



JOHN FEINSTEIN

# THE PRODIGY

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of David Sattler,  
who didn't love golf, but who absolutely adored his children.  
It was an honor to call him my brother for twenty-seven years.*



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seven—likes to say to me, “Daddy, you’ve written enough for today.”

As usual, she’s right . . .

—J.F., Potomac, Maryland





# PART I



**THE BALL WAS ALREADY IN THE AIR WHEN FRANK**

Baker yelled, “Last chance to save a dozen if you quit now!”

“No way!” came the answer from Slugger Johnston in the golf cart on the other side of the fairway. Which was exactly what Frank had expected his teacher to say. In truth, it was what Frank had hoped Slugger would say.

The ball cut through the dewy early-morning air and landed about 20 feet short of the flag on the 18th green at Perryton Country Club. It took one hop, then rolled forward before skidding to a stop somewhere inside five feet. Frank couldn’t be certain how close the ball was to the hole because the green was slightly elevated and the flagstick was near the back of the green. He didn’t need to see it, though, to know it was close. The shot had felt perfect coming off his club.

Slugger had already hit his second shot into the right-hand bunker, which was why Frank had been willing to give him a chance to concede his victory and only have to buy Frank a dozen Dunkin’ Donuts on the way to dropping him at school.

During the school year, this was their weekday morning routine: Slugger would pick Frank up and they'd arrive at the club by five-thirty, hit balls for thirty minutes, and then jump in a cart and play a quick nine holes. They would play for a dozen Dunkin' Donuts. Each press—starting another mini-match if one player fell two holes behind—was worth another six. Frank usually won and always shared his winnings with kids in his first class of the day, which was the only way his skill at the sport had ever earned him much admiration among his classmates.

If Frank's putt for birdie went in, he'd shoot 34—two under par. Slugger, who had been the golf pro at Perryton CC for five years—and Frank's swing coach for almost as long—was still a good player at the age of thirty-two, but when Frank was on his game, Slugger couldn't beat him.

Frank had already closed out the dozen-donuts match, and Slugger had pressed for six more on the 18th tee. Frank's offer to let him off the hook wasn't so much about showing mercy as about making Slugger give up with the ball in the air—which Frank knew Slugger would never even think about. It was Frank's way of taunting. You didn't get to taunt while playing golf too often.

Frank had only been 147 yards from the flag when he hit his second shot. He'd brought his putter with him so he could walk up to the green. It was only a little after seven, but the air was already warm and the bright blue sky was cloudless. Frank and Slugger both wore golf caps and sunglasses to protect themselves from the already-blazing morning sun.

When they'd teed off on Number 10 at six o'clock—they

alternated nines each morning, today was a back-nine day—the sun was up, but there was still a hint of coolness in the air. Frank loved this time of day and loved being on the golf course at such an early hour.

Most of the time, he and Slugger had the place to themselves, could still see some dew on the grass, and, as they drove off the tenth tee, could see most of the back nine—the trees overhanging the fairways, the pristine bunkers, and the water hazards were fun to look at from a distance as long as you kept your golf ball away from them.

Sunrise and sunset were great times to be on a golf course.

That was especially true for Frank Baker—whose full name was John Franklin Baker, after the early twentieth-century Baseball Hall of Fame player John Franklin “Home Run” Baker. Thomas Baker was a baseball junkie with a passion for the history of the sport. He had once dreamed that his only kid would be a baseball star, and had called him “Home Run” when he was little, but now he was completely immersed in Frank’s golf career.

Frank was not quite seventeen, wrapping up his junior year at Storrs Academy. He was being recruited by every college in the country that had a big-time golf team. He had no idea where he wanted to go to school. In fact, at that moment, he had no idea *if* he was going to go to college.

As he walked up the slope to the green, he saw two men—one his father, the other someone he didn’t recognize but who instantly raised Frank’s concern meter. *Who shows up at a golf course at seven-fifteen in the morning wearing a suit?*

“Nice shot, Frank!” his father shouted. “Three feet, Slugger! That good?”

“Hell no,” Slugger answered, digging his feet into the bunker. “It’s more like four feet, and he has to putt it. Donuts at stake here.”

The man in the suit laughed—a bit too hard, Frank thought—at Slugger’s little joke.

Slugger’s bunker shot rolled to within ten feet. A nice shot, but not good enough. Now that both players were on the green, Frank pulled the flagstick from the cup and set it off to the side, out of the line of play.

“Frank, putt that out if Slugger insists and then come on over. I want you to meet someone,” his dad said, looking at Slugger, who nodded, even though he was away, indicating it was fine for the kid to putt first.

Frank took his time. For one thing, the putt *was* four feet—no sure thing. For another, he was in no rush to meet his dad’s friend.

But he did knock the putt in.

Then he and Slugger, as they always did, took their caps off to shake hands. Slugger was a stickler for proper golf etiquette—whether on an empty golf course early in the morning or in the heat of a big tournament.

After replacing the flag and collecting their equipment, Frank and Slugger walked over to where the two men stood.

“What’d you shoot?” his father asked.

“Thirty-four,” Frank said.

“Not bad. What’d you hit in here to eighteen?”

