



*CHAPTER 1 SAMPLER*  
**"A BOY CALLED HORSE"**

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## A BOY CALLED HORSE

“You are the sum total of everything you’ve ever seen, heard, eaten, smelled, been told, forgot—it’s all there. Everything influences each of us, and because of that I try to make sure that my experiences are positive.”

—MAYA ANGELOU

**T**he pounding woke me up in the early morning. It was a violent *bam bam bam* on the door, echoing like machine gun shots. They weren’t just coming from the front of our home but from multiple doors in our community. Our family had moved from the south side projects of Columbus, Mississippi to these north side projects a few years after I was born. It was like going from nothing to nothing. The north side projects did have a more tightly-knit, family atmosphere, with two units residing in one building and multiple buildings spaced closely together. The loud knocks woke up everybody.

My four older sisters jumped out of bed, and I quickly followed. They were all teenagers, the youngest ten years older than me. There were eight of us children. I had an older brother who passed away before I ever met him, and my only other

brother was twenty years older than me. The baby of the family, Tomasina, was a year younger than me.

As we all gathered around the door, I could see Momma looking startled. We wondered if somebody was about to burst through the door.

“Stay back,” she told us.

After pausing for a few moments, my mother opened the door. Nobody was there to be found, but there was a note left on the floor. My mother picked the note up and began reading it aloud. I can still hear her reading it.

Dear Niggers: Thank you for doing our jobs for us. Thank you for killing yourselves, and thank you for being so ignorant. You know, we expect nothing from you niggers—

My mother stopped reading. It had two or three paragraphs, but she was finished sharing it with us. The damage had been done, however, because my older siblings were furious. Especially when we realized that other people in our community had gotten the same sort of letters. Handwritten messages of hate.

As everybody filed out onto the lawn between the buildings, I felt the morning dew on my bare feet. There was a hint of daylight breaking on the horizon. It was just dark enough that somebody pulling this sort of hateful act could run away without being seen or caught. Grandmothers and mothers stood in their nightgowns talking while kids still were groggy from just waking up. As a young kid, I didn't understand why everybody was so angry. I didn't know what the commotion was about, and why people wanted to find whoever wrote it.

This was the day I learned “nigger” was a hate word.

Hearing a letter like that had an effect that it might not have today. The word meant something different back then. It carried

the weight of the world on its shoulders. In Mississippi back then, there was literally just black and white. Racism was real and it was raw. “Nigger” was not just a word; it was a weapon. Now when you hear this word, it can sometimes be used as a word of endearment that blacks use towards one another. It’s used so often it’s become diluted. There are those who feel entitled to say it but know others can’t dare utter it. Back then, “nigger” held so much weight that it would keep you from breathing. I don’t use that word as either an endearment or an entitlement.

When we were back inside, my brothers wanted retribution and talked about what they would do if they found the culprits. My mother wasn’t having any of that.

“You’re not doing anything,” she said. “You’re going to sit here. You’re going to do what you always do and live for another day.”

My mother was a very kind woman, and she wasn’t someone to feed off of a situation like this. Among many other things, Emma D. Rush was a midwife at one time in her life. I love my mother to death, but I grew up to be angry at her sometimes; I’m angry because she was the one who put so much fucking love in my heart, so much that made it hard for me even to this day to look at people with hatred.

These were the 1970s, and this was a difficult period for racism. The Ku Klux Klan was still active, and we eventually discovered they were behind the notes. The kids talked about doing something, but nobody could do anything. We were young and I was just starting to understand the reality of racism, the ignorance behind racism, the damage it does, and the heartbreak I felt when I knew I couldn’t insulate my family from it. At the time, I was a follower, looking up to my brothers and sisters, so I thought, *if they’re angry I should be angry*. But my mother was telling me I shouldn’t be angry, and she explained why.

Hatred and anger came from emotions.

“Emotions can save lives and emotions can take lives,” Mom told me. “Emotions can put you in jail and emotions can make you do things that you can’t take back.”

My mother tried to explain that being emotionally destructive is feeding off something that somebody wants to happen. She knew that these letters were meant to cause a reaction, but that reaction, back then, would have been suicide.

“You can’t just react to things you don’t know anything about,” my mother told my brothers and sisters.

