



LEBRON

**Thank you for downloading
this Simon & Schuster ebook.**

Get a FREE ebook when you join our mailing list. Plus, get updates on new releases, deals, recommended reads, and more from Simon & Schuster. Click below to sign up and see terms and conditions.

[CLICK HERE TO SIGN UP](#)

Already a subscriber? Provide your email again so we can register this ebook and send you more of what you like to read. You will continue to receive exclusive offers in your inbox.

LEBRON

JEFF BENEDICT

AVID READER PRESS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

To Gary

I grew up thinking you walked out on Mom and me. As a kid, I was convinced you didn't care. About her. About me. As an adult, I wondered why. I knew where to find you. But I never bothered. Then, in my late forties, I got your number and called. When you answered, you called me Son. Turned out, you had read and saved most everything I'd ever written.

Turned out, you were longing, too. You traveled to my home. Met my family. Put your arms around me. Told me you loved me. Told me you were proud. All those years... I had it wrong. I learned that when a baby is born to two unwed adolescents, a lot gets buried. I love you. Thank you for being my father. This one's for you.

ONE

WHAT JUST HAPPENED?

A motorcade of shiny black SUVs exited Westchester County Airport and crossed into Connecticut, meandering along wooded back roads before turning onto a smoothly paved private drive lined on both sides with stone walls and large leafy oaks and maples. In the backseat of one of the vehicles, twenty-five-year-old LeBron James sat beside twenty-three-year-old Savannah Brinson, his soulmate since high school and the mother of their two little boys. In his eyes, she was the one thing more enchanting than the idyllic scenery visible through the windows as they eased to a stop in front of a house on an estate in Greenwich. Wearing black shades, a white T-shirt, and black cargo shorts, James stepped out and looked around. Golden light from the late-afternoon sun shone through the property's white picket fence, illuminating the lush green lawn, pink and purple impatiens, and chocolate-colored mulch. A stone path led to the sprawling New England Colonial. It was Thursday, July 8, 2010, and James had come to rehearse, have dinner, and relax. In a few hours, he was set to appear in a prime-time special on ESPN to reveal his decision whether to remain with the Cleveland Cavaliers or join one of the five teams that had been courting him for more than a year. The world's most celebrated basketball player couldn't foresee that by the end of the night he would be the most hated athlete in all of sports.

More than a half dozen people poured out of the other vehicles, including two of his best friends, twenty-nine-year-old Maverick Carter and twenty-eight-year-old Rich Paul. They were among the handful of people who knew James's plans. Carter and Paul, along with James's thirty-one-year-old chief of staff, Randy Mims, had been with James since his senior year of high school in Akron, Ohio, when LeBron had asked the three of them to come work for him, to be his inner circle. Smart, ambitious, and fiercely loyal to each other, they and James

called themselves “the Four Horsemen.” Mims hadn’t joined them on this trip, but Carter and Paul followed James down the stone path toward the house, walking with a swagger. Especially Carter. James’s business partner and an aspiring mogul, he was the one who had advised James to announce his decision in such an audacious way. James was the only athlete in America with the muscle to get ESPN’s president, John Skipper, to green-light an hour for his own show. And Carter relished the idea of James using that muscle to do something more revolutionary than merely exercising his right as a free agent to choose one team over another. Rather, James was about to issue what amounted to a declaration of independence from the economic grip of team owners, from the filters that journalists at traditional media platforms put on him, and from the overall power dynamic that historically kept athletes—especially Black athletes—in their place.

Savvy and entrepreneurial, Paul was gearing up to become a sports agent, and he was uneasy over the way the decision was being announced. But he agreed with Maverick on one thing: LeBron was about to wreck the status quo.

Brimming with confidence, James took in the moment with his friends. He recognized how much leverage he possessed. In seven seasons in Cleveland, he had done things that no basketball player—not even Michael Jordan—had done. Ordained “the Chosen One” on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* during his junior year of high school and signed to a \$90 million shoe contract by Nike before graduating, James had entered the NBA like a comet at age eighteen and promptly become the youngest and fastest player in league history to reach the collective milestones of 10,000 points, 2,500 rebounds, 2,500 assists, 700 steals, and 300 blocks. He was on pace to become the most prolific scorer-playmaker the game had ever seen. In 2004, at nineteen, he became the youngest NBA player to make the US Olympic basketball roster, and in 2008, at twenty-three, he won a gold medal. In the same year, he produced his first film through his newly formed production company, signed his first book contract, and went into business with Dr. Dre and Jimmy Iovine at Beats Electronics, which was later acquired by Apple. He also cultivated friendships with two of the richest men in the world, Warren Buffett and Bill Gates, both of whom were impressed

with the cadre of sophisticated bankers and lawyers who were advising James and his inner circle. Of James, Buffett said, “If he were an IPO, I’d buy in.”

