**EXCERPT FROM ALL MEANS ALL, IF YOU BELIEVE**

Prologue

**D**erek’s head bobbed slightly to the music as he glided down Interstate 95 South. It was spring break, and Derek was making the short drive from Morgan State University, where he was a senior and star football player, to his home in Alexandria, Virginia. He was listening to a rap song from Lupe Fiasco called “Around My Way (Freedom Ain’t Free).” His parents hated rap music and preferred the mellower, old-school, R&B sounds. They considered rap music vulgar, and claimed they couldn’t even understand the words. Derek smiled slightly to himself because as far as he was concerned, all music with lyrics was rap; all the songs used words or rap to tell a story or provoke an emotion or reaction. Even his parents’ old-school soul music used rap to tell a story of what was happening during that particular time. Just look at Stevie Wonder’s “Living for the City” or Marvin Gaye’s classic “What’s Going On.” The rap of Derek’s generation simply told a different story of a different time to a different beat. The rap of his day had a harsher, more urgent—some might even say more desperate—beat than that of his parents’ generation.

Most of Derek’s college friends—his boys—were on their way to the traditional hangouts for spring break, places like Cancun, Miami, and Vegas, to do the usual partying, drinking, and hell-raising. But Derek had decided to forego these shenanigans this year and go home instead. His girlfriend, Serena, whom he had met in high school, was also a senior at Morgan State. She was spending the first few days of spring break volunteering to tutor local high school students in Baltimore’s inner-city public schools. His heart ached softly as he thought about Serena, a kind-hearted, sensitive, and loving Christian lady. Serena was the kind of woman any man would be happy to take home to mama. If there was ever an angel created by God to walk this earth, it was Serena. She had asked him to stay with her in Baltimore for a few days to do “good work.” But Derek declined. He had to get home. He had something important to do.

Derek was extremely gifted both academically and athletically. As a high school senior he had consistently maintained a 3.8 GPA while leading his football team to regional and national football championship titles. He stood about six feet three inches tall, and was as handsome as all get-out. He had his mother’s cinnamon-brown skin and chiseled cheekbones, and his father’s muscular build, full African lips, and long-lashed bedroom eyes. As a star running back, he had been courted and swooned by colleges across the nation for his football prowess. He chose Morgan State because both his parents had attended historically black colleges and universities, and they encouraged him to follow in their footsteps. He was glad he decided to attend an HBCU because there was nothing quite like the camaraderie and sense of family that existed on such a campus. Also, Morgan State was only a little over an hour’s drive from his home in Alexandria. After he graduated from college, Derek was expected to follow in his father’s footsteps by getting his law degree and joining his father’s prestigious law firm. He had always done what was expected of him—from as far back as he could remember.

Derek thought fondly of his family. His parents were both successful in their own right. His father, Derek Earl Jones Sr.—called DJ for short—had started his own law firm soon after he graduated from North Carolina Central University School of Law. His mother, Ruth (aka BabyRuth, a nickname she picked up as a kid because she loved Baby Ruth candy bars) was a chief financial officer at the Department of Veterans Affairs in Washington, DC. He adored his parents, but the family member who really had his heart—lock, stock, and barrel— was his baby sister, Kenya. She was named after the African country that his mother had fallen in love with while on vacation there with his father about nine months before Kenya was born. Go figure. Derek still called Kenya “baby sis,” although she wasn’t exactly a baby anymore. She was a senior in high school. His eyes misted slightly as he thought of his sister. Since he was a few years older, he had always been her protector, her hero—the one she always looked to to make things right. He knew she practically worshiped the ground he walked on, and he returned her adoration in full force.

As Derek passed his old high school, he pulled the car over to the side. He had such wonderful memories here and could practically see himself on the football field throwing that winning pass—or better yet, running the ball in himself for the touchdown. It had only been a few years ago, but somehow it seemed like a lifetime had passed. As Derek pulled away from the curb to make the short drive home, he took out his phone and pushed the speed-dial number to his mother’s office. Her staff assistant greeted him warmly and put him through immediately to his mother’s direct line. He smiled as he heard his mama’s familiar baritone voice. “Hey baby, you home yet?” she asked with pure joy in her voice. “Almost, Mama,” Derek responded as he made the final turn onto the cul-de-sac where his home was. “Well, I’ll be home as soon as I can. I made you some smothered pork chops and cabbage. Look in the fridge.” BabyRuth knew this was his favorite meal and made it for him as often as she could.

“Aw, Mama, I told you not to make a fuss. I’m not going to be here long,” Derek stated.

