

The
Unbelievable
Point Guard



Brian Gotta

Dedicated to the thousands of boys and girls who I've been lucky enough to coach over the years. I've learned as much from you as you have from me. Special thanks for their proofreading and editing to Curly and Alex.



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Chapter One

Time was running out on the Baker Middle School Titans. The Layton Wolverines led by four with less than a minute remaining. Clifton Conners, who often introduced himself simply as “Number 2,” which was the number on his Baker jersey, tugged on his shorts as he bent his heaving chest towards the Layton gym floor. A bead of sweat rolled from his forehead and down to the tip of his nose. It paused, as if trying to decide whether to stay on his face or jump, and then dripped down onto the tail of the wolverine painted at mid-court. Clifton rubbed it in with his new high-top basketball shoes.

He looked up to see his teammate and best friend, Bobby Anderson, at the free-throw line. Bobby was the Baker Titan's small forward and leading scorer. He took aim at the free-throw that could cut the Wolverine lead to a three-pointer. Swish. The Titans rushed back on defense and set up in man-to-man as the Wolverines jogged up-court, in no particular hurry. The Layton point guard, whose name Clifton knew to be Tommy Irving, slowly brought the ball up. He paused, bouncing it on the brown head of the painted wolverine three or four times, and then backed across the timeline. Clifton picked him up.

The Layton cheerleaders, with their backs to the action, chanted, "Stand up tall-shoot the ball!" while bouncing from side to side.

Shows what they know, thought Clifton with snort.
The last thing they want to do now is shoot.

Tommy Irving approached the three-point line and turned around to face the basket, keeping his dribble. Layton's coach was up off the bench, yelling for him to spread it around. Clifton knew that with a three-point lead

and time running out, Tommy had no intention of shooting. He backed off a little, hoping to tip a pass or dive at the right instant and knock the ball away.

Clifton glanced at the clock on the scorer's table. 21 seconds. Coach Watson jumped up and yelled, "Yellow!" ...the signal for a trap. Bobby left his man free and flew over to try to pin Tommy in. Both Bobby and Clifton converged at the same time, hands up, going for the ball. It worked. Tommy panicked and tried to make a jump-pass but Clifton got a hand on it. Bobby flew down the court in perfect anticipation and Clifton hustled to retrieve the ball. He snatched it from a diving Layton player and heaved a baseball pass. Bobby waited for the ball to arrive, then laid it up and in. Coach Watson immediately called timeout. 13 seconds remained and the Titans were down by just one.

"GREAT PLAY, BOYS!" Coach Watson shouted as the team went into their huddle. Coach Watson was also the 7th grade Algebra teacher and he sometimes called Clifton "Drifin' Clifton," because he didn't always pay attention in class. Clifton thought about how different "Coach Watson" was from "Mr. Watson." He couldn't imagine ever hearing him yell, "GREAT QUIZ, EVERYBODY!" while holding a stack of exams in the classroom. The thought made Clifton smile. He'd have to tell that one to Bobby after the game.

"Now we're going to press full-court," Coach Watson said with intensity. "Clifton—you guard the inbounds. If they get it in, foul immediately. We're out of timeouts so after their free-throws they'll either be up by one, two, or three. If it's only one or two, Clifton, drive the hoop and score. If it's three, penetrate. Then try to find Bobby on the right wing for the three-pointer. Got it?" The coach looked at Clifton and must have believed he was "drifin'" again.

"Clifton!" he shouted. "The cheerleaders will still be there after the game." Clifton felt his ears burn. A few of the guys, including the backup point guard, Denny Davis, giggled.

"Do you know what to do after their free-throws?"

"I got it," Clifton replied as the horn sounded indicating the end of the time-out.

The Titans broke the huddle. Number 2 stood next to the baseline. The ref bounced the ball to the biggest Wolverine—their huge center—who slapped the round leather with his giant hand. Clifton jumped and waved his arms, just barely missing the inbounds. After catching the pass, Tommy Irving was immediately fouled. He sauntered down-court for his free-throws. 10 seconds remained.

"Block out!" both coaches shouted. Tommy shot the front end of a one-and-one and both teams crashed into the lane, fighting for position. The ball bounced around the rim, then fell through. The cheerleaders began chanting, "Work it free! Hit a three!"

