

"Ends"
a short story
by Jonathan Vaught



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The father lumbered forward, squinting in the afternoon glare. His fist stamped a dent in the flowered wall. He didn't seem to notice.

"She left us because of you, Dad! You ran her off with your drinking, and your temper, and you can't keep a simple job—" the boy was backpedaling, at seventeen not yet a match for his father in a fight. "They're going to know it was you that took the money from the cash drawer. What did you think would happen? Now you'll be unemployed *and* arrested. How could you be so stupid?"

The boy sidestepped his father's charge, but only halfway. The older man's momentum carried them both backwards, glancing off a wall, then onto the threadbare sofa. Clumsy, roaring, he landed a blow on his son's temple and another on his rib cage. He didn't stop to wonder why the boy wasn't putting up more of a fight. So he just had time to be surprised when the gun, pulled from under a cushion, was placed between his eyes and fired.

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"Come on man, three hundred is all I could get. Just please give me the stuff. I'll get you the last hundred tomorrow, I swear." The boy bounced on the balls of his feet, just outside the oval of sodium-yellow streetlight, Walkman headphones dangling around his neck.

"Who do you think I am, your mama?"

"Or you can have this. It's worth a hundred and twenty. I just got it yesterday." He fumbled with the Walkman on his belt, fouling his hand in the headphone cord. He offered it up. "Here man, just take it."

"You stupid rich kids. I should take your money and your toys and leave you for the cops to clean up." The dealer plucked a knife from a pocket and motioned with it. "Give me the money. Now."

The strobe of a muzzle flash lit the scene, an instant before the gunshot's crack split the alley open. The knife skittered away as the dealer collapsed, a red stain sprouting on his chest.

The Walkman fell from the boy's hand. He turned to see the shooter step from behind a dumpster at the dark end of the alleyway. A boy about his own age, wearing a jacket and work gloves. The gun disappeared into his jacket pocket.

"Wow man. You totally saved the day. I really thought he was going to cut me or something."

The second boy stepped around the first, crouched, and retrieved several bags of powder from the dead man. The bags disappeared into the pocket opposite the gun. He picked up the knife and stood to face his peer. One eye was decorated with a fresh bruise. "So you want this stuff?"

"Yeah, um, I mean if you don't..." There was something cold and snakelike in the other boy's face. Despite himself, Walkman took a step back.

"Let me have your wallet then. Not just the money. The wallet."

Walkman shrugged and handed over his wallet, hand trembling with relief, anticipation, or both. The shooter peeled off his jacket and held it out. "Put this on. Drugs are in the pocket."

Walkman complied without hesitation and rooted eagerly in the pockets. "Thanks again. It is a little bit cold out here. Hey man, I really appreciate this, um, if you ever need any—"

Walkman's gratitude was cut short by a grunt as the other boy flicked the knife into his chest several times. He thrashed, unable to get his hands untangled from the jacket. Seconds later he remembered the gun in one pocket, and managed to get off one wild shot before staggering to the pavement.

He was much too late. The killer had already dropped the knife, scooped up the Walkman and fled into the dark.

“Mr. Sutton. A D? Did you have better things to do than study for midterms?”

Thomas shrugged, crestfallen. He had had better things to do, or so it seemed at the time. Crashing a sorority party was not to be blown off for something as mundane as studying. He'd had the opportunity to cheat—last week someone had scored a copy of the exam and passed it around—but lacked the guts. He wished he had one of those decisions back. He hated Mondays.

Dr. Sterling dropped the offending exam on the desk and clapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t beat yourself up too much, Thomas. Think of it as an educational incentive.”

Midterm grade notwithstanding, Thomas liked Modern American History. Dr. Sterling was friendly and approachable. Most of the freshman courses Thomas attended were presided over by distracted lecturers who stood at the front of a large hall, delivered their monologues, and left the student interaction to graduate assistants. Dr. Sterling made his large class feel like an intimate circle. He joked, asked direct questions, encouraged students to speak up. Most of the girls in the class swooned over his youth and good looks, despite (or perhaps because of) the family photos decorating his office desk.

“Speaking of incentives, people, we’re going to talk about broken windows today. A few years ago, New York had some of the worst crime in the world. Today, you won't find a safer big city. Why? Because they started cracking down on the small crimes. If your building has broken windows, and graffiti on the walls, you’re less likely to care if there are cigarette butts lying around. Where there are cigarette butts, there's trash on the ground. Before you know it, there's a drug dealer standing on the corner. If you let the small problems go, you invite bigger problems.”