We didn’t have weapons and we didn’t have people to join us in combat. We were just a bunch of families in the projects trying to make a living. And trying to stay alive.



While my mother showed me how to love, it was my father who showed me how to work. Harder than everyone else.

“Dre, let’s go,” he would tell me before leaving to go work on a farm.

Tommy Lee Miller was a very aggressive man, very dark-skinned. I remember veins in his arms that were as big as your fingers. He called me “Dre,” not in an affectionate tone but rather in a very stern and direct manner. As a kid it sounded harsh—even scary—whenever my father said it. He worked in construction for fifty years, and this was when construction was real construction with fewer machines and more manual labor getting the job done. My father’s brawny physique proved this. Even though he could be the nicest man in the world, his persona felt so dominant to me, so intimidating. While he also worked as a truck driver, his most important job was to teach me

my work habits and work ethics. Little did I know he was showing me how to be a man.

As was true among most of the families I knew in the projects, my dad and my mom weren't married. I didn't know what marriage was. Maybe one or two families had couples who were legally bound, but all I knew was *that's your mom and your dad*. That's how it was. My dad was always there.

As soon as I could walk, my dad put me to work. He came to the house every day or every other day and I would climb into his dirty and rusted-out truck that he drove to one of the local farms. One day I asked him why we needed to go to work.

"When I was eight years old like you, I had to drop out of school to help my mom and dad," my dad said. "That's how I got these rough hands. That's how I learned how to build the first house I ever finished."

I had seen a picture of my grandfather taken on a farm. It was a grainy black and white photograph, and the image reminded me one of those stereotypical movies depicting a very dark-skinned man working on some sort of plantation. My grandfather was lean but muscular, and I could see my father's reflection when I looked at the photo.

After working at his regular job, my father took me and my siblings to different farms to help him in the fields, picking peas, tomatoes, corn, and green beans, and heaping them in thirty-pound, brimming bushels. I even had the pleasure of picking cotton. It hurt. It hurt a lot. But I always did everything my dad asked me to do. My dad was so in tune with the earth, and he tried to teach us how to be this way.

"Dre! Pick it like this. You gotta do it this way, Dre."

I would be holding a dirty vegetable in my hand and my father would say, "Taste it, Dre! What does it taste like? Just bite it!"

Like a gourmet chef sampling a succulent dish behind a giant stove, I sampled the ingredient. I didn't want to bite a dirty vegetable, but I did. I didn't like vegetables, but I would learn much later that we didn't eat a lot, so these vegetables were pretty damn good. Soon I would be eating vegetables before going anywhere, and I would eat so much that my father finally had to start saying "Dre, stop eating all the food!"

Somedays, as I walked beside dad under the searing Mississippi sun, seeing the beads of sweat on his forehead, I listened to him mumbling things, whether to himself or only for me to hear. We didn't have a radio or anything else to listen to, but that was okay because I enjoyed hearing him talk. He spoke to me with the passion of a preacher, and I soaked in the words as if I were listening to Martin Luther King Jr. give one of his most memorable speeches.

"Do you see this soil?" he asked as he began to dig in the dirt, pulling out a long and twisting worm. "Did you know that even earthworms provide all the nourishment we need."

"You don't eat worms," I said.

"Sure you do. They're high in protein and lots of other things." Then he took that dirty worm and ate it like it was nothing.

The first time he ate worm, I couldn't believe it. Sometimes I think he ate the worms to show me they were God's gift to us. It was pretty funny and disgusting at the same time. Little could I have imagined that years later, I'd be doing the same thing with real bugs while I was in the military.

The gravitas my dad carried with his dogged work ethic came from the fact that he was old to have a young kid. All of my brothers and sisters were much older than my younger sister and me; by this time in his life, my dad could basically have been our grandfather, and he spoke as such. His words resonated with the wealth of a lifetime of memory. He had already

gone through two decades of seeing his children grow, so he could reflect on this and teach me. I know now this was why he was so hard on me, and why he made such an impact on me. He pushed me in ways he never pushed his other kids.