“Nine-iron.”

“One-fifty flag?” his dad asked, slipping into golf jargon. *One-fifty flag* meant 150 yards to the flag for his second shot.

“One-forty-seven,” Frank said, nodding.

Without pausing, Thomas Baker turned to the man in the blue suit and said, “Frank, I want you to meet Ron Lawrensen. He’s a VP at Double Eagle Inc., and reps some of the upcoming young guys on tour.”

Frank hadn’t ever heard much about Double Eagle, but he knew that reps—agents—handled all the business details for pro golfers: getting them into tournaments, drawing up contracts, arranging travel, handling media appearances and sponsorships. They did all the boring stuff so that players could just focus on golf. And they were well paid for it, sometimes taking upward of 20 percent of an athlete’s income.

“He’s a pro—kind of a pro’s pro,” his dad finished.

Lawrensen’s face lit up with a smile, and he put out his hand. Frank started to shake it, but Lawrensen twisted it into a bro-shake and pulled Frank in for a shoulder bump—a very awkward shoulder bump.

“Been wanting to meet you ever since the Amateur last year,” Lawrensen said, the smile still plastered across his face. “I thought for sure you were going to Augusta.”

Augusta National Golf Club was the site of the annual Masters Tournament, held every year at the start of April.

Frank said, “I never led in the match and I lost on sixteen, so I don’t know why you thought that.”

His father gave him a sharp look.

Frank didn't really care. The guy had just met him and had already brought up the most disappointing day of his golf career—his semifinal loss in last summer's U.S. Amateur. If he had won, he would have qualified to play in the Masters, since both finalists received invitations. But Rickie Southwick had beaten him handily in the semis.

Frank changed the subject. "This is Slugger Johnston," he said. "He's the pro here, and he's my teacher."

Mercifully, Lawrensen didn't go for a bro-shake or shoulder bump with Slugger. In fact, he said nothing to Slugger beyond "Nice to meet you."

Slugger, being polite, no doubt, but also looking for information, said, "What brings you to town, Ron?"

The agent gave him a no-big-deal shrug. "A few of my guys are playing an outing down at River Highlands," he said. "Media-day type of thing for the Travelers. Then I head to Memphis and from there on to Erin Hills. The circus never stops."

He gave a world-weary shake of his head after ticking off the next stops on the Professional Golf Association Tour. Memphis was this week; then the U.S. Open was at Erin Hills in Wisconsin the following week, and then the Tour came to Hartford after that, with the Travelers Championship being played at River Highlands—which was about 20 miles south of Perryton.

"I thought it might be interesting for you to spend a little time with Ron, hear about what might be in store for you," Thomas Baker said. "We can grab breakfast inside—"



“Dad, I have to get to school,” Frank protested.

“First period is at eight-thirty,” his dad said. “I’ll drop you off this morning. We’re ten minutes away, and it’s not yet seven-thirty. Slugger can pay off those donuts tomorrow. Right, Slugger?”

“Sure thing, Thomas,” Slugger said. He didn’t really care about the donuts, and neither did Frank.

“Thanks, Slugger. Come on, Frank. Let’s get some food in you.”

He and Lawrensen turned in the direction of the clubhouse. Frank looked at Slugger.

“You coming?” he said.

Slugger shook his head. “Wasn’t invited.”

*“I’m inviting you.”*

“Just go,” Slugger said softly, putting his hand out for Frank’s putter and nine-iron. “We’ll talk later. I’ll take care of the carts and the clubs.”

## 2

**KEITH FORMAN ROLLED OVER IN BED, STARED** at the ceiling, and took morning inventory.

The first question, and the most crucial one: *Where am I?* His instincts quickly told him he was in yet another Courtyard Marriott. But where? It came to him: Germantown, Tennessee, a suburb of Memphis.

It was Tuesday at—he rolled over slightly so he could see the clock—6:35 a.m. Time to wake up. Tuesday was a big day for him at a golf tournament—any golf tournament. Tuesday was the day players first showed up and, since they had no official responsibilities until the next day's pro-am, they usually had time to talk to reporters like Keith.

He picked up his cell phone off the night table and glanced at it. There was one message on the screen: **Commie, call me ASAP.**

Slugger.

Forman groaned. What in the world could Slugger Johnston want with him? They had been classmates at the

University of Richmond and teammates on the UR golf team ten years earlier. They'd stayed in touch some through the years since both were still in golf—Slugger as a club pro in Connecticut, Keith as a golf writer. But they'd barely talked since Donald Trump's inauguration because Slugger kept sending him emails that started, **MAKING AMERICA GREAT AGAIN**.

Forman had stopped responding because, as a dyed-in-the-wool Boston liberal, he had been sickened by the outcome of the presidential election the previous November. That was why Johnston called him "Commie." It had been his college nickname because everyone else on the golf team was, as he liked to put it, "so far right, they were almost left."

Slugger had earned his own nickname in college, too—after an ill-advised locker-room fight with a guy from the football team.

Now, after almost six months of radio silence, Slugger wanted something—and he wanted it ASAP. Forman sat up and smiled. He knew what Slugger wanted: U.S. Open tickets for one of his members. Made sense. The Open was a week away.

