

WINGSHOOTERS

CHAPTER ONE

In my apartment in California there hangs a picture of my grandfather. He is one of twelve men dressed in off-white baseball uniforms and plain dark caps, all seated in front of a boy in a baggy black suit. The men sit cross-legged or rest on one knee; their bats lean together like logs on a camp fire, surrounded by their gloves. Behind them stand two large, boxy cars with a banner draped between them that reads, Buick Ball Club, Deerhorn Wisconsin. Although the picture is posed, there is something about the quality of the players' postures and smiles that makes it seem like they just collapsed there, giddy and tired, and someone happened to capture the moment. The uniforms have a softer look than what ballplayers wear today—the caps are rounder and more pliable, the pants and jerseys looser, the gloves amorphous and lumpy—but the men look more like men. My grandfather, sitting in the lower right-hand corner, smiles at the camera from out of his open, handsome face as if he knows he'll live forever. The license plate on one of the Buicks has tags from 1925, and if the date is accurate, then my grandfather, Charlie LeBeau, is nineteen. Because of the cap, the usual shock of slicked-back hair that falls over his eyes, making him look playful and roguish, is held still. But even so, he is beautiful, and knows it. Farther back in the picture, a young woman leans out the window of another car, resting her chin in her hand, and I imagine she is staring at Charlie. Everyone, for all of his life, always stared at Charlie.

My grandfather grew up in the country five miles outside of Deerhorn, and played ball in the evenings after long days out in the fields. His family grew corn and potatoes and barley, and raised cattle and pigs, until the Depression made it impossible to keep the farm running and they sold it and made the move into town. By that time, he was married to my grandmother, Helen Wilkes, whom he'd met at the one-room school just east of town. Charlie was never a student—he was two years behind his class when Helen sat down in front of him, and Helen a year ahead of hers, their respective talents and deficiencies erasing the gap of three years that divided them. He kept pulling on her pigtailed as she tried to listen to the teacher, and she finally married him, she said, to make him stop. They married—eloped—when Charlie was twenty and Helen seventeen, so he already knew her when the picture of the baseball team was taken. It could be that the relaxed, self-satisfied grin on his face has something to do with her. It could also be that the girl in the car—whoever she is—knows this, and that's why she looks

so sad.

My grandfather never fought in a war. He was too young for the first great conflict in Europe, which took his father's brother, and too old for World War II. And he never held a position—say, sheriff or lawyer—that placed him above other men. No, Charlie LeBeau worked the same unforgiving, muscular jobs—at the meat processing plant, the car parts shop, the Stevenson shoe factory—that the other men did, but he always seemed larger than them, heroic. He was the best ballplayer in the region, a third baseman pursued by the White Sox, as his father had been twenty years before. But also like his father, he turned down the chance to enter the White Sox's minor league system because he wouldn't leave Central Wisconsin—and because he refused to play for the team that had recently thrown the World Series. He won the state skeet-shooting championship a half dozen times; I still have a letter, dated 1935, from the Thomason Gunworks Company, congratulating him on his perfect score in that year's contest and offering him a lifetime supply of free ammunition. He was simply, consistently the best shot in the state of Wisconsin, as he proved every fall by bagging more ducks, grouse, pheasants, and deer than his family could ever possibly eat. The gun case in my grandparents' dining room was his centerpiece, his shrine, filled with weapons of every size and capacity—some functional, some collectors' pieces purely for display, like the Springfield Rifle his uncle had used in the Great War. He also had three bows, regal, primal-looking things, and another case for his collection of fishing rods. Sometimes I would take out one of these rifles or bows just to hold it and feel the power it contained. But it wasn't his skill with weapons that set Charlie apart. It was the way that other people related to him. Men gathered around him at Jimmy's Coffee Shop or Earl's Gun Store or in his own house to hear him expound on everything from the proper training of hunting dogs to the town's new traffic light; women lowered their eyes and blushed when he was near. And he paid back and increased this devotion in a thousand small ways—by changing tires or plowing sidewalks for the widows in town; by welcoming unattached men into his house for Friday suppers; by taking young boys to the baseball fields to work on their games, or out into the deepest woods, to hunt.

My grandfather was a man, in a vital, fundamental way that grown men simply aren't today, at least not in the city. And maybe that was why he was so disappointed in my father. Stewart LeBeau was as different from Charlie as a boy could possibly be—studious, dreamy, and unathletic. He hated hunting, and didn't care much for fishing or dogs, and while it wouldn't be exactly true to say he disliked sports, playing catch did not enliven him as it did the other boys in town. Stewart read, and spent his time with a few other serious, awkward boys, and behaved well enough in school to generally avoid having his knuckles rapped by the nuns with their ever-ready rulers. He was closer to his mother, my

grandmother, who was glad to have produced a child she could relate to (they talked of books together, and he helped her with shopping and chores). Stewart, like his father, was born between wars—he was too young for World War II and Korea, and past the age for Vietnam—yet, unlike his father, he had no desire or ability to make up for what Charlie considered unfortunate timing, striking the second generation in a row. But while he was never of the town—not in the blood-deep way my grandparents were—he never did anything to openly defy it until his final, huge act of rebellion, which was leaving. He had applied to the University of Wisconsin without telling anyone (the nuns, who believed that the world outside of Deerhorn was sinful and corrupting, would not have approved), and he was the only boy in town who went to college. In Madison—much to his parents' distress—he acquired new clothes, new concerns, and a strange new set of friends. My grandparents' dismay must have multiplied by a thousand when he decided to marry my mother.

If leaving Deerhorn was so distasteful that both my grandfather and great-grandfather passed up a chance to play in the majors; if the town was so insular that my father's departure was seen as defection; if it had never, in all the years of its existence, been home to a soul who wasn't German, Polish, Norwegian, or French Canadian, imagine the shock of having to contemplate a daughter-in-law from Japan. And my mother, Reiko Tanizaki, was not Japanese-American—she didn't eat hamburgers or say the Pledge of Allegiance or speak English much at all—but real, born-and-raised-there Japanese. My father had met her in Madison, where she was an exchange student at the university. Maybe despite their language and cultural differences, they had something in common because they'd both made their way out of small country towns to try their luck in the larger world. But more likely, her sheer difference from everything Stewart had known was exactly what drew him to her. For their enclosed and turbulent marriage became the central drama of my father's life. It was the one realm where he could be extreme and heroic and foolish, just like his father always wanted him to be.

Although my grandmother cried and pleaded with him, my father was set on marrying Reiko, so Helen, tight-lipped, took a Greyhound bus down to Madison for the wedding. My grandfather did not attend, and you could say—as my grandmother often did—that the trip itself, not the color of Stewart's bride, kept Charlie at home, but my father rightly took his absence as disapproval. There was no way Charlie LeBeau would ever accept a foreigner into his family, and although he did finally meet my mother when my parents visited Deerhorn, he didn't smile for her or turn on his charm; she never saw who he was. My parents never stayed in one place long enough to get comfortable, anyway. Theirs was a traveling road show of a marriage, starting out in Madison, and making stops over the next ten years in Milwaukee, St. Paul, Fresno, Sacramento, Seattle, and finally Japan. I was only present for the last part

of this journey—I was born in Tokyo in '65—and something about my appearance must have tipped their already precarious union completely over the edge, because by the time I was two, my mother started leaving us for days and even weeks at a time. I remember her absence more clearly than what it was like to have her with us, and I remember my father spilling whiskey and holding his head in his hands, pleading with her parents in his broken Japanese to please tell him where their daughter had gone.