By July 2010, James’s estimated \$50 million in annual earnings from his basketball salary and endorsement deals were just part of his burgeoning portfolio. His worth was on track to crest \$1 billion within the coming decade. There had never been a billionaire playing professional team sports in America. James was determined to be the first.

At Nike, he had eclipsed Tiger Woods as the shoe company’s most valuable brand ambassador. When Woods had crashed his SUV into a neighbor’s tree and seen his reputation crumble in a sensational adultery scandal the previous fall, corporations dropped the golfer and increasingly gravitated toward James. American Express, McDonald’s, Coca-Cola, and Walmart embraced the authenticity of James’s devotion to family and his unrelenting commitment to his Akron roots.

Meantime, his global fame already transcended sports. Performing with Jay-Z, campaigning for Barack Obama, dining with Anna Wintour, doing a photo shoot with Annie Leibovitz and Gisele, and starting his own foundation, James ventured into politics, fashion, mass media, and philanthropy before his twenty-fifth birthday. In a recent one-year span, he was profiled on *60 Minutes* and appeared on the covers of *Vogue*, *Time*, *Esquire*, *Fortune*, and *GQ*. According to a leading celebrity index, James had surpassed Jay-Z in popularity. And Nike made James into a global icon through Hollywood-caliber television commercials that showcased his abilities as an actor and comedian. From China to cities across Europe, James became a household name.

About the only thing James hadn’t done was win an NBA championship. But that, he had determined, was about to change. For more than a year he’d been clear that when his contract with the Cavaliers expired after the 2009–2010 season, he would look at his options and sign with the organization that was best equipped to field a team capable of winning rings. Everyone wanted in. Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the city of New York went as far as launching the “C’mon LeBron” campaign, putting up digital messages in Times Square and running ads on the mini-screens of taxicabs in hopes that James would join the Knicks. A Russian billionaire who owned the Brooklyn Nets tried to lure him

by sharing his vision to help James become a billionaire. Even President Obama weighed in, making a pitch from the West Wing for his hometown Chicago Bulls. Billboards in Cleveland begged James to stay. Billboards in Miami pleaded with him to come.

Like any great entertainer, James wanted to be wanted. By everyone. At times he obsessed over the way people perceived him, especially when it came to his peers. The day before James traveled to Greenwich, free agent Kevin Durant used fewer than 140 characters on Twitter to announce his decision to sign a contract extensions with the Oklahoma City Thunder, saying, “I’m just not the guy that always wants to be in the limelight or have my business out there.” Durant was James’s closest rival in terms of talent. And Durant’s low-key manner drew widespread praise from basketball writers, many of whom used his approach to take shots at James and his ESPN special. “An hour show? WTF?” a Fox Sports commentator wrote. Some players anonymously piled on. “With LeBron, it’s all about him,” one unnamed NBA player told a sportswriter. “He talks about wanting to be one of the greatest of all time, like Jordan, like Kobe. But Jordan and Kobe would never do this. He’s trying to be bigger than the game.”

James read what was written about him. The constant comparisons to Jordan and Kobe got old. But nothing stung more than being called selfish. In his mind, he was just approaching basketball the same way team owners did—as a business. Teams were willing to compete for his services. Why not meet with them and listen to their pitches? And why not try to orchestrate the best situation possible by talking to other players about joining forces to win championships together? That wasn’t selfish. It was shrewd.

No one seemed to appreciate James’s approach as much as Miami Heat team president Pat Riley. During the previous week leading up to the ESPN special, James met with more than a dozen executives from teams jockeying to entice him. Riley showed up with his championship rings, making it clear that he knew what it took to win them. He also wasn’t threatened by James’s taking it upon himself to recruit other great players to band with him for a championship run.

From a career standpoint, it was clear to James that Miami was the smart play. Still, the prospect of leaving Cleveland tore at him. Ohio was home. He had

never lived anywhere else. He was comfortable there. And for reasons that few people other than his mother fully understood, James had a visceral connection to his hometown of Akron that made him feel indebted to the place that had made him. His head was telling him to go to Miami. His heart was tethered to Akron.