Forman was thirty-two and once upon a time he had aspired to be part of the traveling circus that was the PGA Tour, just not *this* way. He had gone to the University of Richmond as a scholarship golfer with dreams of playing the Tour someday, of being a player like Phil Mickelson, Ernie Els, or Vijay Singh. Heck, he'd have settled for being the next Geoff Ogilvy, the Aussie who won the U.S. Open in 2006—the year Forman had graduated—and who hadn't done much since.

He didn't think once about being Tiger Woods because he *knew* he'd never be that good. No mere mortal was that good.

He'd had a reasonably good college career and had graduated with a degree in history, making him different from most of his teammates. He'd hoped that a few years of playing golf full-time, whether on mini-tours or the Hooters Tour or even the Web.com Tour, would get his game to a level where he could play with the big boys. The Web.com was one step from the PGA Tour; the Hooters Tour was two steps away. The mini-tours were the low minors, but players did occasionally work their way up the ladder from there to the big bucks.

Forman had gotten married shortly after graduating. He'd met Julie McCoy at a golf team party when both were juniors. They got married in her hometown, Asheville, North Carolina, and Julie's dad told Keith he'd loan him fifty grand to get him started as a pro.

"You pay me back when you begin making the real money," Julie's dad had told him. "The only interest I want is for you to take good care of my daughter."

Forman had failed to pay off the loan or the interest. He'd spent three years playing mini-tours in Florida and had made a total of \$27,116. His biggest check had come when he tied for ninth at an event in Sarasota and brought home the princely sum of \$2,811.

That money was barely enough to pay for his expenses—which included a small apartment he and Julie shared in Orlando and paid for with his tiny checks and her salary as a

bank teller. The plan had been for her to go to graduate school and get an MBA once Keith started to make real money.

The real money never came. Three times Forman went to the PGA Tour's Qualifying School, a three-step grind, which, if all went well, led—back then—to the PGA Tour, or at least to the Triple-A Web.com Tour. Twice, Forman made it through the first stage but hit what players called “the second-stage wall.” Second stage had a lot of good players—some who had been on the PGA Tour but had fallen to that level. Others were future stars on the way up. Jordan Spieth had once failed at second stage. That's how tough it was.

After Forman hadn't even made it to second stage in his third Q-School try, he drove home from Tampa to find Julie and her father waiting at the apartment.

“I was hoping we could go to dinner to celebrate you making it,” his father-in-law said. “Let's go out and get a good steak anyway.”

Forman knew that his golf-sponsor/dad-in-law hadn't flown down from Asheville to celebrate getting through first stage. Second stage—maybe. But he'd just flunked first stage.

They went to Charley's, a truly great steak house on International Drive in Orlando. Walking in, Keith felt a little bit like a convict about to have a great last meal before being executed.

With Julie sitting there, blue eyes glistening, her dad laid it out for Forman.

“Keith, I know how hard you've tried and I know how hard you've worked at your game,” he said. “I also know you've

spent the fifty I loaned you three years ago and, if anything, based on what happened this week, you're farther from the Tour now than you were starting out."

Keith started to respond, but the older man put up a hand to stop him.

"Let me finish," he said. "Keith, there's a time and place in life when you have to cut the cord on a dream. I know how hard that is—I know we all think we're close, that we're about to have a breakthrough. I was like that as a baseball player until I got to college and couldn't get the ball out of the infield.

"You play golf a lot better than I played baseball. But—forgive me for being blunt—it's not good enough. After three years, it isn't bad luck and it isn't because you've been injured. You've given it your best shot. It's time for you to find a job, spend more time with your wife, and start thinking about a family."

Deep down Keith knew that everything his father-in-law was saying was right. But he just didn't feel ready to give it up. For what? Law school perhaps? The thought of all the research made him feel sick. Money managing? He'd sooner rake bunkers for a living than do that.

He looked at Julie. "Do you agree with this?" he said.

She looked him right in the eye. "That's why my dad is here," she said. "I didn't think I could say the words to you, so I asked him to do it."

To this day, Forman remembered the moment vividly. He remembered sitting back in the booth, just as his massive

porterhouse steak arrived. He knew what he said next would change his life—one way or the other.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said, looking at Julie. “I’m just not ready to move on with my life. I still think there’s another act left in golf.”

. . . . .

The last act wasn’t any better than the first three had been. Keith and Julie separated, quietly divorcing a year later. There wasn’t any real animosity in the divorce, especially since there were no real assets to fight over. There was regret on both sides, but they both knew it had to happen. Keith was twenty-five. He wasn’t ready for a nine-to-five life *or* children.

He actually played a little bit better on the various Florida mini-tours and got to second stage of Q-School again. But on the final day of second stage he hit four balls in the water, stubbornly trying to make an unreachable shot to the 17th green, just like Kevin Costner in *Tin Cup*, and went from three shots outside the cut to nine shots out. At that moment—a year too late—he knew he was done.

He still wasn’t ready for nine-to-five or law school or any other kind of grad school. He thought briefly about going to work for a political campaign, but realized—finally—that golf was still his real passion. He started a blog, writing mostly about Web.com players and Hooters Tour players. He found stories about guys who’d made the big Tour, then slid back.

