

Sterling Recruit

It was an empowering feeling being selected, especially out of the blue like that. I was on my way back from Farmers Market to la casa bungalow when Tessa appeared. She had a tinkly laugh. She said, You're astonishing, you know that?—the epitome of what we look for. I'd rarely before been noticed. I knew her name was Tessa from the letters on a sterling silver necklace cupping her throat. When she handed me a pamphlet, I dropped my bundle of asparagus and baby bok choy right there on the sidewalk, part of my "eat better" campaign involving no more mochas, chorizo burritos, or sleeves of cheese though truth be told I often tossed the produce out my shower window that opened onto an alley behind La Brea. Buh-bye veggies, you tasteless bitches, was my first thought when Tessa said auditions would be held the following day. I knew I'd be too excited to eat.

Legion Hall, she went on, arrive by six in the morning. Do not be late.

The gate was locked when I got there. Other applicants were gathered outside, shiny and buoyant as the rising Pollyanna sun. I still get pimples on my cheeks. Sometimes a weird one behind my ear. Sterling Recruits we were called, not women, which was fine by me because women sound old, craggy, malcontent. Then Tessa said, Sterling Recruits, aim to be precisely that: Sterling to the *n*th degree. Justin has a most discerning eye and the highest of standards. There's no guarantee everyone will be accepted.

A collective sea of groans gathered then faded as the wrought iron gate opened on its uncoiled track.

Inside, the lights were bright, the auditorium a chilly sixty-six degrees—we'd been led past a thermostat while being assembled into rows. Tessa had a team of deputies. They wore black pantsuits and pointy stilettos like you might see on Oscar winners excepting Meryl Streep. My toes instantly curled inside my Vans. The checkered ones. I felt stupid and small. Go with it, I told myself, quit questioning good things. Good things can happen, even to you. And anyway, I'm not petite. I clock in at almost five-ten. The deputies' hair was fashioned into tight buns capped by silver headsets. They didn't look directly at you, they mainly only signaled, like stand here, please. They led me into a small room

and had me strip down to a gown. It was all very professional. They told me to step on a scale then took my vitals and arranged my feet into polished steel stirrups—to make sure you're flexible, they said. And properly moisturized.

I held my breath. I counted to twenty. I thought: I want a silver headset. I didn't even have a phone.

Do you wish to be healed, the deputies asked, and I said oh yes, that would be a dream come true. We thought so, they said, and handed me juice made from crabgrass. Their voices were soft as dew. There were three of them. They said protocol included probing, there might be a minute or two of discomfort but then it would be over. Just a small bit of twisting. Recruits must be up to snuff and sometimes it's risky to pluck someone off the street, they gently explained, even though Tessa reported I had presented as special right away. Her snatch rate was high but you never know, and I said I understood, you can never be too careful. One of the deputies took my hand in hers. It was velvety, like the inside of my old dog Socrates's ears. When I was little, I liked to rub Soc's ears between my fingertips while lounging on the rug after school. Or anytime, really. We didn't have a TV and not many books. Whenever my sister saw me rubbing Soc's ears, she'd tell me to stop. I don't want to watch you having sex with our dog, she would say.

Were the deputies attractive, you might ask. It's a natural question. It's how we've been raised. Their faces were stark and featureless, like the skin had been sanded with the finest of tools then glossed to a sheen and placed in a kiln. There was little time to observe their faces closely, however, as they soon secured a mask over my very own face, the kind burglars wear, although this one had no eyeholes and was open at the scalp. It's for your protection, they said, which gave me an inner glow. For once my looks were of no consequence. The mask was lilac-colored with a tiny vent near the nose. It smelled slightly like Socrates after a bath. Twice he got skunked. My father doused him with tomato sauce which both times made me crave lasagna. Too greasy and starchy, my mother said the few times I requested it—I cannot in good conscience support carbo-loading, we're having brown rice instead. This was in the eighties. She was ahead of her time.

The deputies insisted I take another sip of crabgrass. For the healing. And to rid STDs, just in case. Those can be wily, they said, hard to extinguish. Here's a sprinkle of lemon juice on top. No thanks, I said, I don't care for citrus. That's OK, they said, we do. Suck the juice through your mask. Sorry we had to cover your mouth, but this is a food-free event.

That was hard to hear but *event* was something I could get behind. I hadn't been to many of those in my life.