Determined not to disappoint his mother, he called her hours before flying to Greenwich and told her what he was thinking. He was the one, she told him, who had to live with the consequences of his decision. She encouraged him to do what was best for him.

* * *

Anxious to get the whole thing behind him, James felt a welcome sense of relief when he entered the Greenwich home of Mark Dowley. Wearing faded jeans and an untucked polo, Dowley didn't look the part of a senior partner at William Morris Endeavor (WME), the most influential talent agency in Hollywood. A marketing strategist, Dowley had arranged the details of the ESPN special. James didn't know Dowley particularly well. But Carter did, which was what mattered to James. He thanked Dowley for welcoming him and opening up his home.

Although Dowley's agency was based in Los Angeles, he resided in Greenwich, which factored heavily into his desire to stage the event there. It was to take place at the Greenwich Boys & Girls Club, and the proceeds from the ESPN show would be donated to Boys & Girls Clubs in the cities of the NBA teams that had been courting James.

Dowley introduced James to his awestruck twelve-year-old son and a few of his buddies. Some representatives from ESPN, Nike, and other corporate sponsors were on hand as well. James politely greeted people, then ducked into a private room and slipped into a pair of designer jeans and a purple gingham shirt, his phone relentlessly pinging with notifications. Just two days earlier, James had joined Twitter, tweeting for the first time: "Hello World, the Real King James is in the Building 'Finally.'" His impending decision was already trending on the up-and-coming social media platform. He was also getting inundated with text messages. One was from Kanye West: *Where u at?*

After making a spectacle of himself by upstaging Taylor Swift at the Grammy Awards, West had been off the grid in Hawaii, working on his fifth studio album, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. Eager to witness James's decision in person, West had made his way to Greenwich and was trying to find Dowley's house. Without giving Dowley a heads-up, James sent West the address before sitting down with Carter and sportscaster Jim Gray to go over the program. Soon there was a knock at the front door. Stunned, Dowley's twelve-year-old blurted out: "Kanye's here!" The low-key rehearsal suddenly felt like a house party.

James had met Kanye through Jay-Z. They were friends. James was friends with a lot of rappers and hip-hop artists. They liked being in James's orbit. They gave him backstage passes to their shows. Invited him to their parties. Sat courtside at his games. Even saluted him in their lyrics. In many respects, they didn't just want to know LeBron, they wanted to be LeBron. As a basketball star, his fame surpassed all of them. Yet as dusk turned to dark, James was on the cusp of a whole new world of possibilities opening before him. Exiting the house with his entourage and filing into a van for a police escort to the Greenwich Boys & Girls Club, James couldn't help wondering: *How did a kid from Akron get here?*

* * *

Generators hummed and satellite trucks jammed the parking lot outside the Boys & Girls Club. Thousands of people wearing NBA jerseys and holding signs—COME TO THE NETS—lined the streets. Fans stood twenty deep, chanting, "Let's go Knicks" as a traffic cop with a bullhorn made a futile attempt to get them to step back. In a van trailing police officers on motorcycles, James rounded the corner as if on a float during a night parade. Flashes from cell phone cameras combined with streetlights, yellow headlights, blue and red police lights, and white spotlights outside the club to create a kaleidoscope of colors amid sirens.

Inside the van, James was nervous and thinking about leaving the Cavaliers. He quietly told Carter, "Let them know."

“We are coming to you live from Greenwich, Connecticut,” a host in the ESPN studio in Bristol said as the network broadcast scenes from the chaos outside.

With Jay-Z’s “Empire State of Mind” cranking on a boom box, kids screamed and pointed when LeBron *and* Kanye emerged from the vehicles. Teenage children of venture capitalists and Wall Street bankers reveled in the fact that for one night their town was the center of the basketball universe.

Grade-schooler Gigi Barter was overwhelmed when she arrived with her older brothers. “What’s happening?” she shouted over the noise.

Her brothers had been taking her to the club for a few years. There had never been crowds outside. Giddy, her brothers explained that LeBron James was in town to announce he was joining the Knicks. It was going to be great.

Once inside, Gigi encountered a friendly face. The man who ran the club made sure she had a seat in the area cordoned off for club kids. He put her near the front, so she had a clear view of James.