Occasionally there was a piece about a guy who finally made the breakthrough to the big money—or at least the semi-big money.

Because he'd played, even if it had just been on the mini-tour level, he could talk to golfers like a golfer. They opened up to him. People began to notice some of what he was writing. Eventually, *Golf Digest* bought the blog and brought him in to write regularly on its website. Now he occasionally got into the print magazine itself. He wasn't getting rich, but he was making enough money to afford rent on a decent-sized two-bedroom apartment in Boston's Back Bay within walking distance of Fenway.

He was on the road more than he liked, although being single, he didn't mind too much. He'd been in a lot more Courtyard Marriotts than he cared to think about, and he still drove more often than he flew because it was easier and because getting upgraded to first class had gotten harder and harder with the airlines flying smaller and smaller planes.

It was okay, though: he wasn't in an office chained to a desk.

He finished breakfast and poured another cup of coffee to take back to his room. Once back there, he decided to return Slugger's call before he showered. Even though he was fairly certain the call was about tickets, there was an urgency to the message that made him just a little bit curious.

He dialed.

"About damn time," Slugger answered.



This wasn't about tickets, Keith realized. Slugger would be a lot nicer if it were.

"I'm on central time," Keith said. "In Memphis. It's seven-fifteen. What in the world is so important?"

"I've got a problem," Slugger said. "And I need you to help."

"Too late. You voted for the guy, so you have to live with your conscience."

Slugger grunted. "You wish that was it," he said. "Listen, I'm serious. I've got a kid here at my club who has a chance to be a real player—I mean, he's legit. Not like you and me. Much, much better than that."

"So why is that a problem?" Keith asked.

"Because his father wants to grow up to be Earl Woods."

That brought Keith up short. Earl Woods had been Tiger's notoriously controlling, money-chasing father.

"Whoo boy," he said. "That *is* a problem. But how can I help?"

"I'll tell you when you get here."

"Get there?"

"Yeah, you're coming to Hartford right after the Open, right? Stop here on Monday on your way down from Boston."

That certainly wouldn't be difficult, although that would mean one night at home between the Open and Hartford as opposed to two.

"Tell me again why I'm doing this?" Keith asked.

"For the kid. Not for me. For the kid."

"Let me think about it."

Keith hung up, took his shower, and walked to his car in what was already almost ninety-degree heat even though it wasn't yet eight o'clock. It was fifteen minutes to the golf course. He waved at the rent-a-cop posted outside the parking lot, who put out a hand to stop him.

"Parking pass?" the guard said.

It was hanging from the rearview mirror. Keith pointed at it. The cop nodded sullenly. No doubt he'd been hoping to turn him away. Most of the cops who worked golf tournaments were friendly and helpful. There were always a couple of exceptions.

"Thanks, Barney," Keith said, rolling up his window to drive away. That was his name for any of the unhelpful ones, after the bumbling deputy Barney Fife in the old *Andy Griffith Show*. Barney was the ultimate cop-wannabe.

Keith parked the car, got his computer bag out, and began walking in the direction of the clubhouse. It would be another long, hot day on the PGA Tour. It occurred to him that Slugger might be offering him a break from the grind. Or maybe not.

Either way, he decided he should find out.

**TWELVE DAYS LATER, FRANK BAKER STOOD IN**

the middle of the ninth fairway at Perryton Country Club, hands on hips, staring in the direction of the green. It was rated the hardest hole on the course: a long, tree-lined par-four with a gentle dogleg to the right, uphill to a well-protected green, bunkers left, water right. It was 7:20 a.m., and he and Slugger were finishing their early nine holes even though school was out and Frank had plenty of time to play.

They were on the course that early for two reasons.

First, the humidity was already hanging in the air like an invisible curtain even though the sun had only been up for a couple of hours. Frank's shirt was damp with sweat, and the mugginess was only going to get worse as the day wore on.

Second, his swing coach's friend Keith Forman was supposed to meet them for breakfast at seven-thirty. Frank's dad had already told him that he was bringing a golf equipment representative to the club to meet him at nine. This way, there

would be time for Frank, Slugger, and Forman to talk before the equipment rep showed up.

Frank knew this was going to be a long week. The PGA Tour was in town, the Travelers Championship being held at River Highlands. Frank had been going to the Travelers for as long as he could remember and always enjoyed watching the pros, occasionally getting to meet one—if only for a minute or two—and collecting autographs. He was too old for autographs now, but he still liked the idea of hanging around on the range checking out golf swings—Slugger always called a player's swing his *action*, as in “I love his action”—and walking the golf course.

He hoped the weather would cool off later in the week. He had tickets, thanks to Slugger, on Thursday and Friday.

“What are you looking at?” Slugger asked, driving up after hitting his second shot from the right rough. “Are you gonna hit or just stare into space?”

“Sorry,” Frank said. “I was just making sure my dad wasn’t back there somewhere.”

“He’s not here until nine,” Slugger said. “We’ve got time. Keith just texted me he’s coming up the drive to the clubhouse. So hit your shot and let’s go.”