Deputy One said to me, Keeley? If I'm being honest? Some pruning is advisable. Too jungly. The probe was being held against my pubes. Whack that chocha waca, Two and Three said in unison. We can tidy up the playground, One continued, as well as your pit

hollows, your ample thighs, your unshaved shins, and oh wow, even the upper lip—and glory be, the chin too? One of the other deputies had lifted the bottom portion of my mask. Her fingernails smelled like Dijon. Your chocha should be Sterling at all times, said One.

Next thing I knew I was newborn-sleek with freshly painted toes though I couldn't see the color, and the hair on top of my head was trimmed too. I'd never been so cared for, so lovingly attended to, so unbelievably sweet-smelling (essential oils had been massaged into my flanks) and ready to smash. That had to be next, right? This was some sort of matchmaking reality show. Not that I would smash on camera, per se, it's just that for once in my life I felt desirable. A feeling I hoped never to lose. It had been a long time since I'd been touched or held. I sucked in my stomach and waited for someone to shout, *Action!*

But then the deputies said my cognitive evaluation was next—it's a crucial part of the process and we trust you'll be frank. Can you give us your honor? they asked. You'd like to advance, yes?

Yes, yes, yes, I said. *Muy mucho.*

Then describe something that scraped your heart, they instructed. We've created a safe space in this Sterling room on your special gurney. Start whenever you're ready.

Well, I began, there was this one guy Cody who said he loved me but then a short time later he claimed he never said that, or at least he couldn't remember saying it, or maybe he'd been drunk and had been joking, like *luv ya bro*, the way you let it fly to a bartender or buddy while tying one on.

But that's when the truth comes out, I insisted to Cody. I looked deep into his heavy-lidded eyes and said, People can't help but tell the truth whenever they're sloppy drunk.

Au contraire, he replied, not in my case—in fact, I never tell the truth.

I could sense the deputies holding their breath. My ears had assumed the job of my eyes.

Anyhow, I said, Cody's heartfelt admission made me love him even more—not just the *contraire* usage but for being so brave and honest about never telling the truth. Taking a chance with me about that. Even if he left shortly thereafter.

My hand flew up to my paper-gowned heart.

The deputies took a dewy gasp. Ooh that's good, so good. No wonder Tessa picked you.

And then there was Charlotte, I continued, who—

Ho-no, gotta stop you there, said One, lightly smacking my thigh. Let's stick to conventions.

But she liked to play Bloody Mary and I thought you might—

We appreciate your enthusiasm but we're using a finely tuned program designed to get to the bottom of your heart and the edge of your soul, and we've got it timed to precision. It's imperative we move on, insisted One. A Sterling girl adheres to the rules, got it? So,

now please describe a time when you did something you deeply regret. Something so awful you've told no one.

An unintended tot buckled into a stroller came to mind. I'd encountered her after exiting a store that sold cake pans and pie tins and other baking essentials. In my bag was a cookie cutter in the shape of a ghost and for a second, I wondered whether the spiritual world was testing me.

Go on, said the deputies.

Well, before coming across the stranded child, I'd gone back and forth about whether to choose a pumpkin cutter or a ghost mold, knowing with certainty that pumpkins are consistently the safer choice, but I'd felt edgy that whole day. Anti-tradition. Pro-Tabasco. The baby was sucking her thumb. The stroller's canopy was pink. Hey there, little one, I said, and she looked at me blankly then squeezed shut her tiny tot eyes and wailed as if being tortured which in a way I suppose she was. There were no other adults nearby, no parental prospects within view so I reached out and wiggled her foot and told her, Hush, now hush, where is your mama? Or your papa? Or maybe your gran? She kicked at my hand with the force of a demon and I wish I'd stayed with her and said, It's OK, sweet thing I've got you, I won't leave you until someone comes, and if no one does then I'll take you to Customer Service and we'll figure something out, you cute little dew drop, you pumpkin-faced angel, you perfect little baby, no one should leave you. Not ever. My boss was expecting me to bake cookies for a boozy Halloween party on the other side of town, and I pictured my aluminum sheet on the counter at home ready for dough. At the time I was second assistant to the personal assistant of an actress on the rise. I took another look around. The mall was empty. No shoppers, no power walkers pumping their arms back and forth, no fake security guards with hollow batons at their hips. I took the cookie cutter from my bag and said, Here baby, have this. The ghost is all yours. I've got plans.

Now that, said One while clapping, is a Sterling example. Well done. I think the only thing is whether you course-corrected later? Like, did you grow from the experience?

Affirmative. I ended up using the bottom of a glass to mash out the cookies.

You didn't use the top?

Lipstick stains circled the rim.

Hmm, she said.