It was 41-39. Clifton, standing at mid-court, recalled his instructions. After this free-throw, if it was still only a two-point lead, he was to get the ball and drive for the tying score; if it was a three-point game he was going to penetrate, and then dish off to Bobby on the wing.

He looked over at the cheerleaders. *Work it free, hit a three! A lot they know*, Clifton thought sarcastically. *They're shooting free-throws, not three-pointers. Why can't these girls learn what's going on in the game?*

Hearing the crowd groan, Clifton looked back in time to see a loose ball to the left of the paint. Since he hadn't been paying attention, he wasn't sure if the ball had just come in from out-of-bounds, or if it was a missed shot. There was no time to ask. Bobby scooped up the loose orange and wristed a bullet to Clifton. Clifton turned and sprinted up-court. He caught a glimpse of the scoreboard as he flew by. :07 changed to :06. He thought he saw 39 points on the Visitors' side but didn't remember if he saw 41 or 42 for Layton.

The Wolverine's defense tried to get into position. Clifton knew he could drive the lane and get off a decent shot. But would a two tie it, or leave Baker down by one? He

leapt towards the basket. Two defenders flew at him as he went up. In mid-air, Clifton still hadn't decided what to do. He felt himself coming back down and, at the last instant, looked to the wing. Bobby was outside, all alone. Clifton chucked an awkward pass out to his surprised-looking teammate. Bobby scrambled, scooped up the weak pass, and fired an off-balance shot as the buzzer sounded. It missed by a mile. The relieved Wolverines celebrated their victory. Clifton looked at the scoreboard. It read: Wolverines 41, Visitors 39. Tommy Irving had missed the second free-throw. A two-pointer would have tied the score and sent the game to overtime. Instead, the Baker Titans felt the sting of their first loss of the season.

As the teams lined up to shake hands, Clifton looked at Bobby.

"My fault," he said sullenly.

Bobby said it was all right but he didn't look Clifton in the eye. On the way to the locker room Coach Watson pulled Clifton aside.

"What were you thinking?" he asked quietly. "You had a good shot to tie."

Clifton got nervous. "I thought you said to go for the win if we were down by two," he lied. "I didn't think you wanted to go into overtime in their gym."

"That's not what I said," Coach replied even more quietly. He looked at his point guard for what seemed like a long time before walking ahead into the locker room. Clifton was pretty sure that Coach Watson didn't believe him.

Perfect. Clifton thought. *I let my team down and Coach is mad at me.* Immediately his mind flashed to the test he had Monday in Coach Watson's class. He got a pit in his stomach. *And to top it all off, I'm failing Algebra. If I don't pass this test, I'm off the team. Maybe Coach wants that.*

Clifton was the last one in the locker room. He could see the bitter disappointment in all his teammates' faces as he walked in.

Chapter Two

Clifton sat next to Erin Cook in Algebra class. Erin was the captain of the Baker Middle School cheerleading squad, and got straight A's. At the beginning of the school year she had been really friendly to Clifton, but now she barely ever said a word to him. That was just fine with Clifton. He didn't care about her—or any girls for that matter. Especially cheerleaders.

When Coach Watson arrived in the classroom, Clifton immediately got the bad feeling in his stomach again. Coach Watson opened his briefcase and pulled out a stack of papers. Those were today's Algebra tests. Clifton looked at them as if they were a stack of school suspension letters all aimed at him.

Coach didn't seem to be in his usual, good mood this morning. He didn't joke or even chat with the class. He didn't smile. All he said was, "Put everything away, clean desks," as he began to pass out the tests. Not once did he look at Clifton. Clifton figured the coach was probably still mad about Friday's game.

The test was really hard, and Clifton immediately knew he should have studied more. *How could I have studied?* He wondered. *I have basketball and all my other classes. It's not fair.*

It was so difficult to concentrate. Out of the corner of his eye he could see that Erin was almost done with the first page of the test. Clifton hadn't gotten farther than writing "Number 2" instead of his name at the top. Oh, how great it would be to know what was on her paper and be able to somehow, magically, transfer it all over to his sheet. But he didn't dare look. If he did, he believed Erin would tell. Even if she didn't tell, if Coach Watson saw him looking it would

be the worst thing in the world to happen. But in addition to all that, Clifton believed cheating was wrong. There was nothing worse than playing on the playground with someone who always called a foul whenever he missed a shot. Or who said he wasn't out of bounds when clearly he was. Clifton hated cheaters in basketball. But would cheating in Algebra really be as bad as cheating in basketball? He was so desperate he began to let crazy thoughts go through his mind.