That got Frank’s attention. He already had his seven-iron in his hand. He abandoned any pretext of his pre-shot routine, swung smoothly, and sent the ball sailing high into the blue sky. It stopped, checked up quickly on the still-soft green, and ended up about ten feet left of the cup.

“Pre-shot routine is overrated, huh?” Slugger said.

Frank laughed and jumped in the cart. Slugger was in the front-right bunker. He hit a good shot to about eight feet. It didn't matter. Frank rolled his putt in to win the ninth-tee press.

"You keep hitting it like this, and you're going to have to give me shots," Slugger said as Frank plucked the ball from the hole.

"You keep losing like this, and I'm going to weigh two hundred pounds eating all the donuts I keep winning, coach," Frank said, laughing. That wasn't likely. Frank was six foot one and weighed a wiry 165 pounds. He had light brown hair and an easy smile. Only in the last year had he started to feel confident about talking to girls, at least at the club where he was well known. At school he was still pretty invisible—except when he had a boxful of donuts in his hand to break the ice.

Watching Frank laughing with Jenna Baxter—a standout tennis player who was a year older than him—outside the pro shop one afternoon, Slugger had commented to Frank's dad that it appeared Frank had finally discovered girls. "He discovered them a while ago," his dad had answered. "Now they're starting to discover him."

His dad, in the right mood, had a quick, dry sense of humor.

Five minutes after finishing on 18, Frank and Slugger walked into the clubhouse and found Keith Forman sitting by the window.

Slugger had told Frank about Forman a week earlier. Frank had actually read some of his stuff and had seen him on Golf

Channel when he made occasional appearances there. Most kids Frank's age spent their free time either texting or playing video games. Frank watched Golf Channel—while texting or playing games on his phone. The fact that Forman had played golf in college and had been a pro for a while didn't really impress Frank. His stories on the *Golf Digest* website were well written and “inside”—which Frank liked. But they didn't impress him that much either. Seeing him on a set with Golf Channel analysts Brandel Chamblee, Frank Nobilo, or David Duval? *That* was impressive.

Now, though, Forman was sitting at a table overlooking the 18th green and appearing a little bit bleary-eyed, drinking coffee.

He stood up when they walked over, and he and Slugger hugged briefly. Slugger introduced Frank.

“I honestly don't care if you can play or not,” Forman said. “I just had to meet someone named after Home Run Baker.” He paused and then added, “And no matter what Slugger tells you, I did *not* see Baker play.”

That, Frank thought, was funny. He liked Keith Forman right away. He was about six feet tall and maybe a few pounds overweight. He had brown hair, brown eyes, and a low-key vibe. As the three of them sat down, Polly, the usual morning server, came over to the table. There was no one else in the dining room at that hour—a blessing as far as Frank was concerned. The fewer curious members who came over to interrupt, the better.

“Who's this on?” Polly asked after they'd ordered.

She had worked at the club for as long as Frank could remember.

“On me,” Slugger said.

“Pro shop number or personal?” Polly asked, referring to the fact that Slugger sometimes charged things to the pro shop’s club account, other times to his own.

“Mine,” Slugger said.

“How’d it go this morning?” Forman asked as Polly walked off.

“He beat me three ways,” Slugger said. “Normal morning nowadays.”

Forman smiled. “So tell me, Frank, you want to turn pro sometime soon?”

“Not really,” Frank said. “I have another year of high school, and then I’d like to go to college for at least a couple of years. I’m not really in a big rush.”

“But your father is, right?”

Frank and Slugger both answered the question at once: “Right.”

. . . . .

It was never easy for Frank to describe his father to an outsider. Keith Forman made it easy, though, because, as he put it, “I’ve never met your father, but I know your father.”

Frank’s parents had divorced when he was very young, and his mother had moved to Japan for her job—her desire to do so being one of the thorny issues between his parents, he’d later

learned. Frank remembered a judge asking him if he wanted to live with his mom or his dad and answering, “Not in Japan.” Soon, his mom had remarried and made a whole new life on the other side of the world. Thomas Baker had been a single parent for more than a decade, completely devoted to his son.

Growing up, Frank and his dad were very close, best friends. His dad loved baseball but also golf. He and Frank would go out to play late in the afternoon all summer and on weekends in the spring and fall. At first, Frank was interested only in driving the cart. But as he got older and began to play the game well, it became more about trying to break 100. Then 90 and then 80. By the time he was fourteen he was a 1-handicap and his dad, a good player who was about a 5 at his best, had turned him over to Slugger for lessons.

Frank loved working with Slugger. He told funny stories about his “failures” as a player even though he had once been very good. When they were on the practice tee, though, he was all business. He was working. He expected Frank to do the same.

It had all been fun until Frank’s surprising run at the U.S. Amateur the year before. Having just turned sixteen, he’d been the youngest player to make it through 36 holes of stroke play into the 64-man match play field. Then, in a shock to everyone—including himself—he’d won four matches to make it to the semifinals. All of a sudden he was seeing stories on the internet labeling him the “Perryton Prodigy,” a word he had to look up to understand the first time he saw it.