“The military figured this out a long time ago. When I was in basic training for the Marines, we had to make our beds perfectly. No lumps or wrinkles. You’ve seen the trick where the drill instructor bounces a quarter on the bed? It’s real. At mealtime, we had to line up our trays and silver exactly right or we didn’t eat. Discipline started with the details. If you want results, you don’t compromise.”

Thomas made a note to remember that for the next exam.

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When Thomas entered the lecture hall for Wednesday's class, the professor wasn't in his usual place by the door greeting students. At 9:13, Dr. Sterling was still absent. Thomas was about to bolt after the fifteen-minute grace period when a woman entered. She had all the unease of an administrator faced with non-theoretical students. "Class is canceled today. Dr. Sterling has had... a family tragedy."

Thomas, already halfway out of his chair, sat back down. The room was silent except for the soft whoosh of the air conditioner.

"Another professor will fill in on Friday." There were a few snuffles from the girls up front. One of them asked a question that Thomas didn't hear. "That's all the information we can give out at this time," the official said. She bustled out, unprepared for a task as intimate as consoling a room full of students.

Thomas left the room amid more snuffles and a babble of questions.

He found himself at the student union in hopes of an early lunch. A crowd—many of them his history classmates—clustered around a television news report. Thomas picked out the words "local college professor", "wife and child", "dead" and "home invasion". By the time he could see the screen, it was showing photographs of Dr. Sterling at the beach, with a very attractive woman and a small boy. Now the girls were sobbing.

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Friday's Modern American History was full at 8:50. The mood was solemn but expectant. Someone had hung a wreath on the whiteboard, and a sympathy card was making the rounds. Thomas was just opening it to sign when the room went dead quiet. He glanced up and saw Dr. Sterling himself at the front of the room.

"Good morning." The professor was pale, but his voice was steady. "As I'm sure you've heard, a lot has happened this week." He attempted a wisp of a smile and continued. "On Tuesday night, my family was the victim of a home invasion. We had just put our son to bed when we realized we were out of milk, so I drove to the store. I returned to find the front door smashed open. The invaders shot my wife in the kitchen"—here his voice began to break—"and then my son sleeping in

his bed. They took less than four hundred dollars' worth of our things." He grew louder, angry. "Four hundred dollars!"

"The police have very few leads. There is a good chance that those... animals... will get away with stealing my wife and son from me."

"When I was in the Marines, my job was to keep you safe from the enemy. Now I realize that there are more dangerous enemies right here at home. Now my job is to teach. You, and others."

Sterling's voice was quavering but strong, like an opera singer Thomas had heard once. His eyes, though, were icy and resolute. "If you ever learn anything from me, learn this today. Families should be safe in their own homes. Instead, we hide inside them, in cages, as if we were the animals. *This has got to stop.*"

"So here's an assignment for the rest of the term. It's completely optional. Learn all you can about violent crime—what causes it, why it's getting worse, and what we can do about it. *And we will do something about it.*"

"Most of you will have families of your own one day. I want to make the world a safer place for them. So I'm asking for your help. Please help me fight these people."

The next day, Professor John Sterling's wife and four-year-old son were buried at the old Episcopal church downtown. All the local news crews were there. So was every one of Dr. Sterling's students.

“John Sterling for Mayor, Public Relations, Erin Goddard speaking.”

There was a moment of silence on the other end, then: “Good morning. The operator said I should talk to you. About Mr. Sterling.” The voice was a woman’s. Older, cultured, tentative.

“Yes, ma’am. What can I help you with?” Erin was technically a speechwriter, but fielded plenty of general inquiries, especially when a new volunteer was manning the phones. She’d been writing speeches for John Sterling for over a year, hired right out of college. She’d heard he favored students from his old school, and had just missed having him as a professor. She loved her job. A little grunt work was a small price to pay.

“My name is Margaret Sterling. I live in Charleston. I’m—well, I saw him on the news the other day, and he said he was from here, and I need to know if—if he’s my son.”

Erin blinked. She had a dozen prepared responses on the tip of her tongue, but none of them fit. She reached for her notebook and a pen. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but could you explain that?”

“I haven’t seen my son in twenty-five years. His name was—is—Richard. Richard John Sterling.”