What if I flunk and get kicked off the team? Does that do anyone any good? And besides, Erin knows all of this stuff because she has time to study. I don't. Is it fair that she gets good grades and I don't just because she has more time? When am I ever going to need to know this stuff anyway? And how would it hurt her if I copied her answers?

Clifton's eye danced ever so slightly over towards Erin's desk. He looked up and saw Coach Watson staring at him intently. Clifton's face flushed and he immediately began writing on his test sheet. Then he erased what he had just scribbled.

Did Coach think I was trying to cheat? He thinks I was trying to cheat! I can't look anywhere else the rest of the period just to make sure he knows I'm not copying somebody! Clifton heard Erin turn her page. She had finished the first sheet and was moving on to the second. Clifton glanced at the clock then down at his paper. Fifteen minutes were gone and he was still on problem number one.

When the bell rang, Clifton was the last one left writing on his test. Everyone else was filing out of the classroom while he scribbled furiously.

Clifton looked up and noticed Coach Watson speaking quietly with Erin at the front of the class.

Teacher's pet, Clifton thought bitterly. She knows all the answers but she still has to be the good little girl anyway. Well, talk some more because you're buying me more time.

Erin said goodbye to the teacher, glancing briefly back in Clifton's direction on her way out.

“OK, Clifton,” Coach Watson said quietly. “Time’s up.”

Clifton put down his pencil and sighed. He looked up at the ceiling and closed his eyes. He didn’t need to wait until tomorrow to see his grade. He already knew.

“Guess you should have studied a little more, huh?” Coach Watson walked over to Clifton’s desk and picked up his paper. Clifton wanted to tell him that there wasn’t enough time to study between games and practices. There was hardly time to do anything. But he had a pretty good idea that Coach Watson might just reply that soon he wasn’t going to have to worry about games or practices anymore.

Clifton trudged out into the hall and to his next class—Science. He saw Erin standing against the wall talking and laughing with two other girls, also cheerleaders. Erin looked at him as he passed and her expression changed. Clifton couldn’t tell if she despised him or felt sorry for him. Either way, *he* despised *her*. He despised school. He was even beginning to despise Coach Watson.

He thought about practice after school. *I don’t want to see anybody tonight, especially Coach Watson. Maybe I’ll just save Coach the headache of having to cut me from the team. Maybe I just won’t show up and then we’ll see how he likes it. If his starting point guard isn’t there to run the offense, he’ll be sorry.*

Chapter Three

The Baker Middle School gymnasium was a spacious arena with a full basketball court surrounded by additional hoops at all four corners that could be raised to the ceiling by a pulley. On game days the wooden bleachers would be rolled out for fans. The days when there were no home games, they were tightly pressed against the wall, providing an extra twenty feet of gymnasium floor. This is where the cheerleaders practiced each night.

Clifton listened to Coach Watson talk about the zone defense, but it was hard to concentrate. Not only was he worried this might be his last practice, (depending on how lucky his Algebra test guesses were), but he also had to listen to the inane chants and cheers coming from the dumb girls on the sideline.

“Time is running out! Time is running out! Oh! We’re gonna shout!” was one cheer Clifton heard the girls working on.

“If we get a shot we’re going to take it-take it! When we take a shot we’re going to make it-make it!” was another.

Clifton shuddered. He could have thought up better rhymes when he was in first grade. Plus, these girls were always doing a cheer for offense when the team was on defense, and shouting for defense when the team had the ball.

Number 2 tuned in Coach Watson again. He was writing on his mini basketball court clipboard.

“And Clifton, you watch for the back-cut here. All right, White offense, Blue defense.”

Clifton wasn’t sure he’d heard everything, but the zone was easy. You just guard a place on the floor. He got into position. The White team, which was the team of

players who were not in the starting lineup, took the ball in from half-court. Denny Davis, the second-string point guard, dribbled across the Baker Middle School logo painted at mid-court.

If we get a shot we're going to take it-take it! When we take a shot we're going to make it-make it! The words went through Clifton's mind like an annoying song from a commercial you can't get rid of. *Time is running out. Time is running out. Oh! We're gonna shout!* Clifton looked over at the girls doing their cheers. Eight of them had their backs turned and three, including Erin, were facing them. They danced back and forth, clapping their hands. Clifton's eyes met Erin's. He immediately looked away and he felt his face flush.