The bushels we filled weren't only for our family but for others. Sometimes we helped strangers pick bushels, and at the end of our work I watched them drive off with them in the back of their trucks. At the time I didn't understand why we went to different farms and picked all these things. When we had visited white farms, I saw machinery for picking vegetables, so why then were we picking all these by hand, bit by bit and piece by piece? One day my dad explained.

"Dre. Do you know why we're doing this?"

"No, sir," I replied. "I know that we're getting some food. I know we get some vegetables."

He shook his head, his eyes piercing me. "This is what we're supposed to do. We help each other, grow from each other. We learn from each other. We pick for each other. This is a community. This is what we do."

His dark ebony hand pointed at the farm we were walking across.

"You see me doing it for the black man. You see me doing it for a white man. You see me doing it for my family. You see me doing it for us."

This was Mississippi, and back then the world was painted in a very distinct black and white way. There was no in between, so sometimes when you were spoken to as such, you could tell by the way people talked to you. When I heard a white person talking to my dad, the tone sometimes sounded degrading and dismissive. My dad always answered with a "Yes, sir" spoken as a sign of respect and not one of submission.

I grew to understand that we were part of a community, and my dad wanted me to learn that we all needed to keep going

and keep strong and never forget where we came from. Going to these fields to pick vegetables was more than a simple part-time job; it helped me understand a greater purpose in life. The food this work produced ended up representing something far bigger than just a meal.

The older I became, the more I realized that these weren't just my meals for the day. I was sharing a little food with nine or ten people. Sometimes my mother would also share a portion of our meals with homeless people that came through. She never hesitated to invite them into our house to come and eat. I would see a stranger suddenly at the dinner table, and they would be so dirty. Nobody but my mother ever gave them anything.

I recall one man who my mother invited in. He was so filthy and he smelled like a latrine. My sister and I were the only ones living with my mom now, and I remember us hiding behind a couch and peering over to look at him. We were wondering why she let him into our home. My mother gave him a little bag of stuff and then he left. I was still scared when the stranger left, but my mother came up and explained why she had let him come inside.

“You know, Andre, everybody needs help. Everybody is human. You need to take care of everyone. Some people need a little more help than others.”

My mom said a lot of things like that. As I've shown, she was an incredible woman. My dad's philosophy was different. He would look at a stranger and say “Hey, you gonna work for it. You got legs you walk on all day, so you can put them to good use.”

Love others and work hard. Those phrases sum up my mother and father, and they pretty much sum me up too.



“Can Andre come out and play?”

I heard my friends at the door of our home talking to my mom. Her response was one she had given them many times before.

“I’m sorry, but he’s not feeling well enough today.”

Soon I heard voices by my bedroom window. It was the middle of the summer, and the July sun lit up the day, but there I was stuck in bed, sweat covering me and a nose leaking mucus. I heard voices calling my name.

“Andre, you okay?”

My friends could see me through the glass. All I did was shake my head. My voice was too weak to even reply. This wasn’t the first time I’d gotten the flu, but on this particular occasion, I felt like I was going to die.

*Why am I always gettin’ sick?* I wondered.

I was an extremely quiet kid when I started attending school in first grade at Union Academy. I never said anything and never caused any commotion or got into trouble. It was a very small school full mostly of black kids from the projects along with a few from surrounding neighborhoods. Along with being quiet, I was also a sickly kid. For some reason I would get sick, and no one knew why. I would wake up with a fever or feel run down, but the doctor always said he couldn’t find anything. I knew there was more, but nobody ever tested me. All I wanted was to know what was wrong, to have an answer, but I never got one.

My younger sister always commented on my health. “You always sick, boy. Everything you do—sick, sick, sick!” That winter while in first grade, it snowed for the first time in Mississippi. My mother told me and my younger sister to stay inside, but I wanted to go outside so bad just to experience actual snowflakes

for the first time. My older brother and sister were playing in the winter wonderland, so they snuck us out of the house. I snuck out without a coat or a hat, and since I was such a sickly kid, guess what? A snowflake flew in my ear and I got an ear infection. It was my first ear infection, and since I was a young kid, that made it a billion times worse. I was out of school for an entire week, all while having to hear my mother say “didn’t I tell you to stay inside?”