Erin fell back on the official biography. “Dr. Sterling’s parents died when he was young. He lived with his grandmother until graduating from high school, and then enlisted in the Marines. His grandmother passed away shortly after. Since his wife and son were killed seven years ago, he has no living relatives. I’m very sorry, Ms. Sterling, but this is some sort of coincidence.”

“I’m sure he’s very busy, but... could I talk to him myself, please? Just to be sure?” The woman’s voice was steadier, despite the obvious disappointment. If she’d been looking for someone for twenty-five years, Erin supposed she’d be more used to failure than success.

“Dr. Sterling would be happy to talk to you, ma’am, but he’s out of the office this morning. I will leave him a message for you, though, okay? He’s very good about returning phone calls.”

“That’d be fine, dear.” The other woman gave a phone number. “Thank you very much for your time.” The line went silent.

Erin opened a new email to her boss's Blackberry and realized she had no idea what to write.

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She was finishing lunch at her desk when the door to the nearest office opened. Its occupant squinted in the glare. "Erin, do you have a minute?"

She pushed her salad to one side and waved to the empty chair in her cubicle. "How's it going, Thomas?"

Dr. Sterling's finance manager hesitated, then sat down. She didn't know him well; their departments didn't interact much. He'd been a student of the boss's at college, though, had known him as long as anyone, and she looked up to the core team. Most of them had joined his movement as volunteers while still in school. Thomas Sutton was one of them. "You talked to that woman on the phone this morning, right?"

Erin wrinkled her nose. "You mean the one who thought Dr. Sterling was her son?" Yeah, I talked to her. I emailed him about it."

Thomas's hands were clasped and restless in his lap, like two squirming children. "He told me about that. What did you think of her?"

Erin shrugged. "We get calls from freaks all the time. All public personalities do. Last week I got a chain email saying that John Sterling was the Antichrist and the world was ending." She rolled her eyes.

"So did she sound like a freak?"

"No, she was a nice older lady. It was just mistaken identity. What's bothering you, Thomas?"

Thomas exhaled and leaned back in the chair. "Look, you write speeches for a politician, right? Don't you ever have to... embellish the truth? It's technically lying, isn't it?"

"We call it spin, Thomas. Don't you watch the cable news channels?" She grinned. "You have to take it in context. Sometimes you make the colors a little brighter, but you're not painting something that isn't there. You're selling something you believe in."

"But you *do* believe in it?"

"With all my heart. I couldn't imagine having a better job or a better boss. Dr. Sterling is making a difference, and I get to help change the world every day I come to work. Because of him, parents are beginning to feel safe again letting their children play outside. Just think of what he'll be able to accomplish as mayor. I wish I'd been in on it from the beginning, like you."

"Yeah. It was really something. I remember the day he came into class after his family died. Changed the course of my life." Thomas stood up. "You get to paint pictures, but there's not much art in my job. Budgets and donations are pretty black and white." He gave a half-smile. "How do you guys work out here with all this fluorescent light? I keep mine turned off. A lamp is a lot easier on the eyes when you're staring at numbers all day."

"You have an office," she pointed out. "You can do what you want." He winked, retreated into the relative gloom, and closed the door.

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"Erin, this is fantastic stuff. It mentions the dismissal, but says nothing embarrassing about a former employee. I hate even having to bring it up, but I know she'll ask."

She took the sheet of talking points back from Dr. Sterling. "I still have a couple of edits to make. Thomas is going to be a major topic of the interview. There's no getting around it."

"It's no one else's business what happened. Just a difference of opinion. Sometimes I hate politics." Sterling pulled a rueful face.

"That's why we all work for you, boss. Isn't it time to get your TV makeup on?"

Her boss made another face and left, feigning reluctance. She grinned at his departing back. Like everyone else in the campaign, she did work for Dr. Sterling because of his idealism—and his character. He was every bit as loyal to his disciples as they were to him. So it didn't surprise her that no one seemed to know what had happened to Thomas. She hadn't seen him since their conversation two days ago.

Dr. Sterling had called a staff meeting the next morning. He hadn't said whether Thomas had quit or been fired, just that he had left the organization. "I have immense respect for Thomas, and I would hate to see this incident damage his career. So I'd like you all to be discreet about it."

With the TV interview coming up—for a national morning news show—Erin had approached the boss directly, so she could prepare a response.

"Erin, I know you need to do your job, but I really can't go into details. It wouldn't be fair to Thomas and it would distract from what really matters in this campaign, which is to take our cause to the next level. Thomas and I had a disagreement and we decided to part ways. He's going to get a top-shelf recommendation from me to any job he wants."