Just then, Chris Mitsuno streaked to the basket on a back-cut. Denny Davis found him with a tremendous pass for an easy lay-up. The White team celebrated a rare basket on the Blues.

"Yeah, baby!" shouted Denny Davis.

Clifton said, to no one in particular, "My fault."

Dang! he thought. *That was the back-cut Coach warned me about! Now I'm going to get it!*

But Coach Watson didn't yell or even look mad. He put down his clipboard and quietly said, "Denny and Clifton, switch."

Clifton couldn't believe it. He had to reverse his jersey to white. Worse yet was the smirk he was certain he saw on Denny's face as he turned *his* jersey to blue. Clifton glanced over at the cheerleaders who were all watching. His shirt got stuck on his ear, and then he couldn't get his arm out. The entire team, Coach Watson, and eleven girls were watching him wrestle with his jersey, making a fool of himself. Clifton gritted his teeth in anger.

"White, run the offense again. Clifton, bring the ball up."

The rest of the practice Clifton ran with the White team. It appeared that because he made one mistake on

defense, Coach Watson was demoting him to second-string. That settled it. Coach Watson hated him and was just looking for an excuse to get him off the team. *Well*, Clifton thought. *If he doesn't need me-I don't need him.*

When practice was over a million questions were swirling through Clifton's head. *What just happened?* he wondered. *Is Denny the starting guard now, and I'm on the bench? Is Coach just trying to send me a message, or is this supposed to be permanent? Why is it fair that I am the only one who has to switch to White after a mistake?* Clifton considered confronting Coach Watson. He stopped on his way into the locker room and watched Coach putting balls in the rack. *Aw, forget it*, Clifton grouched. *What's the use? If Coach wants me to ride the pine, I'll ride it. It won't be long before we're down by ten and he puts me back in anyway.*

But just then Coach Watson looked up and saw Clifton looking at him.

"Clifton," he said in a tired and sad-sounding voice. "I need to speak to you in my office. Get showered and I'll see you in ten minutes."

Chapter Four

Clifton waited in Coach Watson's office, which was near the back of the locker room next to the showers. At one time it had been a closet. Mr. Schaeffer, the PE teacher who was also the wrestling and track coach had the big office by the door, so they had converted this small, brick-walled room for Coach Watson to use during basketball season. The only light was a dim, yellow desk lamp. There was barely enough space for the desk, two chairs, and bookcase stuffed inside the room. Also squeezed behind Coach's chair was a little table on which sat four basketballs reading, "Baker Middle School-City Champions," followed by the year. Some of the dates were from more than ten years ago, when Clifton was just a baby.

Each dusty ball had been signed by the players from that year's team. He read mysterious names like Dan Epstein-8, Julio Cota-13, Pete Samaras-12, Scott Roemer-31 and Gary Munro-2—Clifton's number! All were former Baker Titans. Clifton wondered where those guys were now, all these years later. It felt neat knowing that maybe he was even wearing the same jersey as Gary Munro way back when. He liked being linked to these older guys who played on great Baker teams from the past. Clifton dreamed that he might someday have the honor of signing a ball that would sit on that table forever. He thought about how some kid ten years from now might wonder who Clifton Connors was, while waiting in Coach Watson's office.

But for that to happen, Baker would have to win City. Their record was 8-1, the lone loss because of the big mistake Clifton made at the end of the Layton game. Layton

was undefeated, 9-0. But even with that one blemish, Clifton knew that with only one regular-season game left, his team would probably make it to the four-team city playoff and have a chance at revenge against the Wolverines.

Coach Watson startled Clifton when he walked past and sat behind his desk. The Coach looked uncomfortable—like he didn't really want to be there. *Well*, Clifton thought. *That makes two of us*. After shuffling some papers and arranging some things on his desk, Coach Watson cleared his throat and spoke.

"Clifton," he began. "I know you really love basketball, and that you're a good kid at heart."

Uh-Oh, Clifton thought. He was pretty sure he wasn't going to like what he heard next.

"Your big issues are your concentration, and taking responsibility. You have more trouble focusing than any player or student I've ever had, and it costs you. It costs you in the classroom and it costs you on the court. You're not slow—in fact...I believe you're very intelligent. That's why it's so frustrating to see you underachieve."

