

**THE  
GUNNERS  
REBECCA  
KAUFFMAN**



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## CHAPTER 1

**M**ikey Callahan discovered something about himself when he was six years old.

Students from his first-grade class were taken one at a time from the classroom and ushered to the gymnasium for standard medical tests. The woman who barked his name (although she called for Michael, instead of Mikey, as his classmates knew him) held his hand as she walked him down the hall, and her fingers were as dry and cool as a husk. In the gymnasium, there were rectangular tables, screens, clipboards, grown-ups dressed in white. A man with a rust-colored mustache put a cold rubber point into Mikey's ears, stared in at them, and led him through a series of easy tests: instructing Mikey to close his eyes and repeat words the man whispered, then listen to two recorded tones and tell him which was louder.

Mikey proceeded to the next station, where he was asked once again to close his eyes, and say "Now," when he detected that he had been touched, on his face or his arm, by the tip of a pen. Easy. Mikey liked this better than sitting in a classroom, and he enjoyed being touched in this way. Gentle, clinical.

At the final station, an easel at the far end of a long table displayed a white piece of paper with a pyramid of black letters on it.

A woman stood next to the paper and pointed at letters one at a time, and Mikey read the letters back to her. The letters got smaller as she moved down the page, and he struggled to read the final two rows. The woman made a note on her clipboard; then she handed him a black plastic spoon and asked him to cover his left eye with it. She replaced the set of letters with a fresh one and repeated the exercise, with similar results.

She said, "Cover your other eye now," and turned the page on her easel once again.

Mikey did not raise the spoon to his face. He felt the heat of dark blood spreading up into his cheeks. He said, "But that's my good one."

The lady said, "What now, hon?"

"I can't cover this one." He gestured toward his right eye, puzzled by her request. "It's the one that works."

The lady came and knelt before him. She looked at his face and said, "Oh, dear."

Mikey didn't understand.

She explained to him that both eyes were supposed to work; most people had two good eyes.

Mikey nodded slowly as he considered this. He had a compulsion to nod when faced with unpleasant information.

He said, "Please, let's not tell my dad."

When Mikey got home from school that day, his father stared at his left eye, the bad one, with a look of mild distaste; then he led Mikey through a series of his own tests, as though the school had exaggerated the condition. He made Mikey close his right eye and tell him how many fingers he was holding up. Mikey tried to answer correctly, fluttering his right eye open to peek. He begged his father not to make him wear a patch like a pirate, and his father said, "What in the hell would that accomplish?"

His father told him he must make the decision, right at that moment, whether the world would know about the left eye or whether it would be Mikey's secret, and he seemed relieved when Mikey quickly answered that it would be his secret. As though the condition, if known by others, would in some way reflect poorly upon both of them. They didn't speak of it again.

Mikey's father worked for the meatpacking facility in Eden, several towns over. He always smelled of blood and had red in the corners of his fingernails, carrying with him the insinuation of violence, brute force. His face was lumpy, as though it had been stuffed full, his eyes drooped. For Mikey's entire childhood, the two of them lived in the first floor of a townhouse on Ingram Street in Lackawanna, a depressed suburb of South Buffalo. Only half the homes on their block were occupied. The others had boards for windows, liquor bottles smashed into the front porches, stray cats shitting in overgrown lawns. The upstairs tenants in their townhouse wore slippers to the store and always smelled vaguely sulfuric, and they engaged in monthly screaming arguments with the landlord over late rent and threats of eviction. Mikey's father always paid rent on time, but sometimes he forgot about the utilities, and a man in navy would show up demanding a cash payment—saying that if they couldn't pay, he'd *pull the plug* on their house, and then how would they see at night? What would they eat?

Mikey's father ate four things: cereal, apples, white bread with cold cuts, and Chips Ahoy! cookies. Mikey was not introduced to other foods until he was offered them by his friends from their lunch boxes or by his friends' mothers in their homes.

Mikey did not have a mother of his own, and because his father refused to provide any information on this matter, Mikey took it

upon himself to search their home for clues. He looked for things he had seen in the homes of his friends belonging to their mothers: a ball of panty hose or a shoe with a pointy heel, long lists written in cursive, a little plastic basket filled with nail polish or a box of Tampax beneath the sink, an apron with roosters or reindeer embroidered onto it. He recovered not one piece of hard evidence in his own home.