So Erin had done the best she could, which wasn't much. Dr. Sterling would have to improvise. Fortunately, he seemed good at that.

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John Sterling reclined at a glass-topped table with the host, perfectly dressed, at ease amid the controlled chaos of the set. Erin watched from the green room, sipping at a bottled water and balancing a notebook on her knee.

"John Sterling, good morning. It's wonderful to have you with us."

They exchanged pleasantries for a few moments.

"Dr. Sterling, you say you're on a mission to fight violent crime. You've had incredible success—first with your own grass-roots organization, and for the last year, as the head of the mayor's task force on violent crime. Now the mayor has said he wants you to have his job. He's endorsed you from the very beginning of your campaign. Can you really carry out your mission better from the mayor's office? Why deal with all the bureaucracy? If you're doing the work you were called to do—as you've put it—why not stay right where you are?"

Erin smiled, having anticipated the softball.

"Linda, I asked myself the same question when the mayor and I first began to discuss my campaign. In fact, I asked it when the mayor first approached me about working for the city. I believe that I have a purpose, and I examine everything in the light of that purpose. After the tragedy that took my family, I did a lot of soul-

searching. I wasn't there when those animals invaded my home and murdered my wife and child in cold blood. I wondered—I still wonder—if I could have made a difference had I been home to protect them. I wasn't. All I can do now is try and protect others."

"After I lost my family, I started a student group. A new family, if you will. The kids exceeded my expectations. They listened to police scanners. They put up flyers. They sponsored neighborhood crime watches. And things began to change. If there was a violent crime in your neighborhood, we would harass the police until they caught the perpetrators and stepped up patrols on your street tenfold. We've gone into schools and cracked down on gang recruitment. Breakins are drastically down over the last five years. In many areas of town, armed robbery is a thing of the past. The students did so well that they outgrew the school. I resigned my teaching position and took the group off campus. I wrote a book about my experiences."

"Which has sold twenty-five million copies. Not too bad!"

"Not too bad," Sterling smiled. "The mayor read my book, and was convinced enough to give me a new job. I've been advising him on issues of violent crime. We've talked strategy, discussed police budgets, ordinances, all the things I could never get on the inside of before. He's a fast learner." He winked. "Now the mayor is coming to the end of his term and wants to make sure that the changes we've begun will carry on. He thinks I'm the one to do it. I'm just trying to live up to his vision—and mine."

Linda moved on. "Yesterday your finance manager resigned. This is the first obstacle in an otherwise picture-perfect campaign. Can you tell us what happened?"

Sterling sighed, looked down for a beat. "Thomas Sutton was one of my most trusted colleagues. He'd been with me since the very beginning. He was a student of mine, in fact. I would like to say that it was a simple disagreement. But I can't."

Erin caught her breath and cocked her pen over a blank page. *He's going off script.*

"I don't want to give you a politician's answer. I'm going to be honest and open with the public, because my position—the one I have now and the one I hope to be elected to—is based on trust. The truth is, Linda, Thomas was a little too

committed to the cause. He wanted to falsify our contribution records—to make it look like a larger percentage of our corporate donations had come from individuals instead. That’s an oversimplification, but the important thing is that no wrong was actually done. I dismissed him immediately because I will not tolerate any appearance of impropriety. Thomas Sutton violated my trust and the trust of everyone who works for my cause.”

Difference of opinion indeed, Erin thought, scribbling fast. So that’s what was bugging him the other day.

John Sterling looked directly into the camera, and as though he was answering her question, continued in what Erin knew was his professorial voice. “I hate to damage the reputation of a former associate. I was going to insist that the public respect his privacy. But yesterday, after being terminated, Mr. Sutton attempted to extort money from the organization. He claimed to have altered our records to make us appear guilty of fraud, even though we are not. I cannot protect his reputation any longer, because he put the integrity of all my employees at risk.”

Erin almost tore an acid-free page from her notebook as she flipped it and kept writing. *The bastard. Selling something you believe in—is that what he thought I meant?*

Sterling continued. “I want to emphasize that no harm was actually done. I’ve opened the books to outside experts, and they assure me that every detail is aboveboard.”

“What about Sutton?” Linda wanted to know. “He could have derailed your campaign. What would you like to see happen to him?”

I have a couple of ideas, Erin thought.

“I’ve thought about it carefully,” Dr. Sterling said. “I’m not going to press any charges, Linda. He’s guilty of misjudging my character, but he was stopped before he could do any real damage. He thought I was someone who would bend the rules to get ahead. That’s not who I am.”