First grade was full of bad kids. I wasn’t one of them. We had a lot of class clowns and disrespectful students, ones who were always getting in trouble talking in class. As the boy who never said much and wanted to connect with my fellow classmates, one day I decided to try to connect by being funny. When our teacher asked me “What is your town?” I told her “Fred’s.” Since we lived in the projects, Fred’s was the place we went to when we said we were going to “town.” The teacher thought my joke was serious.

“What do you mean Fred’s?” she asked. “You don’t even know the town you live in?”

Several of the kids laughed while she realized I was trying to be silly, so my teacher took me down to the principal’s office.

That year, I failed first grade. I remember my teacher talking to my mom for some reason, and I didn’t know why since I didn’t have bad grades. She had told my mother that I had a learning disability and I needed to be held back before I went to second grade. My mom believed her so she came to me and shared it in her gentle, sensible way.

“Andre, your teacher told me you’re so smart that they want to keep you in first grade again next year.”

I simply went along with it, saying “okay, Mom.” I didn’t know what first grade was supposed to be like.

When I ended up going to second grade, the same thing happened again: the teacher told my mother there was something

wrong with me, that I had learning deficiencies. My mother agreed to have me held back *again*, so I ended up repeating second grade.

I just knew something wasn't right.

My younger sister was very smart, and basically everybody around me was intelligent, but I knew I wasn't *not* smart. I couldn't blame my mom for buying into their decision. She had all these kids to worry about, so she had her hands full. Mom even came and asked me if I was having problems at school, if anything was wrong, but I simply told her "No, ma'am."

By the time third grade rolled around and they tried to pull the same stunt again, using words with my mother like "dyslexia" and suggesting I be put into special ed., I had no idea what was the matter. It didn't make any sense. All I could think was *I don't know what you're talking about! I'm just a kid.*

I had never heard my mom curse in my life, but when she was told I would have to repeat third grade, she made an exception.

"They're fucking lying," Mom yelled. "This is not fucking right."

By this time, my sister who was a year younger than me had already passed me by. Mom held her ground and refused to let me repeat another grade. She went to the principal and yelled and screamed at him. She ended up discovering that the school had treated a couple of other black kids like this. Kids from the projects, ones who could easily be overlooked and dismissed. Kids with no learning disabilities whatsoever.

It was later learned that this was purposely done to kids by teachers, especially the kids who were disorderly. But I never wanted to be noticed—I was a quiet kid. Maybe they did this to me to impact statistics and to fill the spaces to get more funding.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I didn't repeat first and second grades. Those decisions changed the

entire course of my life. Would I be here right now writing this book? Would I be known as Chef Rush, helping lots of people, or would I be a chef at all? Would I have any platform at all?

The truth is I don't think about things like that. In fact, my younger sister had to jog my memories of what happened to me in grade school. I had blocked those memories. I have a tendency sometimes to do that to things that have affected me in a dramatic way. Trust me, there have been a lot of those things in my life. I know who I am and I live in the here and now. Some people like to dwell in the past, wondering what might have been if they had made this decision or if something had worked out for them. Some people carry regrets around with them like holding onto a genie in a bottle after making three wishes. I don't wish to change anything in my past, simply because that's impossible to do.

All I know is that you can change something in your life today.

Looking back on being held back in those grades, I realize a powerful truth. No one decides your destiny. Your destiny decides you. And it's up to you to mold it for your needs and others.



My mother was the best cook in the world. She planted the seeds inside of me that would grow into my becoming a chef, not just with the dishes she made but with the way she delivered them to our family. Southern food always came hand in hand with southern hospitality. My mother was the epitome of hospitality, showing it with neighbors and friends; she served us comfort food, which came with a lot of calories and a whole lot of care.

When my family came together around the table, I got to spend time with my brothers and sisters. Sharing meals together felt like a whole different world. We ate and laughed and talked. The food was amazing and so was the camaraderie. Every time we came together, we prayed, we stayed, we loved, and we were grateful. Afterward, we would go back to squabbling as usual, never losing sight of how much we loved each other. I always wanted to hold on to those feelings around the table; that's another reason I ended up becoming a chef.