On one occasion, however, Mikey discovered a single item that didn't fit in his home; it wasn't quite right. It was a small suitcase located in the corner of his father's closet, beneath a stack of neatly folded sweaters in various shades of gray. The suitcase was tacky and bright—it was the only thing in their entire home that Mikey simply could not imagine his father purchasing. When Mikey opened the suitcase, the scent of the cobalt-blue lining inside tickled at a memory, as faint and faraway and indistinct as a single puff of smoke. Maybe a memory of a memory. Even so, Mikey began to wonder if he had not been born out of a lady's peeing-hole (like his friends), but had simply arrived in this suitcase, which was perfectly sized to hold a small child and vaguely womblike in its shape. Mikey had no proof that this suitcase had produced him, but as a young boy it was his most persistent theory, and he liked to open the thing and stroke its strange synthetic fur and imagine that life had begun in this soft, blue place.

Mikey's father was a man of dark and quiet emotions. Things were rarely horrible between Mikey and his father, at least not in the usual ways; things were not vicious or unbearable. But things were never easy. Mikey's father had bad knees and bad moods, a shadowy disposition. He drank too often (daily), but rarely too much in a single sitting—Mikey never once saw him stumble or slur or

fall asleep upright in a chair. When Mikey was a child, his father's moods manifested in biting criticism over meaningless things and treacherous, silent evenings at home when, for no reason at all, he would refuse to let Mikey out to play with his neighborhood friends. On these nights, Mikey would put himself to bed early just to remove himself from his father's presence. He would close his bedroom window so that he would not be pained by the faraway voices of his friends.

Alice, Sally, Lynn, Jimmy, and Sam became Mikey's friends when they were neighbor kids, all living on the same block, all seeking playmates as well as an escape from their own homes. The children claimed one of the abandoned homes on Ingram Street as their official meeting place, and the rusted mailbox mounted to the front door of the house read THE GUNNERS in gold Mylar stickers. The house had been vacant for as long as any of them could recall, and they knew of no Gunners in the neighborhood, so they took the place over and assumed its name as their own. They furnished the main room of The Gunner House with items found on the side of the street: mildewed mattresses, throw pillows with cigarette stains, three-legged patio chairs, eyeless baby dolls, an artificial Christmas tree in such a tangle it took days to reassemble. They hung a flashlight from the center of the ceiling in this room, and it was in here that they invented jokes and games and secret languages, made plans, made trouble, bad-mouthed their parents, played cards, gambled, told stories, plotted against bullies, bickered, made up, luxuriated in boredom, and dreamed of the lives they would one day live, far from Lackawanna.

As children, The Gunners could not have imagined that by the time they were sixteen years old, one of them would turn her back on the others, and the group would be so fractured by the loss, the

sudden and unexplained absence of this one, that within weeks the other friendships would also dissolve, leaving each of them in a dark and confounding solitude. Mikey Callahan became a sink-hole; everything inside sort of loosened and then just collapsed.

## CHAPTER 2

**I**t was springtime, April, with one month left of her junior year of high school, when Sally Forrest cut herself off from the rest of The Gunners. She stopped speaking to them at school, never again set foot in The Gunner House, would not answer them when they called to her in the hallway or when they tried to approach her as she walked down Ingram Street. She would quicken her pace and lower her eyes and change her route. She would not answer phone calls to her house. The rest of them finally went directly to her home to seek her out, where Sally's mother, Corinne, said that Sally was unwell, and she would not allow the children to enter.

Sally did not replace the group with new friendships at school; she seemed altogether uninterested in the company of others, taking her lunch outside or to a classroom that was not in use. She never raised her hand in class. Her pale eyes went cool, and her posture was hard.

For several weeks, the others puzzled over the situation together, replaying recent conversations, devising theories, formulating vague and uncertain but genuine apologies. When they could not reach any single conclusion as to what might have caused Sally to turn on them, they began to turn on one another, with accusations and assumptions, resentment and suspicion. The Gunners

found themselves behaving like strangers toward one another in the halls of school and the streets of Lackawanna for their remaining months of high school.

Mikey was one grade behind the others in school, and the only one, aside from Sally, who remained in the area.