Resourcefulness is one of the things I pride myself on.

Do you? she said.

It was an unusual feeling, bragging about myself. I couldn't remember ever having done it, but in that moment, I thought about the value of practicing it more often. Things I'm good at? Reusing foil, removing splinters, plunging a toilet. The crabgrass was working.

The healing was happening. Gratitude filled my every pore. The deputies were akin to that teacher lady with the three names who helped Helen Keller.

The deputies trilled, Now for the best part! List making! You won't believe how much fun this will be. Don't forget—Sterling cooperation equals Sterling attitude, which is the whole point of the day. Several other recruits have already been released. You wouldn't still be here if we didn't think you had Sterling potential. That's what first caught Tessa's eye.

My gratitude suddenly tipped toward annoyance. Just get on with it, dear depts. My stomach was rumbling, and my joints seemed stiff. The top of my hair did too.

OK, said the deputies, we want you to make a list of adjectives that describe the species of man.

You mean like inert? Or...clueless?

Well, sort of, said One. But think bigger. Less flattering. Aim for the balls. Justin wants us to write down your words on a chalkboard.

Blam-o went my brain. A second-grade teacher once said if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all. I knew better than to say that out loud, though. I lay there quietly on my special gurney until someone poked me in the rib.

Has anyone ever betrayed you, One asked, like maybe that Cody character?

Like maybe the only thing he *loved* was screwing, added Two.

Possibly, I said. But there was no proof.

Good, said One, good, good. Two, please write down cheater. What about bush-whacked?

Si. Night manager at Burger King.

Perfect, said One. How about swindled? I nodded. Stalked? Solicited? Twice I repeated the motion. Reduced, she said—physically, verbally, or otherwise? My head bobbed like a car dash accessory. It was as though the deputies were mind readers. It went on and on like this until finally they seemed satisfied. It's a fine list, they said, and began to read aloud: Druggie, Thief, Liar, Alchie, Convict, Stoner, Inflatable Raft Fucker, Fucker of Anything (see above)—

Stop, I shouted and covered my ears.

It's fine, fine work, said One.

So excellent, added Two and Three.

I was glad we were done. I felt covered in mud.

They mumbled in a corner, or at least what I thought must be the corner. It was hard to make out what they were saying due to the scribbling of pens, but it sounded like someone said, Wonder if her points for this will make up for earlier deficits?

Oh, One said, he's coming. Sit up.

She rushed over and pulled me upright with her velvety hands.

The mask prevented me from being able to see Justin, but it was easy to sense his presence. Confidence the size of a room. Pleasure to meet you, young meaty recruit, he boomed. Tessa has told me great things. Allow me to cut to the chase. That list you made? I'm sure you can now see it's evident men have no control over what they do and who they are—they can't change even if they wanted to. Everything comes down to DNA. They were made to build and conquer. And girls were made to nurture. God did not make Adam from Eve's rib, am I right? It's an easy concept to grasp: There are warriors and there are nurturers. A.k.a. caregivers. That's what's in *your* DNA. That's why you were selected. Nurturers are needed now more than ever. You must forgive, accept, and always be loyal and loveful.

Someone flicked on and off the light switch.

Sir? said One, I believe you forgot to mention that Sterling girls are one hundred percent responsible for their relationships. It's all up to them. A man's DNA does not provide accountability.

Good catch, he said. You're right. That's numero uno.

I liked that everyone was bilingual.

Hand me the probe, I want a quick whiff, Justin said, and the deputies laughed.

It's still soaking, sir.

But I'm feeling froggy. Look at this raging boner.

You're always pointing that gun.

They were so free with each other, so open and flirty, like the relationship I'd always wanted.

One said, Have a look at her report. That might remedy the situation.

Justin began reading out loud: Geographic tongue, rashy shins, eczema present on elbows and knees, extra tall fivehead. Whoosh, he said, whoa doggie. I see what you mean. Kinda adds up to a big yuck.

On the plus side, she has very nice nail beds, said One. And her height! Plus, you know, we can hide—

It was interesting hearing them talk about me so openly. Much better than overhearing snarky gossip about myself.

How's the Inner Sanctum? Justin asked.

Notes of jackfruit and brine but otherwise tip-top.

Add some rosemary, he suggested, one or two sprigs.

I was highly impressed he knew such a word.

Yes sir, said the deputies. We'll add it to the list.

After Justin was gone, One explained, We're holding space for you to become your best Sterling self which will mean shedding some L-Bs. You're coming in a tad high.

Any juice left? I asked. My throat was suddenly dry.