Until then, his dad had been his biggest cheerleader. No coaching, no questioning what he was doing, no talk of anything but playing golf. It had all changed at the start of this school year, when he'd come home a star after his performance in the Amateur.

Agents were calling. So were equipment reps. And college coaches—lots of college coaches. Clearly, his dad was enjoying the attention, and the possibility of early retirement. His dad was fifty-five and had never especially enjoyed buying and selling stocks for other people, although he did fine at it from his office in the attic of their house.

"You make it big," he'd said one night, "and we'll get a place in Florida. You'll be able to practice year-round once you're out of high school, and I can retire and get really good at golf and drinking at the bar after golf."

"What about college, Dad?" Frank had asked.

"If you're as good as Slugger and I think you are, you don't *need* college." He laughed. "Pass Go, collect two hundred dollars—or more." The reference was to their favorite board game. In simpler times he and his dad had played Monopoly for hours.

Frank spent what felt like a long while laying this out for Keith Forman.

Twice they were interrupted by members coming in to eat. Both apparently recognized Forman from his TV appearances and came right to the table.

"So, Slugger, you got a celebrity in town," Bob Dodson said, interrupting Frank in midsentence as if he were invisible.

“Old college teammate,” Slugger said. “He’s in town for the Travelers and dropped in for breakfast on his way down there from Boston.”

Dodson shook hands, introduced himself, and added, “Why does Brandel always criticize Tiger the way he does?”

Forman shrugged. “Maybe because he thinks he deserves it.”

“Well, I just think it’s wrong for someone who isn’t close to the player Tiger was to criticize him,” Dodson continued.

Frank could tell by the look on Forman’s face that he dealt with this sort of thing pretty regularly.

“If that were the case, then no one would be allowed to criticize Tiger,” Forman said. “Except maybe Jack Nicklaus.”

“I met Jack once—” Dodson started to say.

Mercifully, Slugger cut him off. “Bob, Keith’s got to get down the road to Hartford here pretty soon, so . . .”

“Oh yeah, sure,” Dodson said. “You go right ahead. Sorry to interrupt.”

He half walked, half stalked away.

“They’re never sorry to interrupt,” Forman said. “If they were, they wouldn’t interrupt.”

Frank liked that line—especially since it was true.

A moment later, Ted O’Hara, a real slimeball who had lost the club championship match to Frank two years earlier, also stopped by uninvited.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said.

Frank couldn’t resist. “If you’re sorry, Mr. O’Hara, why are you interrupting?”

Frank couldn't stand Ted O'Hara and didn't care if he knew it.

O'Hara stared at him for a second, then continued. "Mr. Forman," he said, reaching across Frank and Slugger to shake Forman's hand. "I'm Ted O'Hara. I'm club champion here."

"Congratulations," Forman said. "You must be pretty good if you beat Frank."

O'Hara's face fell. He looked at Slugger and Frank almost pleadingly, as if begging them to keep his dirty secret.

"I didn't play here last summer," Frank finally said.

Now it was Frank and Slugger looking at O'Hara to see if he'd fess up. Instead, he told Forman he enjoyed reading his work and fled.

"Let me guess," Forman said. "You aren't eligible to play in the club championship until you're eighteen."

"You're half right," Slugger said. "Frank beat him—what, four-and-three, Frank?—two summers ago when he was fifteen. *Then* O'Hara and his buddies pushed through a rule saying you couldn't play until you were eighteen."

"What a shock," Forman said.

Frank had known Keith Forman for less than an hour. He already felt comfortable with him.

. . . . .

Keith had been a little cranky making the drive down to Perryton. Waking up at five did that for him. His coffee thermos

was empty before he was out of Boston, and he was craving more caffeine and a Danish the last ninety minutes of the drive but resisted.

As soon as Frank and Slugger started talking—without interruption—the weariness washed completely away. He could feel his adrenaline getting started.

There was no way to know how good a player Frank Baker was going to be. Making it to the U.S. Amateur semifinals not long after turning sixteen was impressive. Plus, Keith trusted Slugger's judgment on all things golf. Slugger was the son of a golf pro and had been around the game all his life. He knew what was real and what wasn't.

Slugger believed that, if all went well, Frank would be ready to take a shot at the PGA Tour in three years—one more year of high school and then two in college. He could literally go to college anywhere he wanted—his grades were good, his board scores excellent—and he would make any team he joined an instant national title contender.

Slugger wanted him to go to Stanford because its golf tradition was virtually unparalleled. Frank liked the idea of Stanford but was intrigued by two other schools: Harvard, because it was Harvard, and Oregon. The coach there was Casey Martin, who had fought the PGA Tour for the right to use a cart due to a rare disease that made walking almost impossible for him. The case had gone to the Supreme Court, and Martin had won a 7–2 decision. Frank had read a book about Martin and had come away thinking he'd be a great person to play for at the college level.

“He can’t possibly go wrong,” Slugger said. “Great schools, great coaches. There’s just the one problem.”

“Dad,” Keith said.

They both nodded. While Frank had been reading up on Casey Martin, his dad had read both of Earl Woods’s autobiographies. If you read those books, you would come away thinking that Earl’s son was just along for the ride, that it was Earl’s genius that had made Tiger into arguably the greatest golfer of all time.

