen got quiet. Mariah smiled anyway, but J caught the way her hand pressed against the counter after, like she needed the balance more than before.

“I’ll be alright,” Mariah said.

“You sure, Ma?” J asked.

“I’ll be here.”

Ashley stepped a little closer. “I’ll come back after everything.” Mariah looked at her and nodded once, like there was more in that sentence than the girls were supposed to catch. “I know you will.” J missed the look that passed between them.

The girls moved through the house easy, already remembering where everything was. Tiana dropped her backpack by the living room couch without looking, already knowing which cushion sat lower than the rest. Nia went to the shelf with the old pictures and stared at one of J when he was younger, face thinner, smile easier, Ashley standing half beside him and half behind him like she’d been caught deciding whether to stay in the shot. “That you?” Nia asked.

J looked over. “Yeah.”

“You looked different.”

“I was different.”

Ashley glanced at him but didn’t say anything.

Outside, Bethany was all the way awake now. Somebody swept their front steps across the street while an argument floated out an open second-floor window two houses down. Music played low somewhere farther up the block, mixed in with traffic, barking dogs, and people trying to start another day. Funeral or not, the block kept moving.

Mariah stood by the kitchen doorway while they got themselves together. She looked at the girls first, then Ashley, then J. Her eyes held on him a second longer than the rest.

“You walk with them,” she said.

“I am.”

“I mean walk with them.”

He heard the difference that time. Maybe it was the way she said it. Maybe it was the chain sitting heavy against his chest. He nodded once. Ashley took

the girls' hands once they hit the sidewalk. J walked beside them while they headed toward the church a few blocks away. Nobody talked much at first. The morning was too regular around them, too full of people going to work, opening up stores, dragging trash cans back from the curb, acting like Dennis wasn't about to be put in the ground.

At the corner, Ashley slowed a little, her eyes moving once down the street before they crossed.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah."

She looked at him long enough to know he was lying. They kept walking anyway.

Neither of them said Dennis's name. Neither of them said Duval, or the Pit. Some things stayed buried until there was no choice left but to dig them back up. The church was only a few blocks from the house, but the walk felt longer than it should have.

They kept walking.

CHAPTER 06

INVENTORY

The first thing the hospital gave J after his mother went missing was a chair, not answers, not his mother, just a chair in a small room off the emergency department, beige walls, a round table, a framed picture of a lake that didn't look like anywhere real. They sat you down before they told you anything. J didn't sit. Ashley did. She had the girls parked near the desk with juice boxes and a nurse keeping an eye, close enough she could see them through the glass. Now it was the two of them in the little room with a patient affairs supervisor, the doctor, and a nurse holding a tablet to her chest like it might protect her. Nobody said missing; they kept finding other words, documentation issue, internal transport problem, system delay, and J hated each one more than the last.

"My mother is not a chart," he said.

The supervisor folded her hands on the table, a calm face under a navy blazer, trained to keep her voice soft while a room caught fire. "Mr. Carter, I understand how this feels."

"No, you don't." She didn't argue, which was probably training too. "What we know right now is your mother came in by ambulance. Treatment continued after she got here. She was pronounced at one fifty-eight." He had no memory of that minute. He'd been in the building somewhere, waiting on a door to open, and while he waited somebody wrote a time down and made it official.

"And after that?" he asked.

"The record shows an internal transfer."

“Where?”

“That’s what we’re trying to confirm.”

“When?” The woman hesitated, and Ashley leaned in. “When.” The nurse looked at the tablet she already knew. “Two fourteen.”

J did the math before anybody said it. His mother died at one fifty-eight, and at two fourteen somebody moved her, sixteen minutes between dying and disappearing, while he was in the same building not knowing the second loss was already happening. “Then where did the transfer send her?” “That field is incomplete.”

“Incomplete how?”

“No receiving department listed.”

He gave a short laugh with nothing in it. “How you move a body without saying where?” Nobody answered.

Ashley had been quiet, reading the room. She’d grown up around enough trouble to tell the difference between confusion and a pattern dressed up like confusion, and she said it low, to J, not the supervisor. “This ain’t confusion. Confusion look different than this.” The supervisor heard it anyway and kept her face flat. “We have staff checking the morgue, transport logs, and security access right now.”

“Now,” J said. “Not before.”

“We started as soon as the inconsistency was identified.”

“The inconsistency is my mother.” The nurse flinched; the supervisor swallowed.

J sat, because standing was starting to feel like losing control, and looked at the folder on the table, the white envelope with his mother’s name on a clean label. Mariah Carter. Easy to spell, easy to file, apparently not easy to keep. “Print it,” he said.