“And when has it ever been a fuss to cook for the ones I love?” BabyRuth responded. “Besides, I figured after all that college food you could use some down-home cooking.” She was a good cook, and it was one of the ways she expressed her love for family and friends.

“Oh, by the way, Kenya told me to tell you to stay put until she gets home,” BabyRuth said as she dug through a stack of folders on her desk. “That girl is really looking forward to seeing you and regrets she missed you when you came home out of the blue last week. I’m picking her up from school on my way home, so we should be there around five thirty or so.”

“Where’s her car?” Derek asked out of curiosity. Kenya had been driving since she was sixteen, and got a Lexus as a gift from her parents at the beginning of her senior year.

“It’s being serviced at the dealer,” BabyRuth replied.

“OK, Mama, tell Kenya I love her.”

“You tell her herself when you see her,” BabyRuth added as she located the file she was searching for and put it aside.

“Now Mama, you know how Kenya hates for me to get, as she says, ‘all mushy’ on her,” Derek said with amusement in his tone. “The last time I tried to hug her and tell her I loved her, she pushed me away and told me I was getting too sentimental in my old age.”

“Oh, you know how she is,” BabyRuth laughed lightly. “She tries to act all nonchalant at times, but that girl absolutely adores you. Well, I have to go,” she added quickly as her staff slowly and seemingly reluctantly began to trickle into her office for their standard staff meeting. “I’ll see you later when I get home, baby.” She was now anxious to start her meeting.

“Mama,” Derek said as if he was hesitant to hang up.

“Yes, baby,” BabyRuth responded absently as she motioned to her staff to be seated at the large conference table in the adjoining room.

 “Never mind,” Derek added sensing his mother’s distraction. “Love you, mama,” Derek said ending the conversation as he always did.

“Love you too,” BabyRuth said as she hung up and strode briskly into the conference room turning her full attention to the meeting at hand.

Derek pulled smoothly into the curved driveway of the home he grew up in and loved. This was the perfect place to be for what he had to do. He retrieved his bag from the back seat of the car, and walked up the short pathway to the door. He looked around the yard at the neatly trimmed bushes and perfectly manicured grass. His father prided himself on maintaining the best lawn this side of heaven. As he turned the key and opened the door, the aroma of his mama’s home cooking filled his nostrils. He took a long, deep whiff and exhaled. No place like home. He threw his bag on the sofa, went quickly to the kitchen, and took out the pork chops and cabbage. He put a small portion on a plate and popped it in the microwave. As the food was heating, Derek moved over to his father’s “infamous” CD collection. His eyes scanned the various titles and he settled on one of his Dad’s favorite songs, “God Bless the Child” by Lou Rawls. He carefully removed it, slid it into the CD player and returned to the kitchen. After retrieving his plate from the microwave, he sat down at the kitchen table to eat while he listened to the smooth mellow voice of Lou Rawls penetrating the air. He savored his mama’s cooking as he listened to the words of the song.

*Them that's got shall get
Them that's not shall lose
So the Bible said and it still is news
Mama may have, Papa may have
But God bless the child that's got his own
That's got his own*

Derek didn’t really understand the song, but he liked it simply because his father liked it. Derek mentally pictured his Dad sitting in his favorite spot on the couch, feet propped on the table, with a slight smile on his face as he sang along with “Mr. Rawls,” the name his father used to refer to Lou Rawls. Derek shook his hair slightly as if to clear his thoughts. His baby sis was right – he was getting too sentimental.

When he finished his meal, Derek emptied the scrapes into the trash can and placed the plate in the kitchen sink. He retrieved his bag off the sofa, and took out two small envelopes, and looked around for a place to put them. He saw his mother’s bible on the living room table, and decided to place them there for safe keeping. Humming to himself, Derek removed the CD, put it back into its cover, and slid it, oh so carefully, back into its place of glory in his father’s CD collection. He went into his bedroom, closed the door, and reached under the bed until his hand landed on a small metal box. Yes, it was still there where he had hastily hidden it during his impromptu visit home last week. He retrieved the metal box, took a small key from his pocket, and quickly unlocked the box. Derek inhaled and exhaled deeply as he looked at the small Smith and Wesson 642 revolver inside the box. It was time. He picked up the gun, put it to his head, and without any hesitation pulled the trigger. As Derek’s blood splattered in all directions and the darkness overtook him, there was one small word that seemed to float somewhere between the conscious and unconscious, between now and later, here and after, the beginning and the end. And, that small word was *“if.”*