Mikey moved out of his father's home after graduating high school, into a tiny ranch house twelve miles north, so that his commute to General Mills, where he worked on the maintenance crew, would be ten minutes instead of thirty. He rented the ranch home from an elderly woman named Louise who had just moved into a retirement center. Louise explained to Mikey that her daughters had both married weasels and she didn't have any plans of leaving the home to them, so Mikey should go ahead and do as he liked with the place, paint-wise, plant-wise, and pet-wise. Mikey brightened the dull gray-pink walls to a warm cream and planted a forsythia bush out front. He got a black kitten one Friday, and named the cat Friday.

After moving out of his father's home, Mikey made a habit of going to see his father every Sunday. His father would pour him a beer and they would stare tensely at the TV for a few hours, then his father would get up to take a piss and say, "Lock the door on your way out," and Mikey would feel a great sense of relief.

Mikey never left the area, or his job at General Mills, although he did receive two promotions over the course of a decade. He never left the ranch home either; he was shocked to find that Louise had actually left the house, and all that it contained, to him when she eventually passed. He hadn't realized she was so serious about those weasels.

Mikey took Louise's impressive accumulation of *Redbook* magazines, erotic novels, and cookbooks to the Salvation Army, except for *The Joy of Cooking*, which he kept for himself. He paged absently through this book, many of its pages stained with sauce or

textured with crumbs, until one day it began to interest him. He learned to baste and blanch and caramelize, poach and macerate and emulsify, learned the quick mental math of dividing recipes into a portion for one. He pored over Louise's collection from the classical repertoire on cassette tapes, listening to this music while he cooked and late into the evening.

Friday became a dear and happy companion. He was a cat of the highest caliber. He purred when Mikey touched his head, while leaning and arching his back into Mikey's legs and walking figure eights through them as Mikey cooked, purred in the morning when he moved from the foot of the bed, where he slept every night, to Mikey's chest, happily and dutifully kneading at Mikey's neck with his little black paws, purring so rapturously that he gasped and wheezed fishy breath into Mikey's face. Mikey wondered what had brought him the great fortune of having such a merry and contented cat, who, unlike Mikey, never seemed to slip into dark, pensive, and ungenerous moods.

It was not long after Mikey left his father's home that his vision in his right eye began to grow worse. Faraway road signs, individual leaves on trees, and tiles on roofs were the first things to go. The change was so gradual that it wasn't until years later that he finally went to see an optometrist.

The optometrist performed tests and gave Mikey a prescription for his right eye. He inquired as to when Mikey had lost vision completely in the left.

"I never had it," Mikey said.

"I see." The optometrist stared back and forth between both of Mikey's eyes and shone a bright blue light into the right one.

Mikey picked out a pair of wire frames, and reiterated to the re-

ceptionist ordering the glasses that he would only need the proper prescription in the right lens.

Several months later, Mikey returned to the optometrist when he could tell his vision in his right eye had already grown worse. He was retested and given a stronger prescription.

A year later, he was back again, for the same reason.

This time, the doctor asked about blind spots. Mikey confessed that he had several and asked what this meant. The doctor explained that he was undergoing early-onset macular degeneration.

Mikey asked him directly, “Will I go blind?”

The doctor answered directly, “Probably.”

“When?”

The doctor compared Mikey’s new prescription with the previous one. “A few years most likely. Although you never know what might happen with technology between now and then.”

Mikey felt an angry and fearful indignation shiver through the cold organs in his belly. He said, “Why is this happening?”

“Are you asking if it’s hereditary?”

“I guess.”

“Possibly,” the doctor said.

Mikey was quiet for a bit. Then he said, “There was one time I looked directly at the sun when I was a kid.”

The doctor smiled gently. “They warn you about that. But it’s almost impossible to cause permanent damage that way. You didn’t do this to yourself, I can assure you of that.”