It was ironic that in a family with five girls, it was the two boys who ended up learning and loving to cook. I had to sneak in the kitchen to cook because my father disapproved. "Dre, men don't cook!" he told me. "They don't do that." But I didn't listen to him. Mom would secretly let me cook and my brother Ricky also taught me a lot in the kitchen. They both inspired my love for the culinary arts. It turned out my father didn't know I became a chef until shortly before he passed away.

I was a mama's boy; I held a fierce love for my mother. I liked being around her, so naturally I wanted to learn from her in the kitchen. Plus I could get another little taste of the food. I loved to see the joy and passion she took from cooking. It was real. Everything she made seemed so marvelous. The smell of the caramel she made from scratch. A chocolate cake that she made without measurements that turned out so moist. The chicken she cooked that had all those tender juices dripping from it. "Why does your food taste like this?" I asked her. It wasn't just the recipes she used or the routine she had. There was something magical about her meals.

One day my mother let me cook a meal for my friends. I was young, but I was by myself. It was a simple meal consisting of a steak and some vegetables. My friends came over and ate it, and one of them told me I could really cook. I know it probably

tasted like garbage, but all I was trying to do was replicate what my mother did in the kitchen.

I didn't realize that in the south, you eat differently. I never knew how different dining experiences could be demographically until I joined the military. What makes southern food so amazing is the hospitality. Service simply makes food taste better. I've tasted many dishes in many places with many prominent people, but if the service is not on par then nothing else matters. That fine, fattening southern food was delicious, but what made it special was that it was smothered with love.

My mother showed me how to cook. It didn't start with a recipe but with respect to others. She paid attention not only to the ingredients of her dishes but also to the people who were going to enjoy it. Whether she was serving her sons and daughters or a complete stranger, Mom always showed love and affection with the food she made. She instilled in me the same desire with the meals I would go on to create. It didn't matter if they were presidents and kings and queens or homeless people. Hospitality means putting your heart into your work, every single time.



Silent and sickly, I attended my first few grades unseen and unheard, and that's exactly how I liked it. The change that would come over me like a tsunami began in grade school, when I lifted something so heavy that it shocked all my classmates. The feat was completely over-the-top, something none of the other kids could do, not even the older ones. One of my best friends said, "Man, you're as strong as a horse. And you run like one, too!" He used those exact words, so then someone else chimed in and said, "Oh, yeah, you're Horse now." The next day when they saw me, they called me Horse, and it just stuck.

Despite my new nickname and my newly discovered strength, I remained quiet. It's easy to bully the quiet kids.

During my years in elementary school, I always got bullied. For no reason except that I was quiet and kept to myself, and I never fought back. I wasn't big and hadn't gone through my growth spurt, so I was an easy target. In fifth grade, there was one particular kid named Roosevelt who loved to terrorize me. This kid was big, and he always sat behind me in class, kicking my desk all day long. Everybody watched it like it was some sort of sideshow. When he flicked spitballs on the back of my head, I turned around and told him to leave me alone. This would just make all the kids in the class laugh.

One day in class when the teacher left the room, Roosevelt went back to his regular antics, throwing another spitball on the back of my head. As usual, I told him to leave me alone, only to feel his boot pound against the back of my wooden school desk. This time I jumped up and looked back at him. "I said leave me alone." Roosevelt stood up, causing the whole class to react. He was known for beating up everybody, so now it was my time to get pounded on.

Roosevelt didn't wait to talk. His arm reached back as he cocked his fist, then he punched me with all his hefty might, landing a perfect hit right in my jaw. My head cocked and my entire body jerked to one side, but then I balanced myself upright and stared right back at him as if he had never hit me in the first place.

He was dumbfounded. But maybe not as dumbfounded as I was.

Seeing my reaction, Roosevelt darted out of class, afraid of being shown up even more. The rest of the class all went "wooooh" and laughed and talked about what had happened. Outside in the hallway, the teacher stopped him and told him

to get back in the classroom, but the kid refused. "I'm not going back in there," he told our teacher. She didn't understand, so she told him he might as well go to the principal's office. He chose that instead of coming back in the same room as me. The next day, the teacher moved his chair over to the other side of the class. Surely she had heard about the altercation.



In the projects, we were all family. We would go to bat for each other. We weren't just friends and neighbors; we were a tribe who took care of each other. So just like with any family, there was a lot of love, but there could be some pain, too.