From now on, only water, she answered. We'll be keeping you here for supervision and to monitor your intake and such, which brings me to the category of exercise. When do you think was the last time you did that? If ever?

Two interrupted: Maybe just do the quiz now?

One said, Sure, go ahead while I record a few things. There's so much going on here. Keeley, you're a complicated case.

It was nice to finally be seen as complex.

Here goes, said Two. Choose carefully. Would you prefer to get cancer or drown?

Is this a riddle? I asked. Or some kind of strange joke?

There's nothing funny about getting cancer or drowning, but I'll mark it down as a pass and we'll come back to it later, said Two. On to the next: Do you prefer to suck or blow?

Not that it matters, Two whispered to Three.

I'm not following this line of questioning, I said, not at all.

Do you prefer emissions in the mouth or carriage hole?

Speaking of, we forgot to take her temperature, said One.

Can we do that now? I said. Please?

Your job is to concentrate, scolded Two. We're not asking these questions for our health.

Basically? One chimed in. There's a flag in your file. But we're willing to overlook it, provided you—

The main thing is this, said Two—why would you leave a baby in a mall? That doesn't sound very nurturing or Sterling.

First off, I said, I still feel shitty about that, and I shared the story in confidence. And secondly, I had no resources to my name. I own no car or phone.

But a baby can't drive, Two said, or use a phone. That makes no sense.

The dewiness of their voices had disappeared.

Perhaps we're getting off track, I said.

We're the ones to decide that, thank you, said One sharply. Turn over, please.

Ouch. What is that? I winced and grabbed my right buttock.

A thermometer.

It's also a numbing agent, muttered Two.

This is making me uncomfortable, I said.

Ooh, the little princess wants her blankie, said Three.

I'm sorry, I said, I'm trying to be cooperative here, I really am, it's just—

Sterling is the aim, reprimanded Two. Not just cooperation.

Right, yes, Sterling, but—

No butts, said One, well, sure maybe some butts, and yours isn't too bad, I mean it could use plumping, maybe some of the loose chunks from other places on your body could be repurposed. Oops, I'm getting ahead of myself. You're scheduled to see the surgeon this afternoon anyway so the issue can be addressed then but meanwhile we need you to kick in someone's teeth.

Will her file get de-flagged if she does that? said Three.

I refuse to dignify that with an answer, admonished One. I thought you said you went to grad school?

Whose teeth? I asked quietly.

A recruit who needs a reminder about the concept of loyalty. She's just one room over. Two can grab her.

What about her face being pristine? I asked. Isn't that the word you use?

Teeth aren't critical, answered Three. Anonymity is. Most Sterling girls wear duffel bags or pillowcases over their heads.

Shut up, I heard One whisper to Three. *My god.*

Hey, I said weakly, none of this is sounding right. Has something gone haywire?

You're haywire, said Three.

I'll go get her, said Two. Kick in her teeth and everything will get cleared up.

I felt clogged and sluggish. Stuck in a loop. Suddenly I missed my bungalow apartment with its teeny shower stall and pinprick basement window offering a view of all things alley, my discarded veggies rotting near the sill. I turned over on the gurney into an upright position and that's when my hand bumped against a cold and wettish cylinder-shaped thing. In one swift motion I aimed the probe upward and jammed the pointy end into the fabric of my mask, intending to poke holes which I could see through. In the feverish process, I nicked an eyeball. Instantly, blood squirted out.

Ew, said Two. Ew, ew. It's like her eye is having a period.

A little blood never hurt anyone, said One.

Shall I ring for Justin, asked Three.

One said, I have half a mind to write you up. You should know what to do.

I was glad I'd taken focus away from the girl.

It's not like we're getting paid, whined Three.

If you believe in the Cause, that's irrelevant, said One, and through my new eyeholes I could see her turn toward me. My vision was blurry, but at least I had some.

Keeley, she said in a tense voice, Here's a question, and if I were you, I would think long and hard before I answered. What if that had been my baby in the mall? How could you have just left her there and sailed on home and baked cookies?

Had I known you then I would have called, I said.

But earlier you said you had no phone?

I don't get what's going on here, I really don't, I said. Plus, I have an insane headache. Droplets of blood were hitting my torso. I felt close to fainting.

What's going on here is an incredible lack of gratitude, said One, who sounded like my mother the day she caught me flushing brown rice down the disposal. We took a chance on you. We whacked your chocha, we restored your chakras, and this is what we get?

If I could go back and rescue that baby, I would, I swear, I said. I truly hope she's OK. I think about her every day.

