

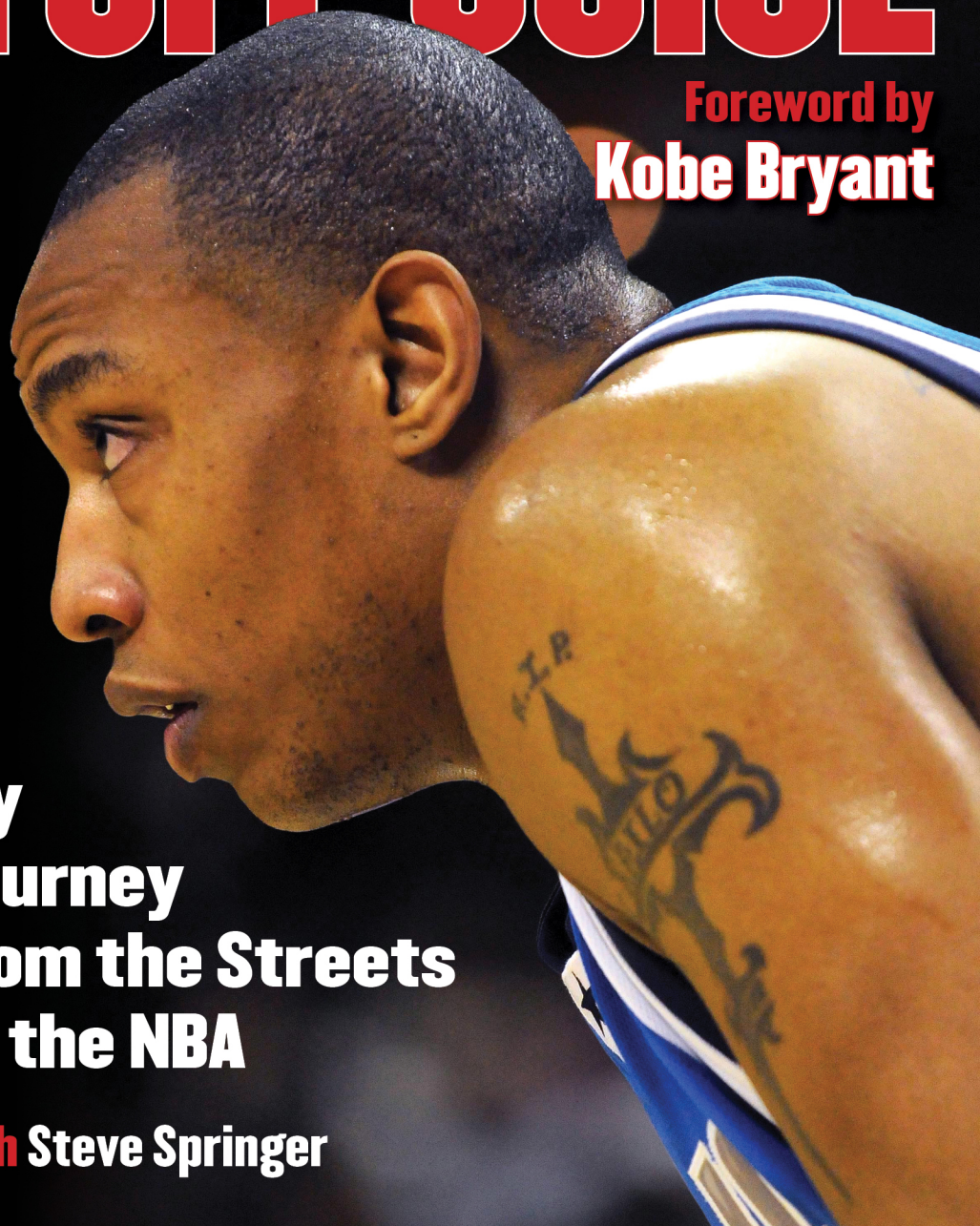
CARON BUTLER

TUFF JUICE

Foreword by
Kobe Bryant

**My
Journey
from the Streets
to the NBA**

with Steve Springer





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ONE

MY D-DAY: A DARK JOURNEY ENDS, A BRIGHT FUTURE BECKONS

It was such a short walk, merely seconds long.

Yet for me, walking from my seat in The Theater at Madison Square Garden up a few steps and across the stage to the podium was the triumphant finish of the toughest journey of my young life, a journey many predicted would end in disaster, and perhaps even death.

The date was June 26, 2002. The occasion was the NBA Draft.

Because Cher had a concert in the Garden, the smaller theater venue was being used for the draft. It created a more intimate setting, allowing me and the other projected top picks to be surrounded by family and friends. I had about fifty people there myself, most of whom had driven from Racine, Wisconsin, my hometown.