A few minutes before 9:00 p.m., James stood outside the gymnasium with Savannah Brinson. Kanye stood nearby in dark sunglasses, a black blazer, and multicolored slippers. Dowley milled around inside, making sure everything was set. Rich Paul called the Cavaliers to inform the team that LeBron was leaving. To Paul this was like a divorce, and there was no easy way to break up with a spouse. Trying to soften the blow, he told the team’s general manager that this was a business decision, not a personal one.

It didn’t matter. Owner Dan Gilbert was furious. Four years earlier he had tried to lock James in with a five-year contract that would have avoided all this, but James had insisted on only signing a three-year deal. “When he said, ‘I’m signing for three years,’ we should have had the balls to say, ‘Shove it,’” Gilbert told a journalist. “We should’ve said, ‘Fuck you. Go. Let’s see it.’”

While Paul dealt with the Cavs, James kept his focus on Brinson until an ESPN producer wearing an earpiece told him it was time.

“Wish me luck,” James told Brinson, and gave her a hug and a kiss. Before turning to go, he displayed his teeth and asked her to check them for food particles.

Brinson loved how he always made her laugh. She gave him the A-OK and nudged him into the gym.

* * *

Jim Gray sat in a director's chair on a makeshift stage in the center of the gym. James sat opposite him in a matching chair. Under one basket, about sixty-five children were on folding chairs. Under the other basket and along the walls, a hundred or so adults in business attire sat in chairs. Police officers stood in the doorways. Despite being a seasoned pro, Gray looked unnerved. James appeared uncomfortable, too. Under the white lights, both men were sweating. A makeup artist touched up their foreheads. Without any cue, the audience remained as quiet as a congregation at a funeral.

From Bristol, ESPN's Stuart Scott told viewers that they were minutes away from James's decision. Gray's initial questions were stilted. Time dragged as James gave vague answers. Finally, nearly thirty minutes into the broadcast, Gray said, "The answer to the question everyone wants to know... LeBron, what's your decision?"

"Um, this fall... Man, this is very tough. Um, this fall I'm going to take my talents to South Beach and join the Miami Heat."

A hushed gasp could be heard in the gym. Gray seemed unsure what to say next. It was as if someone had paused live television. Outside, booing erupted.

The booing reverberated in sports bars from New York to Los Angeles. In Cleveland, there were tears of disbelief. James's nine words—*I'm going to take my talents to South Beach*—had rocked the NBA and its fans.

"How do you explain this to the people in Cleveland?" Gray asked.

"Ah, it's heartfelt for me," James tried to explain. "I never wanted to leave Cleveland.... And my heart will always be around that area."

Within minutes, fans in Cleveland took to the streets, setting fire to LeBron's jerseys and spewing profanity.

Unaware of what was transpiring back home, James stood up and stepped off the makeshift stage. He agreed to take a photo with the kids and motioned to them to come over. They swarmed him.

Older boys rushed past her, but Gigi Barter suddenly felt herself lifted into the air from behind. The man who ran the club handed her to James, who hoisted her onto his shoulders. With James's hands wrapped around hers, Gigi gripped his thumbs. Beaming, she couldn't believe she was on the shoulders of *LeBron James*. "I was the smallest person in the room," she later recalled. "I felt like the tallest person in the world. I literally felt like I could touch the sky."

Surrounded by children, James smiled for the camera.

* * *

After the kids were gone, James sat down for an interview with sports journalist Michael Wilbon, who was in an ESPN studio. "I've got to ask you," Wilbon said, "in Cleveland now there were places where they were burning your jersey. We've got some video of it right now."

James watched a monitor. Flames consumed jerseys with his name and number. In his earpiece, James heard Wilbon's voice: "If you can see that image... How do you feel about it?"

"One thing that I didn't want to do was make an emotional decision," he said. "I wanted to do what was best for LeBron James, and what LeBron James is gonna do to make him happy. Put the shoe on the other foot. The Cavs would have got rid of me at one point. Would my family burn down the organization? Of course not."

On television and on social media, James was getting pilloried.

"He looks like a narcissistic fool," one prominent basketball writer said on ESPN.

Another basketball writer blasted the show as "shameless."

A prominent journalist called LeBron "an egotistical self-promoter."

One of David Letterman's producers weighed in on Twitter: "I'm keeping my 2 year old up to watch the LeBron James Special. I want her to see the exact moment our society hit rock bottom."