“What aspect of Earl does your dad admire the most?” Keith said.

Frank smiled. “All of it,” he answered. “The money, the planning, the control he had over everything. How tough he was on Tiger. The whole package.”

“Mostly the money,” Slugger put in.

“It isn’t quite that simple,” Frank said. “My dad is a good guy, really he is. He’s been a great father. Raised me alone since I was six. He’s just got so many people in his ear telling him how rich he can be that it’s kind of overwhelming. Now he’s gotten defensive about it, at least in part because I’ve told him I’m going to college—period. He wants me to at least think about turning pro next year.”

Keith knew exactly what Frank was talking about. He had dealt with plenty of fathers like Thomas Baker, both as a player and as a reporter. The only difference between Earl Woods and thousands of other pushy stage fathers was that Earl had been lucky enough to have the son whose talent was so extraordinary he could succeed *in spite* of Earl.

What's more, Earl's teachings might have helped Tiger a little bit as a competitor, but they had also helped to mess him up pretty good.

Keith was starting to explain that to Frank and Slugger when they saw a man with salt-and-pepper hair walking across the room in their direction. Keith guessed that he was in his fifties and, judging by the look on his face, he wasn't coming over to tell Keith how much he admired his work or to apologize for interrupting.

"Let me guess," he said quietly to Frank. "Your dad."

"Brilliant deduction," Frank hissed back.

The two men stood up to greet Thomas Baker.

"Must have somehow missed my invitation to breakfast, Slugger," Thomas Baker said. "Who the hell is this?"

**IT WAS 8:40 WHEN FRANK SAW HIS FATHER**

walking in the direction of their table. He had already figured out that their discussion wouldn't be over before 9:00—when his dad was scheduled to arrive with the rep from Brickley. He was fine with the notion of his father meeting Keith Forman—even liked the idea—so the early arrival didn't bother him.

But his father's opening salvo to Slugger—"Who the hell is this?"—made him wince. He already had the sense that Forman wasn't a backdown kind of guy, and he *knew* his father wasn't a backdown guy either—especially nowadays if he sensed that someone didn't fully agree with his grand plan for Frank.

If Slugger was ruffled, he didn't show it.

"Mr. Baker, good morning," Slugger said. "Want you to meet an old friend, Keith Forman. We were teammates in college about a hundred years ago."

Grudgingly, Thomas Baker shook Forman's proffered hand.

"And what brings you to Perryton?" he asked.

"Please, sit down and join us," Slugger said before Forman could answer.

Frank saw his father's face soften—if only for a moment. He sat in the one empty chair at the table and waved at Polly for coffee. She already had it in her hand and poured refills for Keith and Slugger while giving Mr. Baker a fresh mug with the club logo on it.

"Anything to eat?" she asked.

"Not yet," Frank's dad said, and then caught his son's eye. "We have a *separate* meeting with someone at nine. I'll eat then."

Polly left and Thomas Baker took a sip of his coffee, leaned forward, and said, "So, Mr. Forman, you were saying?"

Forman shrugged as if he'd been asked what time it was.

"I'm in Hartford this week," he said, also taking a swig from his coffee. "Just got back from the Open late last night, so I'm a little bleary-eyed, but I'm supposed to meet up with Rory around lunchtime today. Slugger's been telling me about Frank, so I thought it'd be nice to meet him since you guys are pretty much directly on my route from Boston to River Highlands."

Frank loved the way Forman dropped Rory McIlroy's name. He suspected it was his way of saying *I'm big-time, pal, so don't think you can intimidate me*.

The name-drop momentarily slowed Thomas's charge.



“You know McIlroy?” he said.

“Pretty well,” Forman said casually. “He and I kind of came on tour together eight years ago. He arrived as a star. I arrived as a writer—couldn’t get there as a golfer. He’s a terrific guy. You’d like him.”

“You ever meet Tiger?” was, not surprisingly, the elder Baker’s next question.

“Sure, a number of times,” Forman said. “Can’t say I *know* him because no one really knows him. I’m not sure *he* knows himself.”

“So if he walked in here right now, he’d know your name?”

“Absolutely,” Forman said. Then he added, “Though he’d probably turn and walk in the other direction.”

Frank saw his father’s face darken—a look he recognized.

“What do you mean by that?” Mr. Baker asked.

“I mean he doesn’t like me much,” the reporter said.

“How come?” Frank asked.

“Because I’ve written that his father pretty much ruined his life—which happens to be true.”

Frank took a deep breath. It hadn’t taken long for the battle lines to be drawn.

. . . . .

Keith saw Frank go a little bit pale when he made his comment about Earl Woods. He also noticed the trace of a smile on Slugger’s face. Clearly, to some extent, this had been a setup. Slugger knew there was no way that Thomas Baker was going

to want to hear anything he had to say—unless there was some kind of challenge involved.

All the agents and equipment reps in the world weren't going to begin to tell this kid's father the truth. Keith would, because—unlike the agents and reps—he had nothing to lose.

Keith looked at his watch. Whoever the Bakers were meeting at nine hadn't arrived yet.