The speechwriter found herself speechless. The boss's response was entirely too gracious. She herself would have thrown the book at Thomas Sutton. And a few other things, too. *I respected him. It just goes to show that you never know who a person really is.*

"Sears speaking."

"Bill, it's Thomas. Don't hang up, OK?"

"Look, Sutton, why do you keep calling me? You've got nothing on the mayor. Leave the guy alone already."

"How does he do it, Bill? His approval numbers are in the 90s. Nobody dares say a bad word about the guy. He's squeaky clean. He's too clean. And I'm telling you, he's lying about why he fired me."

"96 percent approval, to be exact. Crime is way down. People are talking about a run for Congress. You want to go up against all that because you guys got a call one day from someone claiming to be his long-lost mother? I don't. Even if I believed you weren't planning to cook the books like he said." Bill Sears ground his teeth and wished, for what had to be the two-hundredth time, that someone else had picked up the phone three years ago when Sutton had started calling the paper.

Sutton groaned. "I told you what really happened. When Sterling heard about that call, he told me to pay her off, keep her quiet until after the election and then he'd deal with it. I decided I couldn't do that. I asked him straight out if she was any relation. Then he fired me."

"OK, Sutton, what if you're telling the truth, and the woman's right? Then the mayor's got a mother he doesn't want anything to do with. So what? Families have disagreements. All politicians have secrets, but they're not all worth exposing. And I checked your story, way back when. I called every Sterling in the Charleston phone book. No one will admit ever talking to you."

"That was yesterday, Bill. I talked to her again today."

Sutton's voice was triumphant. He'd been waiting to drop this little nugget. Sears sighed. "Go on, I'm listening."

"Back then, I tried calling her back, several times. I could never get her to answer the phone. I figured Sterling went ahead and paid her off himself. Anyway, she called me this morning, and confirmed that. He talked to her, convinced her he was no relation, gave her some money to keep quiet. She wouldn't say how much."

“So she went back to looking for her kid. She read Sterling’s book, and it said he joined the Marines in the fall of 1980, the same year her son went missing.”

“But if he’s not her son, what’s he have to do with anything?”

“She was looking through news archives from around the time her son disappeared, hunting for unsolved deaths, stuff like that. She didn’t find anything solid—but one thing she did find was a double homicide on the last night she saw her son. A bad drug deal. The dealer was shot and the buyer was stabbed. Apparently they did each other. The buyer was a kid about her son’s age, and was involved in a domestic shooting earlier that same day. The dad came home drunk and picked a fight, but the kid got to Dad’s gun. The same gun that was used on the dealer.”

“I still don’t see the connection, Thomas.”

“She says the case was closed fast because it was two birds with one stone. A drug dealer was off the street, a domestic crime was solved. The gun and the prints checked out. But no money was found at the scene.”

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“Bill, call me when you get this. We need to talk about your story.”

Sears deleted his editor’s third voicemail and went back to his typing. The hotel air was stale and the light was fading. He'd recorded his interviews and notes, but preferred to hack out as much of a draft as possible before leaving the scene of a story. The hotel was a block from the old crime scene, and the neighborhood hadn’t gotten any better in the last twenty-eight years.

After the conversation with Sutton three days ago, he’d taken a trip down to Charleston, interviewed the Sterling woman, and seen photos of her missing son. He’d pulled Sterling’s Marine Corps record and found that he had indeed joined in 1980—weeks after the murder—with the minimum paperwork, and no next of kin listed. He’d been unable to find anyone still on the Charleston police force who remembered the double homicide. He’d scored a look at the case file, but the photos of the dead that he was hoping for were absent.

Before working the city desk, Sears had cut his journalist’s teeth on the crime beat. It hadn’t taken him long to learn that a drug crime with no money was not a drug crime at all. The police had concluded that the bodies had been picked over by a scavenger, but in that case—why leave the drugs that were worth so much

money? Add the missing crime scene photos to the recipe, and you got the distinct aroma of coverup.

In short, he had a story.

When the last ray of sunlight had deserted his window, he closed his laptop and opened his phone.

"What's up, boss?"

"Pack up your stuff and get back to town, Bill. Your story's going on ice."

"Why? Everything I have checks out. It could be huge."

"We got word today that the mayor's planning a run for Senate next year. And it looks like your primary source is on his opponent's payroll."

"What?"