“Mr. Carter, we can give you proper documentation once the review...”
“Print what you got now. The time she came in. The time she died. The time

somebody entered that transfer. Who entered it. What code. All of it.” “Some of that may have internal staff information.”

“My mother is missing in your hospital.” Nobody spoke. “Print it.” The nurse looked relieved to have something to do and left fast.

Ashley watched him across the table, his hands flat on the surface, the chain quiet against his shirt. He was still the man from the hallway, the one who’d looked at her like she’d helped steal something from him, but something colder was coming up through the grief now. “Your mother wouldn’t want you alone in this,” she said.

“You don’t get to use her right now.” It hit clean, and she took it, because she deserved some of it, not all, maybe not even most, but there was no pulling apart what belonged to grief and what belonged to her, not yet. “I’m not trying to,” she said.

“Then don’t.” The room went quiet. Out past the door the hospital kept moving, a cart rolling by, a phone ringing, the sounds coming through soft and far away.

The nurse came back with pages still warm from the printer and slid them across. J read the first line, Mariah Carter, emergency admission, then the next, time of death, 1:58 p.m., and his eyes stayed there too long. The page after that was a list of entries shortened into hospital language built to keep regular people needing somebody to explain it: transfer authorized, time entered 2:14 p.m., destination blank, receiving unit blank, staff name blank, credential code present.

He stared at the last line. “There’s no name.”

“There’s a credential code attached to the entry.”

“I said there’s no name.”

“The code matches an internal user. We’d have to verify that through compliance.”

“You need compliance to tell me who moved my dead mother.”

“We have to follow protocol.”

“Protocol lost her.” That one sat in the room.

Ashley took the page from him and read it slower, looking for what they wanted her to miss, no funeral home, no morgue, no department, just the code, a string of letters and numbers that meant nothing by itself, which almost made it worse. You could confront a person; you could remember a name; a code just sat there clean, doing harm without a face. “Was this entered before or after he got told she died?” she asked.

The doctor looked uncomfortable. “I’m not sure of the timing of our conversation.”

“You told me after,” J said. The doctor said nothing, and that settled the order of it: his mother died, sixteen minutes later somebody entered a transfer, then the doctor came to tell him, then the hospital found out it couldn’t find her.

Everything in J wanted to go through every locked door in the building, his body ready before his mind had a plan, and Ashley saw him shift. “J.” He stood anyway.

“Security is already reviewing the footage,” the supervisor said. “I want to see it.”

“That’s not possible right now.”

“Then make it possible.” Ashley touched his sleeve, not his hand, just the fabric. “Not like this.” He looked down at the touch, and for a second she thought he’d pull away, but he didn’t; he just stared past the door into the hallway, breathing hard through his nose, jaw locked. “They can’t lose her,” he said.

“They won’t, if you keep them honest. But not like this.”

“I didn’t even see her.” That was the thing under all of it, and she heard it. He’d walked in with a mother breathing, then dead, then sick the whole time, then gone out of a building that couldn’t say where, too fast for him to feel one

thing before the next one hit.

“I’m going to keep looking,” he told the supervisor. “You’re going to give me copies of everything.”

“There are limits to what we can release.”

“Then write down the limits.” She studied him and seemed to understand the room had changed, he wasn’t just a grieving son now, he was listening, collecting, and she nodded. “I’ll give you what I can today and tell you what needs a formal request.”

By the time they left, J had three pages, two direct numbers, one credential code with no name, and the entry that said his mother got moved sixteen minutes after she died. He still didn’t have his mother. Ashley stayed beside him, not in front, not behind, and watched him slide the pages into the folder. “They know more than they’re saying,” he said.

“Maybe.” She held his eyes. “Or somebody made sure there wasn’t nothing easy to say.”

J looked down at the chain against his shirt, cold in the church, heavy at the house, quiet here, and now sitting against him with a weight that felt less like jewelry and more like instruction. He came in with a mother. He left with paperwork. And no body.

CHAPTER 13

LEVERAGE

J stopped sleeping the regular way after the cemetery. He'd lie on the couch with his eyes shut and his mind running the journal like a ledger that wouldn't balance, and after an hour he'd give up and turn the lamp back on and open it again. The third night he found the photographs Dennis had kept loose in a sleeve at the back, the ones that weren't houses.

The oldest one was decades gone. He could tell from the cars, the suits that weren't pretending to be vintage because they hadn't had to, the waterfront behind the men in the frame still half-built and already half-forgotten. He almost passed it. Then he caught the figure near the edge, turned slightly, like he'd stepped through the shot and didn't care if he was caught in it. J knew the face. He set the old photo down on the coffee table and laid one of Dennis's newer ones beside it, a grainy block-party print from sometime in the nineties, and there was the same face again, in the back, untroubled, the exact same age. The cars had changed. The clothes had changed. The waterfront had finished being built and started falling down. The man hadn't moved a year.