Sitting with me at the draft table were my mother, Mattie Butler Claybrook, my grandmother, Margaret Butler Bolton, my then-fiancee, Andrea, my brother, Melvin, my agent, Raymond Brothers, and Jameel Ghuari, who ran the neighborhood rec center in Racine and got me started in organized basketball.

It was the first time my grandmother, born and raised in Columbus, Mississippi, had ever been to New York.

I had smiled when I heard her initial impression of The Big Apple.

“People don’t never go to sleep here,” she said. “Every time you look out the window, somebody moving somewhere. People got things to do all night long.”

Once the draft began, that smile had disappeared from my face. I was nervous as I watched NBA commissioner David Stern return to the podium time and again to announce the selections.

According to everything I had been told, I could expect to go anywhere from 3rd to 12th.

While you'd like to think your spot would be determined by what you did on the court, I learned that my place in the draft could also be affected by people who had never set foot on a college court. There are stats to be analyzed, wins and losses to be considered, attitude and work ethic to be examined.

But there is also the whisper campaign. Right after I left UConn, the very night of my farewell news conference, I had selected Raymond to be my agent. Other agents had interviewed me and filled my head with praise about how great my life story was, but when I didn't pick them, some of them tried to use my story against me to boost up their own clients.

Those agents would tell me, "We respect how you made it through all the hardships you endured, selling drugs and the gang activity. And now, that's going to work in your favor because team officials are not going to worry about you getting millions of dollars and messing yourself up. No, they will figure you've been through all that already. They are going to worry more about the kid who has never had any real money and, when drafted, is going to get exposed to it for the first time."

But when they had other clients who were potential lottery picks, those agents planted some bad seeds about me. They tried to damage my reputation by putting the idea in the heads of team GMs that my past might haunt my future.

It didn't work because I had been totally honest with every team I talked to. I told the team officials, "The reason I won't do this or do that is because I've already done it all. I don't have entourages. It's just me and my family. You can hire a private investigator or do whatever research you want. It's already all out there. It is what it is. I may have skeletons, but they are not hidden in my closet."

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Yao Ming (from China) went first to Houston.

At No. 2—Jay Williams (Duke University) went to Chicago.

At No. 3—Mike Dunleavy Jr. (Duke University) went to Golden State.

At No. 4—Drew Gooden (University of Kansas) went to Memphis.

At No. 5—Nikoloz Tskitishvili (the country of Georgia) went to Denver.

Next up was Cleveland.

Three teams had invited me to work out for them: Memphis, Chicago, and Cleveland. I had a great workout in Cleveland and thought that was the place where I would wind up.

Then, I heard there was going to be a draft day trade involving the Cavaliers and the Clippers that would have sent me to L.A., but the Clippers botched it.

At No. 6—Dajuan Wagner (University of Memphis) went to Cleveland.

“Damn,” I said to Raymond, “what’s going on?”

With the selections rolling by, no teams reaching out to me, and seemingly all eyes in the room looking my way, I was sweating. My shirt was soaked all the way up my back underneath my suit coat. I had never worn a suit before, and I no longer wanted to wear one at that point. I started to take the coat off, but Raymond shook his head and told me to leave it on.

His cell was ringing constantly.

Every time it did, I asked, “Is that a team?”

And every time, Raymond replied, “Not yet.”

At No. 7—Nenê Hilário (Brazil) went to New York.

Raymond motioned for me to get up and then led me into a nearby restroom. Once in there, he grabbed my hand and said we needed to start praying. He asked God to bless me, bless my career, and he wished for health for me and my family.

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As we walked back to the table, the crowd started chanting, “Caron! Caron! Caron!”

When I sat back down, I looked at a nearby TV and heard Charles Barkley say I was the best player left in the draft.

Everybody around me was asking what I thought. I didn’t know what to think.

At No. 8—Chris Wilcox (University of Maryland) went to the Los Angeles Clippers.

Raymond’s phone rang again. As he listened to the voice on the other end, a smile broke out on his face. He gave me a thumbs up and said, “We good.”

At No. 9—Amar’e Stoudemire (Cypress Creek High School, Florida) went to Phoenix.

No one else at the table knew that someone from the Miami Heat had called Raymond. But then the tension around me broke and the uncomfortable wall of silence was shattered by thunderous cheers as the commissioner told the crowd and a worldwide TV audience, “With the 10th pick in the 2002 NBA Draft, the Miami Heat select Caron Butler from the University of Connecticut.”

I broke down and started crying. My mom started shaking. My grandmother started tearing up. And Andrea was smiling from ear to ear.

When I put my arms around my sobbing mother, she looked up at the ceiling and said, “Thank you, God. Thank you, God.”

As I headed up the steps into the spotlight to shake the commissioner’s hand and face the nation as a professional basketball player for the first time, my first thought was, “I made it. Now, don’t fall.”

Then, I started replaying the journey that had brought me here.