Mikey started to learn Braille. He started practicing to cook and clean and clothe himself with a piece of tape over his right eye. He also started to catalog images, colors, memories, and he created associations that would make sense to him when—if—he lost his sight. *The color red = the smell of cinnamon. Blue = fingers under running water. White = the taste of cream. A full moon is*

*Chopin's Nocturne, Opus 9, No. 2. The first snowfall looks exactly the way sugar tastes. A tree-lined street with lampposts is Philip Glass's "Metamorphosis One."*

Excluding Sally, the rest of The Gunners started up a group email thread within a year or two of graduating high school and going their separate ways. Any ill will among the rest of them caused by Sally's absence seemed to have been forgotten. Although this was never formally acknowledged between them, they reconnected easily over email, the ongoing thread coming to life every few months, and their contact was warm, often containing a happy childhood memory or an ancient inside joke. With all of them now around thirty, the past decade had seen a great deal of movement and change, all documented through these emails.

Jimmy had come into great wealth since moving to Los Angeles at age nineteen and making wise investments. Sam had been married at age twenty-one in a family-only ceremony, and was now deeply involved with the church he and his wife attended in Georgia. Lynn had attended a music conservatory in New York City, but now lived in a small town in Pennsylvania, where she and her boyfriend ran the local AA chapter. Alice had attended the University of Michigan, eloped with a graduate student who she referred to as "The Saint," been married to him for a year and then divorced him; she now dated women. She currently owned a small but successful marina on Lake Huron. Sometimes, Mikey felt embarrassed by how little his own life had changed since high school compared to the rest of them. In their emails, the others described marriage and travels and concerts. In Mikey's emails, he described renovations to their high school gym, a new recipe he had attempted, and minor updates to Friday's health.

On occasions when Mikey saw Sally Forrest out in Lackawanna, he had to fight his urge to report back to the others. As far as Mikey could tell, Sally remained in her mother's home after high school and he continued to see her out from time to time, standing in line at the CVS pharmacy, massaging peaches at Tops, or walking up Ingram with a cell phone at her ear, although Sally always seemed to be listening, never speaking into that phone. Mikey did not know if she worked. He did not know if she had new friends, or who spoke to her from the other end of that phone.

With high school behind them and the others far away, Mikey had initially been hopeful that he and Sally might be able to reconnect, that she might finally reveal to him what had caused her to abandon the group, and that he might have the opportunity to apologize if he'd had any part of it. But when they encountered each other in public, Sally continued to look past Mikey with the same cold disdain she had when they were still in school. As though she'd never known him, as though they'd shared nothing. When he saw Sally, Mikey was filled with a dense, aching emptiness, one that contained so much.

He longed to report to the others that their old friend Sally was still so, so thin, perhaps had even lost weight since the last time he'd seen her. She always wore sunglasses, so he could not see her eyes. She carried a canvas bag with a fruit basket embroidered on it, and there was a large, bright yellowish stain on the strap. He still missed her, wondered about her, wondered what had gone wrong, and whether the others did, too. But he always reasoned with himself that if the others cared, they would ask. No point picking at a sore and drawing fresh blood if everyone else was content to leave it be.

There was often talk of a reunion between the five of them, but plans never came together. Even so, with brief and infrequent face-to-face contact, and all these years later, Mikey still considered

Alice, Jimmy, Sam, and Lynn his dearest friends. He had trouble connecting with peers at work, and despised social events. He had not grown less shy over the years. He couldn't bring himself to start social media accounts because he hated all photographs of himself: left eye always a bit creamy and strange and faraway, right eye focused but never quite meeting the camera's lens, as though he feared its judgment. Cheeks always flaming, freckles overlaid with red. Cowlick always wild, as if it had an ax to grind.

Mikey therefore always read the emails from The Gunners with great interest, and felt deeply invested in their lives. He went on soaring Google Earth explorations through their towns, zooming around parks and downtowns and up and down residential streets. He made a habit of sending birthday cards—*actual* cards, via snail mail—to the others, who always expressed incredulous gratitude for the gesture.

Mikey did not tell his friends that he might be going blind and was mining childhood relics, yearbooks and journals and stacks of Polaroid photographs rubber-banded together, searching for pictures of his friends and meditating on them, knowing that these dear faces might one day elude him.

In early January, the city of Buffalo was fossilized beneath three feet of hard gray snow, the air bitterly cold and humid. People moved slowly, like cogs in an old machine, muscles hard, cold licking at their faces. Pipes had burst at General Mills, and Mikey was working twelve-hour days. Mikey's thirtieth birthday came and went, with a text from Alice and a generic card from HR in his work mailbox, the typeface meant to resemble actual handwriting, acknowledging him as a valued employee and wishing him a special day.