J sat with that for a long time and didn't let it become anything he couldn't use. He'd grown up on the idea that the things that scared you were usually just things you hadn't looked at hard enough yet. So he looked. Duval, the same across forty years, in photographs Dennis had kept for a reason. That didn't have to mean what the back of J's neck said it meant. But Dennis hadn't believed in ghosts. Dennis believed in leverage. And Dennis had circled this man not because he was strange, but because of the money and the land.

Because the addresses lined up. Some of the houses Dennis marked sat near the same waterfront blocks that kept surfacing in old city records, abandoned structures, closed docks, lots the city had stopped asking questions about, the dead stretch out at the edge of Soils where the cemetery sat and the warehouses kept their broken windows. Places nobody expected anything to grow again. And running under all of it, regular as rent, the payments to Gomez, structured, steady, cash. Dennis hadn't been buying Bethany houses to flip them. He'd been holding ground a man named on a clean white sign wanted, and somewhere in the holding he'd been keeping J's dying mother in front of a doctor nobody was supposed to know about. The land and the mother were in the same book because, to whoever owned that sign, they were the same kind of asset. Something you could move when the paperwork said you could.

In the morning J went looking for the one person left who might've watched all of it happen.

He found Silas where people said he'd be, on the bench outside the shuttered laundromat with a paper bag between his feet and his cane hooked over the armrest. The old man looked smaller than he had at the funeral, the suit traded for a coat too heavy for the weather, his beard gone gray and uneven. But his eyes came up clear when J's shadow crossed him, clearer than a man with a bag at his feet had a right to, and stayed clear for the length of a breath before he let them go soft again.

"Mariah's boy," Silas said. "You got the chain on."

"You knew my father."

"I knew everybody father." Silas worked the cap off the bottle and didn't drink, just held it. "Used to sit you on my knee when Malik had business. You wouldn't remember. You was young and I was sober." He almost smiled. "Both them things changed."

J sat down on the other end of the bench and put the old photograph on the wood between them, the waterfront one, Duval at the edge. Silas looked at it

for a long moment and then looked away, out at the street, like the picture had a temperature he didn't want to keep his hand near. "You know him," J said.

"Everybody round here know him. That's the trick of him." Silas's voice dropped into a rhythm that wasn't quite drunk and wasn't quite sober, words sliding sideways. "He don't kick your door. He buy the building your door is in. He don't come for you. He wait till you got to come to him." He tapped the photo once with a knuckle, not touching the face. "And he don't work for himself. Never did. He a hand. The thing that own the hand, you don't want to be in a room with."

J asked what owned the hand. Silas drank then, finally, a short pull, and J understood the bottle was less about the drink than about the not-answering, a wall the old man kept up on purpose. "You drinking so she can't find you," J said, guessing, and Silas's eyes cut to him sharp, the first time he'd moved fast, and that was answer enough that J wished he hadn't been right. "Smart like your daddy," Silas said, quieter. "That's gonna be your problem too." He nodded at the chain laying against J's shirt. "Keep that on. Don't take it off for nobody, not to sleep, not to wash, not when somebody tell you it'll go easier if you do. They been wanting it off you since before you was born." He wouldn't say why. J pushed, and Silas slid out from under every question like water around a stone, into half-sentences about ground that remembered and houses that had souls the same as people and a pit out by the dead water that ate both. None of it held still long enough to be information. All of it sat in J's chest anyway.

"My mother's body," J said finally. "They took her. Why her."

Silas was quiet a long time. When he spoke it had gone flat, the riddling gone out of it, and that was worse. "Because she was loved," he said. "By more than you. That make her worth something to a thing that can't love nothing." He capped the bottle. "You want my advice, you take that girl and them babies and you get gone from Bethany. But you ain't gonna. You Malik son. Y'all

don't run, and it cost you every time."

He picked up his cane and his bag and stood with effort, and before he shuffled off he put a hand on J's shoulder, the grip stronger than the rest of him looked. "One thing," Silas said. "Whatever they offer you, however they dress it up, they can't take it. It only count if you hand it over. So don't." Then he was gone down the block, leaning on the cane, and J sat with the old photograph and a fistful of warnings that wouldn't resolve into a plan, only into a direction, the same direction everything kept pointing. Out toward the water. Out toward the place where the land was worth dying over and the stones were already cut.

KEEP READING

The rest of Bethany is waiting.

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