I thought about how far our family had come from the cotton fields of Mississippi.

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I thought about the decades my grandmother had put in working at a tractor manufacturing plant in Racine, Wisconsin, to support my mother and her other children.

I thought about my mother working one, two, three shifts a day, piling up so many hours her nickname became “Overtime,” all to make sure my brother and I would have a better life.

I thought about the rough streets of the south side of Racine where I sold drugs, dodged bullets, and first learned to dribble a basketball.

I thought about Junebug, once the drug kingpin of Racine, all the millions spent on crack cocaine, and all the wasted lives left behind.

I thought about my Uncle Carlos, whose dreams of college and a basketball career, of perhaps hearing his own name called in the draft, were destroyed by a drug bust that sucked him in and landed him behind bars even though he was an innocent man.

I thought about James Barker Jr., Andre King, and Black Rob, all close friends of mine who were shot to death.

I thought about all the other casualties of the gang wars I was a part of in the 1990s.

I thought about my mom driving down to the 18th Street park night after night to pull me out of that druggie hangout.

I thought about being arrested and locked up in the Ethan Allen correctional facility when I was fifteen with my mother spending much of my first night there outside the gates in her station wagon.

I thought about the time I spent in solitary confinement in Ethan Allen, alone with my Bible and my faith.

I thought about those dark days when I could have never even imagined making this walk up to shake the hand of the commissioner of the NBA.

I thought about the birth of my daughter, Camary Harrington, my first child, while I was in Ethan Allen.

I thought about the head of the Ethan Allen parole board who set me free even though I had to break the rules to get to him.

I thought about Detective Rick Geller of the Racine Police Department, who gave me the second chance my Uncle Carlos never had.

I thought about Jameel, who convinced me to join his AAU team and gave me a vision of what my world could be like if only I would cut my ties to the street life.

I thought about Max Good, a coach who took a chance on a kid with a troubled past, admitted me to a prep school in Maine, and taught me so much about basketball, and about life.

I thought about UConn basketball coach Jim Calhoun, who also gave me a chance when he had his pick of the litter with so many other talented high school stars elbowing each other to get in better position to make the UConn recruiting class.

I thought about my little brother, Melvin Jr., and how proud I was of him and his resolve not to follow the rocky road I chose growing up.

And I thought about Andrea, who had given me love, stability, and the hope for a normal family life.

As I reached the commissioner, he said, "Congratulations. How do you feel?"

I said, "Fucking great."

His eyes opened wide, he paused, and then he started laughing.

I repeated it: "Fucking great."

I was later told that, back home in Racine, cars were driving up and down the street, horns honking as if the town had just won the NBA championship.

I have to give a lot of credit to Raymond. He kept pitching my story, working it.

I think some teams were scared off early by my history, but Pat Riley, genius that he is, believed in my ability, believed in me as a person. He wasn't at the draft, but I talked to him by phone backstage. He said he was sending a private jet to pick me up and he'd see me in Miami.

After finishing up several media interviews, addressing a Heat draft party back in Miami on a video feed, and shaking hands with so many people that I felt like I was running for office, I started back down onto the floor of the theater. As I did so, I spotted Andrea's mother, Shirley, in the audience. Because Andrea's family is from Jamaica, they didn't know much about the NBA. They certainly didn't know anything about the

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draft. So Andrea made it very clear to me that if I wanted her mother's approval of our plans to marry, Shirley had to be at the draft.

"I need to bring my mom," Andrea told me, "because she needs to see that this is real, that it is something that can secure our future. Otherwise she is not going to let me leave with you. In her mind, you are just some boy without a job."

She may have stressed the importance of this day to her mom, but Andrea later conceded to me that she herself wasn't convinced it would be meaningful.

"It was the unknown," Andrea later told me. "I didn't understand it. I knew there are plenty of talented players who don't even get drafted. I was listening to you say you were going to be in the Top 10. I didn't know what the hell the Top 10 meant. I had never even watched the draft before."

That day, Andrea became a believer. So did her mom, who told her daughter after sitting in the audience and seeing the cameras and the crowd and the excitement, "Oh, this *is* something serious."

My mom didn't need convincing. She had always believed this day would come.

As she watched me at the podium, she thought about one of the many times she ordered me out of the park in Racine and into her car. On that particular occasion, I looked at her and said, "Mom, I am not going to get in trouble anymore."

While I didn't keep that promise right away, she clung to those words, sure I would eventually make good on that vow. And I did.

When I returned to the draft table, my mother told me with tears in her eyes, "This is so wonderful. It's one of the happiest days of my life. We don't have to live like we used to live anymore. I don't have to get up in the morning and work into the night. My head can stop being heavy. I ached so much it was like my body had a headache. That is going to disappear forever."

I went over to my grandmother, gave her a big hug, and told her, "We on our way now, Granny. We on our way."