Even Jim Gray was getting mocked. "Foreplay from Jim Gray just as satisfying as I've always imagined it would be," comedian Seth Meyers tweeted.

Sports Illustrated's media critic referred to Gray's interview as "the kind of milking best done on a farm."

Back at Dowley's house, the CEO of Dowley's agency called from Los Angeles to congratulate him on the show's success. It was the most highly rated studio program in the history of ESPN. Thirteen million people were tuned in when James uttered the words *take my talents to South Beach*. Meantime, the Boys & Girls Clubs in six cities were recipients of record-setting donations to improve their facilities. But no one was talking about any of that. Instead, James was morphing into a heartless villain in real time. The *New York Times* had already posted a story online, declaring Miami "the new Evil Empire" and criticizing James for his "mercenary reach for championship rings."

"What we did was well intended," Dowley explained years later. "But no one remembers that we gave \$5 million to the Boys & Girls Club. We did a terrible job with that. It just got subsumed."

* * *

By the time James boarded a private plane for a late-night flight to Miami, Cavaliers owner Dan Gilbert had worked himself into a rage. He published a letter in Comic Sans font on the team's website that began:

Dear Cleveland:

As you know, our former hero, who grew up in the very region that he deserted this evening, is no longer a Cleveland Cavalier.

This was announced with a several day, narcissistic, self-promotional build-up culminating with a national TV special of his "decision" unlike anything ever "witnessed" in the history of sports and probably the history of entertainment....

You simply don't deserve this kind of cowardly betrayal.

He went on to call out James for his "shameful display of selfishness and betrayal" and his "heartless and callous action" that "sends the exact opposite

lesson of what we would want our children to learn.” With police officers stationed outside the Cavaliers’ arena to deter vandals from tearing down the giant banner of James that hung from the building’s exterior, Gilbert ended his rant with the closing sentiment “Sleep well, Cleveland.”

No one felt worse about the situation in Cleveland than Maverick Carter. As the self-described leader and architect of the plan for a grandiose announcement, he had badly miscalculated the outcome. Sobered by the fallout, he wanted to disappear in a hole, where he couldn’t see or hear anything.

James didn’t have that luxury. After he was in the air, James said, “Fuck! What the hell just happened?”

No one said a word. Rich Paul had been on a lot of flights with James and Carter. Never had he been on one so awkwardly quiet.

“We fucked up,” Carter said, reflecting on the situation years later. But in the moment, Carter was too dazed to weigh in.

Beleaguered, James turned inward. A big fan of Mafia figures from film and television, he had memorized lines from memorable scenes, like the time Tony Soprano felt vulnerable and tore into his consigliere for failing to protect him:

You got no fucking idea what it’s like to be number one. Every decision you make affects every facet of every other fucking thing. It’s too much to deal with almost. And in the end, you’re completely alone with it all.

James loved *The Sopranos*, especially Tony. But James was nothing like the fictional crime boss. For starters, James wasn’t confrontational. Rather than lash out at Carter, James held his tongue. Besides, he knew Carter felt wounded. There was no point in piling on. Plus, James valued relationships above all else. He and Carter had been best friends since James’s freshman year of high school, when they were teammates. He viewed Carter more like a brother than a business associate. He wasn’t about to do or say anything—privately or publicly—to distance himself from the decision to participate in the ESPN show. That would only embarrass Carter. Instead, James resolved to take the hit for Carter’s miscalculation.

Dan Gilbert was a different story. He had deliberately attacked James's character and mocked his motives. Leaving Ohio was the most gut-wrenching decision James had made since joining the NBA. Akron was the only place he had ever lived. He'd fallen in love there. His children were born there. He and Savannah built their dream home there. They were so attached to their house that they planned to continue living there even after James signed his contract with the Heat. Strangely, reading Gilbert's letter numbed the pain of choosing the Heat over the Cavaliers and convinced James he'd made the right decision. *I don't think he ever cared about me*, James told himself.

* * *

It was around 3:00 a.m. when the plane touched down in Miami. Pat Riley was waiting for James on the tarmac. Exhausted and emotionally drained, James stepped off the plane and into Riley's embrace and rested his head on his shoulder. Then James and Brinson got into an SUV. The two of them held hands as they stared out the window into the Florida darkness. James was about to find out what it was like to be public enemy number one in every NBA city other than Miami.

Pulling away from the airstrip, Savannah put things in perspective with a simple reminder: You've been through worse than this. Much worse.