When I was in elementary school, we would walk to school a mile away from home. My best friend and I would walk together and talk while my younger sister, Tomasina, followed behind us. "Stay behind me!" I told her. She was only in first grade. One afternoon, we decided we were going to go over to another friend's house to play a game, so I told Tomasina to walk home herself, but she refused. She didn't want to be alone.

"Just go straight down this street," I told her. "You'll be fine."

She was terrified and started to cry, but we took off anyway. When Tomasina arrived back home, my friend's grandmother spotted her and asked what was wrong. By the time we arrived back home, his grandmother was waiting for us. My mother wasn't there, so she brought us both into her house and told us we should have never let my sister walk home alone. She had pulled off branches from the trees and braided them, making them stronger and tighter, then she commenced to beat us one at a time with those switches. With every swing you heard a "WOOSH!"

I went first and then my best friend followed. I will always remember watching him get his ass torn into by his grandmother and hearing him cry his ass off. I couldn't believe it because the switch hadn't hurt me a bit. When we finally went back outside, I was laughing at my friend, assuming he was just acting upset to play it off in front of his grandmother.

"What're you laughing at?" he said.

"What do you mean? That didn't hurt?"

We almost got into a fight, because the switch sure hurt my friend, but he had never been whipped by Emma D. Rush. His grandmother later told my mom that she whipped both of us for what we did to Tomasina. This time it hurt!

It was like this every day in the projects. We were all kindred souls and connected. If someone other than your own parent could give you a whipping, you sure better be family.



One late afternoon when I was in fourth grade, my father and I walked along a dirt path cut between two fields. The bushels of peas and corn were full and loaded in his truck. Before we reached his truck, my father stopped and pointed at the ground.

"Dre, you see that penny there? Pick it up!"

"Pick it up?" I replied with a chuckle. "It's a penny."

"And I said pick it up."

I picked up the dirty penny and slipped it into my pocket.

"One thing you gotta remember, Dre—money doesn't grow on trees," my dad said.

"You can't go pick it up in a farm, Dre. You have to work for it. Every penny you work for."

This was my father's story, the narrative of his life. He worked extremely hard and developed this habit in me. He also showed me what to do with the money he earned. We lived a very simple life. I wore shoes for two or three years. I rarely could get haircuts and didn't ever buy new clothes. This prompted kids at school to laugh and make fun of me.

It wasn't that we didn't have the money, but the little bit we had needed to go to other different places and people. Even as a kid I was okay with that. Eventually I grew to respect my father's attitude with financial matters.

The irony of it is to this very day, I still pick up pennies. I haven't stopped. I still put them in a piggy bank. Those piggy banks have turned to stocks, and those stocks turned into money marketing.



The lessons we learn during our childhood are like the lines on our palms. They inform our head and our heart, directing what we do for the rest of our lives. The lessons my dad taught me were etched into my hands, but sometimes they cut more deeply. They demonstrate how life can change in a split second.

One day while doing construction, my dad had an accident and needed to see a doctor. I went to bed that night before he got home. The next day, my dad was sitting in a chair and told me to come over beside him.

"Look at this here," my dad told me, holding out one of his dark and rough hands.

When I looked at the hand, I could see that part of his ring finger had been cut off. I gasped and asked what happened.

"This happened at work," he said nonchalantly, holding up his hand. "I was working on one of the machines and turned my

head and just like that it got cut off. In a split second, the saw took it. They couldn't save my finger—they couldn't do anything with it 'cause it was too mangled. This is what happens when you're not careful."

His face didn't appear angry or sad. In fact, he actually looked relieved in a way.

"The good thing is that it was cut off right at the nub. So I can still wear my ring."

For years, my father's missing finger felt like some sort of trophy to him. The older I got, the more I understood why. Whenever I touched my dad as a kid, his skin felt like a mixture between a bull and a pigskin. The texture was hard and coarse and weathered. His hands especially. They felt like they had been forged in fire. And he always wanted me to understand how the most scorching flames produced the strongest force inside of us.

My dad believed a very long time ago that I was a special kid, so he prepared me for the future that awaited. He didn't have to look at my palms to predict my future. He could see the hard road lined up in the distance and the harsh fates awaiting me, so he forged me to be ready.