"What in the world does that comment mean?" Thomas Baker said.

"It's what I believe, Mr. Baker," Keith said. "Tiger Woods is about as rich as you can be. He's won fourteen major titles and, in my opinion, is the greatest player in the history of the game."

"Better than Nicklaus?" Frank asked, unable to resist the question.

"Nicklaus has the greatest *record* of all time," Forman said. "Eighteen majors to Tiger's fourteen. But at his dominant best from '97 to '08, Tiger did things no one's ever done. He won the Masters by *twelve* strokes, a U.S. Open by *fifteen*. He had nine years in which he won at least five times. Those numbers are impossible."

"So how can you possibly say Earl ruined his life?" Frank's dad said. "You just said he's the greatest player ever."

"And he's not a happy human being, in my opinion," Keith said. "Earl raised him to believe that only two things mattered—winning and being rich. He raised him to not care about anyone but himself and to never do anything that didn't

benefit him in some material way. And, most important, he raised him to trust no one—except for Earl.

“And then he betrayed his son by cheating on his mother—repeatedly. So Tiger did the same thing, and the rest is supermarket tabloid history. Everyone knows the trouble he’s put himself and his poor kids through. Forget the divorce—that’s the least of it.”

“So you don’t like him because he’s driven.”

“That’s not what I mean at all. I don’t dislike him, I feel sorry for him. And I blame Earl.”

Baker opened his mouth to respond, but something caught his eye and he turned around. A tall man with thick blond hair and wire-rimmed glasses was crossing the room with a huge, phony smile on his face.

Keith knew him: Tony Morton, who worked the Tour for Brickley, one of Nike’s big competitors. He was the kind of guy who laughed too hard at jokes told by people he considered important and had no time for anyone or anything that didn’t involve promoting his company in some way.

Generally speaking, Keith’s conversations with Morton usually started and ended with a curt nod or a brief hello. They never even reached *How’s it going?* most of the time.

Now they had no choice.

Since the others stood to greet Morton, Keith stood, too—grudgingly. Morton put his arms out to hug Frank’s dad as if they’d been separated in a war zone.

“Thomas, it’s been forever, hasn’t it?” he said as they disentangled.

"The Amateur last year," Baker said. "Frank, you remember Mr. Morton, don't you?"

"Um, sure," Frank said, clearly not remembering Morton at all. "Good to see you . . . again, Mr. Morton."

"Come on, Frank, it's Tony. You know that," Morton said.

"Sure . . . Tony."

Frank looked miserable. Keith didn't blame him.

"Tony, this is our pro here, Slugger Johnston," Frank's dad said.

Morton acted as if he were being introduced to Jack Nicklaus. "Slugger, know all about you," Morton said, slapping Slugger on the back. "Heard you've done great work with our boy Frank here. Nice to finally get to meet you."

Slugger managed, "Same here."

There was a brief, awkward silence. Clearly, Baker had no desire to introduce Keith to Morton.

Finally, Slugger said, "Tony, I don't know if you know Keith Forman—"

"Of course I do," Morton said, hand extended. "You get lost on the way to Hartford, Keith?"

"Was going to ask you the same question," Keith answered. Their hostility simmered just below the surface.

"Well, I know you want to get down the road, Mr. Forman," Baker said. "Lot of work to do at River Highlands."

"I better get to work, too," Slugger said. "I know you two want to talk. Frank, you gonna go and hit some balls?"

Keith knew his friend was trying to provide Frank with an escape hatch. The father was having none of it.

“Now, Slugger, you know Tony didn’t come out here just to talk to me. Frank will stay. I know Tony’s got some fun stuff to tell him about.”

*Fun stuff*, Keith thought. What could be more fun for a seventeen-year-old than talking about why the new Brickley driver was the best thing to hit the golf market since Titleist first made a golf ball?

There was another round of decidedly unenthusiastic handshakes, and Keith and Slugger left.

After an hour inside the air-conditioned clubhouse, they were blasted by the humidity once they were outside again.

“So what do you think?” Slugger said.

“I think that kid is about to be pushed off a cliff,” Keith said. “I feel bad for him. He seems like a good kid.”

“He’s a great kid, not a good one. The dad isn’t a bad guy, Frank’s right about that. But he’s under the spell of frauds like Tony Morton who keep filling his head with dollar signs.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Keith said. “All Frank wants to do is play golf and these guys are already planning the first marketing campaign. He needs a buffer—maybe more like a brick wall—between him, his dad, and all these guys.”

“Someone who doesn’t have to worry about losing his job if he says something the dad doesn’t want to hear,” Slugger added.

Keith looked at Slugger. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“You’ll go to L.A. for the Amateur in August?”

“I said I’ll see what I can do.”

Slugger clapped Keith on the back. “Thanks, pal,” he said.

“There’s one more thing,” Keith said.

“What?” Slugger asked.

“Morton’s a big Trump guy. He’s one of *you*.”

Slugger didn’t miss a beat. “All the more reason for you to protect the kid from guys like him . . . and me.”

Keith shook his friend’s hand and headed for the car. He needed a shower. And it wasn’t because of the humidity.