That's more like it, said Two, because it was left behind by a man and, as you know, he couldn't help it.

I am extremely disappointed, said Justin, when he reentered the room. Shockingly disappointed. You promised to be Sterling. I've got the paperwork right here.

He was smaller than I imagined, Danny DeVito-ish with the mannerisms of a PE teacher twirling a rope whistle around his neck. His large belt buckle spelled out KING.

If you can't care for yourself, how can you care for anyone else, he scolded.

But the rules are unclear, I objected. I'm not sure what's happening. Or what it is that you want me to do?

Marring your mask with gore? Would you describe that as Sterling behavior? His tone approached that of my father's when he caught me licking peanut butter from Socrates's new Kong toy beneath the Christmas tree. My sister's voice had been in the background: Dad—you gotta admit she was adopted. There's no way we're related.

I lowered my bloodied head.

After all we've done for you, I expect full cooperation, not some Joan of Arc bullshit, raged Justin. I've got a roster of bigwigs eager to meet you, personal friends of mine who broker gigantic deals twenty-four seven even while acquiring letters of the alphabet. Or plunging deep waters and plowing into space. They're the reason our country runs like it does which means they've earned our deepest respect, and they in turn are fans of the deep pockets we provide. Yours has tested among the boggiest. And it's important to share.

I heard him take a big breath. I heard One say, You're captivating as ever, sir. You always explain things so well. I learn from you every single time. Here, King Justin, take a load off.

She pulled out a chair, and he plopped down with the delicacy of a tiger.

I'll get her ready and back on track before you know it, added One. The good news is her gusto is almost gone.

Blood was still flowing from my eyeball. I smeared some of the fluid across my stomach and down my arm. The pile of clothes that I'd removed earlier and had placed in the corner was no longer there. Aiming for nonchalance, I trailed the sides of the gurney with my bloody fingertips and muttered, Doesn't appear we're a match. I think I should go.

How precious, Two chuckled. She thinks it's a choice.

God, this is boring, said Justin. Just inject her already and throw her in a tub—

Hear me out, I said, sitting up straighter. One pushed me back down, so I was lying flat again. I'll never say a word about this to anyone, I croaked. I swear. I promise. You can keep doing whatever it is that you do here, and I'll go home and pack my things and get out of this town. Believe me, I've had my fill of LA. Please, may I be dismissed?

Oh, that's funny, Justin said, and he and the deputies laughed and laughed. I could hear a door opening, then someone shouting, Tessa, get in here! You won the prize. Margaritas for everyone!

I'm serious, I said. Sooner or later, someone will realize I'm missing. Like my coworkers or my boss or my family mem—

Au contraire, said One. On your app it says you have no job and no friends and your family lives somewhere back East.

Tessa's voice surfaced. What's all this, she said.

She's exactly how you described other than a couple glitches, said Justin. You know how to find 'em.

Hear, hear, said the deps.

Please, will you release me, I asked again, ever so sweetly.

And again, they laughed, this time with Tessa's tinkle in the mix. Her laugh was crisp as a sleigh bell, and suddenly I realized what she'd noticed at Farmers Market—a strapped and forsaken girl waiting for a velvety hand.

Bring me the scissors and a roll of tape, commanded Tessa. The strongest we have.

She came over and removed my bloodied mask then deftly applied adhesive across my lips. When she tore off more tape that I knew was intended for my eyes I grabbed hold of her necklace and tugged.

Did she smell nice up close, you might ask. Like wildflowers? Or myrrh? By then my olfactory sense had all but disappeared along with most of my faculties. But did I pull harder? Yes, yes. Muy mucho. I yanked and pulled on that Sterling silver necklace until my arms and legs were secured to the gurney.

There, there, Tessa said when she was through—I've got you.

Those three words were what I'd longed to hear all my life. But—

Uh-oh, she's still moving, I heard the deputies say. Her foot.

I felt Tessa grab it. I felt her wiggle it back and forth. Her toenails look so pretty, she said. Nice work!

Why thank you, said Three.

It was me, objected Two.

Either way, said Tessa.

I sensed her moving toward my blockaded face—my eyes by then had been covered with tape. Her breath was soon close to my ear. Despite my increasing impairment I smelled notes of citrus and skunk. She pinched my pinna, my cartilage crunched. I tried to object, I tried to speak through the obstruction but this only made my extra tall fivehead pucker, which Tessa, mind reader extraordinaire, smoothed with her soft, placid hand.

Such a lost little toy, she whispered. But now you're home.