It was a week after Mikey's birthday that he received word of Sally's death.

The news came from a colleague, someone who had attended Mikey's high school but who was several years younger than Mikey. The colleague had not known Sally, but news of a former student's suicide had reached him through the local news. Her body was found in the Buffalo River, less than a quarter mile downstream from the Buffalo Skyway. Her car was parked just off the entrance to the Skyway, an elevated steel bridge that soared one hundred feet over the water beneath. Her mother had reported her missing late the night before. Although there was no note, it appeared to be a straightforward suicide. Her mother confirmed her struggle with depression. Video surveillance from the bridge showed that she acted alone, just after midnight. Mikey's colleague realized that Sally would have been about Mikey's age, and he asked Mikey about it at work, wondering if Mikey had heard the news about his classmate, wondering if Mikey had known or would even remember the girl. *Her name was Sally*, the guy said to Mikey. *Did you know a Sally?*

Funeral arrangements were announced—it would take place in two weeks at St. Mary's, the church nearest Sally's mother's home, just six blocks off Ingram.

Mikey was broken, muddled, distracted. He could think of nothing else, yet no matter how long and hard he thought on Sally, he could never reach her center. Furthermore, as he tried to recall memories of her, he realized he could never reach his *own* center—he could

never reach something that felt entirely real, or true. He began to wonder if he had no center. A hollow man.

Mikey was in touch with Alice, Jimmy, Sam, and Lynn to make sure the news had reached them. They all planned to come to town for the service.

Knowing that he would see the four of them brought Mikey some measure of solace as well as nervous anticipation. Adulthood and years of living alone had taken a toll on his confidence. He wanted to believe that he would still be able to relate to his friends face-to-face, would still genuinely interest them, could offer comfort and share a laugh. But in pessimistic moments, he feared uneasiness between them brought on simply by the passage of time, too much life lived apart.

In the days leading up to Sally's funeral, Mikey got a haircut and shoveled snow and vacuumed up Friday's hair. He often found himself short of breath, even when he had barely stirred.

He avoided the Skyway, taking the long and indirect route north on Niagara Street instead.

Several days before the funeral, Mikey received a call from Jimmy inviting him to a catered dinner following the funeral service at the lakeside vacation home not far from Lackawanna that Jimmy had purchased years earlier for his family. Jimmy said he would be inviting Alice, Lynn, and Sam as well. Jimmy said there were enough beds for everyone, and all were welcome to spend the night.

Mikey thanked Jimmy for the invite and said, "Can I bring something?"

"Oh God, no." Jimmy laughed bleakly. "Zeppelli's catering the thing. There'll be enough for an army."

Mikey said, “How are you holding up, bud?”

Jimmy said, “I just can’t believe she’s gone. Again.” It was quiet for a bit, then Jimmy said in a strange voice, “I can’t stop wondering . . . Well, do you know anything, Mikey?”

Mikey’s head felt way too heavy for his neck, not right at all. His heart was loud. He had the strangest sensation, as if he were being pulled at, as if he were in someone else’s dream.

He stared out his window and saw that an enormous flock of grackles—there had to be a thousand of them, maybe ten thousand—had come to rest in the row of diseased-looking maple trees just on the other side of the street.

Mikey got up, phone still at his ear, walked to his door, opened it, and stepped out into the snow.

The air was thunderous, full and alive with the clamorous chatter and vibration of the birds. But moments later, when Mikey closed the door behind him, some of the birds nearest him were startled by the sound and took flight. Others followed. More. Mikey exhaled a white cloud, and his empty lungs tickled with cold. He coughed and watched the birds as they lifted off the trees in a magnificent ripple. It wasn’t long at all until the entire flock had departed in a huge spinning black cone, leaving only a blank and depleted void in their wake. An *after* sound. A holy, yearning silence, like a prayer that was too sad and too deeply felt to be spoken aloud.

Mikey still held his phone at his ear, his lips now paralyzed by the cold, and Jimmy said, “Mikey? You there?”

Mikey finally said, “I don’t know.” As these words slid out of his mouth, they felt long and cool, like snakes.