"We got a tip that Thomas Sutton's been receiving money from the incumbent. It's rock solid. Which makes your coverup circumstantial at best, and a total fabrication at worst. Either way, you've got a bigger story now."

"They're projecting the race for you. Congratulations, professor."

John Sterling froze halfway through the lobby, steps from the car waiting to take him to his victory party. "Good evening, Thomas. Should I be calling the police?"

The younger man sat behind him in a leather armchair, beneath a floor lamp. His features were worn prematurely thin, like a garment that had been ironed too many times. "What's the point? You proved I can't touch you. What more can you do to me?"

"I did what I had to do, Thomas. I always have. For my cause and my family."

Thomas Sutton gave a mirthless bark. "Your family? What about that poor woman in Charleston? What about *her* family?"

Sterling stiffened and turned partly towards his accuser. "Thomas, all your snooping around her son's death found nothing. The reporter you sent after me found nothing. If anyone caused that woman harm, it was the two of you. I helped her by taking care of you."

"You admit that you set me up, then. You knew I wasn't on the take from your opponent. You made all that up. He had nothing to do with this. At least Sears got a good story out of it. I got my life taken away." Sutton's words spilled out faster, his voice plaintive. "I was happy working for you, you know. You gave me a purpose, and then you took it from me. For what? For doing the right thing? For refusing to make a pointless payoff?" Sutton leaned forward, gripping the arms of the chair.

"That was an investment in the greater good, Thomas," said Sterling, slipping into a lecturing tone. "We were at a crucial moment in our first campaign. We couldn't afford even the appearance of impropriety. You knew these things. I hoped you'd be a team player. Sometimes the right thing is to do a little wrong."

"I couldn't accept that then, *professor*, and I can't accept it now. I don't get how the man who taught me so much—history, business, how to make a difference—could stand there and say that with a straight face. You may not be a politician, sir, but as a liar, you've got them all beat. Enjoy your party. Oh, and by the way: her son is officially missing. Not dead."

Sterling turned back toward the door, his voice cold. "Thomas, in a curious way, you've turned out to be one of my best students."

He threw the light switch as he left, leaving Thomas Sutton sitting in darkness save for the small circle cast by the lamp.

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The man known as John Sterling sat alone in the shadows in the back of his official car, sipping ice water.

It was so close now.

Years of planning and sacrifice were about to pay off on a monumental scale. First celebrity, then a city, now a national office—even a master planner like himself could barely fit his mind around the possibilities from here. He took pride in his ability to always look forward and move forward—the past was only the road you took to get to the future—but the troubling encounter in the lobby with Sutton fueled his memory.

His clumsy coverup had held over the years; there had been only the matter of an old woman and some photos that needed to disappear. By the time that came up, much later, he had the resources and was skilled at minimizing unintended consequences.

He barely remembered the boy he'd been, thirty years ago, fleeing his father's booze-soaked, mercurial regime. It had been easy to stash the man's gun and provoke him into a fight. He'd known just what buttons to push. The man had destroyed himself, really; he had only provided the bullet. It had been somewhat less easy to dispatch the silly rich junkie and his supplier, but he'd needed money and an identity to vanish into the refuge of military service. He'd later given most of the money to a street punk, who rose to his own kind of power as a gang leader. They'd done each other more than a few favors over the years; he was useful for certain tasks and excellent at keeping his mouth shut.

In all his time studying and teaching history, he'd seen a few certain paths to greatness. The truly great man had the stomach to do what the next man wouldn't. He'd also seen firsthand the difference between his Marine superiors who were loved and those who just wore more rank insignia. John Sterling would take love over fear anytime. He built the core of his army by winning the hearts of some im-

pressionable college students. But to be loved by millions—for that he needed celebrity, and a cause to champion.

Each sacrifice was an essential step on the path.

It took years, but he rid himself of the nightmares. The only remnants of that night were the memories of his car, and the damned song. *Iris*.

He no longer thought about the moment he said goodbye for the last time, or the moment he'd opened his smashed front door knowing what he would find. Even the blood and the image of their ruined faces against the floor had mostly faded. But the song had never left his mind. *Iris* playing on the radio as he drove past the parked car, full of gang members. He had only hesitated for two or three beats before flashing his lights and sealing the fates of his wife and child. He had never regretted the decision; it had made him. But the Goo Goo Dolls would not leave his mind; he heard the melody in his sleep, and loud as a scream in his head every time he woke up.

It was a small enough price to pay for where he was going.