Number 2 shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"And, son," Coach Watson continued, "too often when you make mistakes you try to make excuses or fib your way out of it."

Clifton was stunned and offended. He didn't make excuses or lie! He was about to tell the coach how much he disagreed, but then, thought better of it. He just folded his arms and looked fiercely at Coach Watson.

"Clifton, I have to do something. I've got your Algebra test."

Baker's starting point guard began to get dizzy. He looked over Coach Watson's shoulder at the basketballs. He wished he were Scott Roemer. Already done with Baker Middle School. Already a City Champion. On with his life and through with Algebra tests. Whoever Gary Munro was, he was so lucky.

Coach Watson slid the paper, which Clifton recognized from yesterday, across his desk. At the top, under where he had signed “Number 2,” was a big, red, handwritten “D.”

For a moment Clifton was relieved. He really thought he’d flunked the test. A “D” wasn’t great, but at least he could stay on the team. There was some hope after all. Clifton had a new life! It was like missing the last shot that would have sent the game into overtime, but then getting fouled on the play and having a chance at two free-throws. He tried to hide his smile.

Then Coach Watson dropped a bomb on him.

“Clifton, a “D” isn’t the type of grade we want from players on this team. Your grade is still passing, so technically I don’t have to take your uniform from you, but there are going to be some changes until you have a chance to get your marks back up.”

Clifton figured this was the whole, “White Team” thing. *OK. I’ll sit on the bench to start the game. As soon as Denny Davis bounces a few off his foot out of bounds, I’ll be right back in.*

“So,” Coach Watson continued, “In order to make sure you have all the time you need to devote to your schoolwork...I’m suspending you from the team, effective immediately.”

Clifton wasn’t sure he’d heard right. Coach Watson was suspending him?

“You won’t be allowed at any practices and you can’t suit up for games. But you’re still on the team. As soon as I see progress in Algebra and your other classes, we’ll immediately reinstate you.”

“But what about the game Friday against Jackson?” Clifton asked.

“You won’t be with us for that one.”

Clifton sat in stunned silence. He couldn’t believe this was happening. Coach Watson said he wasn’t asking for his uniform back, but this was just as bad. Then it got worse.

“And, since you’re going to have extra time after school when you would have been at practice, I’ve asked for someone to stay after and give you...um...help. To be a tutor.” Coach Watson cleared his throat.

Clifton put his head in his hands. He actually felt like crying but he was in middle school now, and no one cries in middle school. This was a disaster.

He looked up. “Coach, can I keep playing on the team if I promise to get my grades up? I swear I can do it if you give me a chance.”

“Clifton,” Coach said softly. “I’ve been giving you chances. With your grades, what does it say to the rest of the team if I let you keep playing? What does that say to you? Your grades come first, and I’m beginning to believe that you care more about basketball than your report card.”

Number 2 thought, *OF COURSE I DO! SCHOOL IS A JOKE! WHEN AM I EVER GOING TO NEED TO KNOW ANY OF THIS STUFF?!* He wanted to shout but he kept silent. He was getting angry—angry at school and angry at Coach Watson.

“So tomorrow, after school, I want you to come into my room and I’ll introduce you to your tutor. She’ll be helping you prepare for our test next week. And the good news is that if you can pull a decent grade on that test, we’ll discuss reinstating you onto the team, OK?”

Clifton nodded his head but could barely look at his coach.

“Hey, come on Number 2,” Coach Watson said with a wisp of a smile. “It’s not the end of the world and it’s not forever. Someday you’ll look back on this and realize that you’re better because of it.”

Better? Is he kidding? While Denny Davis takes my spot on the team and we lose a chance to play for the City Championship I’ll be staying after school with some old lady, learning a subject I’ll never need. But someday this will all make me better. That’s perfect.

Though thoughts burst through his mind like a rushing river, Clifton wisely didn't say any of the things he was thinking. All he muttered was, "Yes, Coach." Deep down, as he left Coach Watson's office and trudged past the empty lockers, he knew he couldn't blame anyone but himself. Yet, as sad and disappointed as he was that evening—as bad as it was—little did Clifton know, it was about to get worse. Because nothing Coach Watson said in his office prepared Clifton for who he'd see waiting for him after school the next afternoon.