

## Die Hard Fan

*Sequel to Love, Your Biggest Fan*

*By Terri Nixon*

*Message Board at [www.stevesargent.com](http://www.stevesargent.com).*

**STEVESGIRL** – Has anyone heard how he is? I'm still in shock... been a wreck since it happened. You guys are all that's held me together.

**CLAIRE1982** – OMG I just heard and came right here... how could this happen? How could someone get a gun in there?????? The show was so awesome, to have it end like this... I just can't get my head around it. ☹

**SARGENT-OF-MY-HEART** – He's OK!! They updated the front page. Sorry I couldn't come here before, guys...I've just been in total shock. Crying for days. Most people don't understand, but I know you all know exactly how I feel. Suzy.

**STEVESGIRL** – Oh, thank God... I've been praying so hard for him.

Suzy – welcome back {{hugs}} I've missed you. I know what you mean, people "outside" don't really get it – it's not like Stevo's riding high anymore, but we love him sooo much. I saw the announcement on the homepage. They took him out of ICU and he's in his own room now. Poor Krysten must have been going insane. ☹ Good to have you back, Suze ~

Teesha.

**KIDSARGENT** – I'm GLAD the bitch that did it is dead. Anyone else reckon it was that weird Brit who called herself Janesargent?

**STEVESGIRL** – Certain of it. God, when I think we were so nice to her. If she was in the room with me now I'd rip her heart out and feed it to her. After I let Steve and Krysten dance on it.

**SARGENT-OF-MY-HEART** – Thanks, Teesha. It's good to be here where we all feel the same. Thank God he's going to be okay. I actually had the camera on him when it happened...I was just holding it way up and clicking. I even have a picture of him falling but I can't look at it. ☹

**CRAZY4STEVE33** – How could anyone want to hurt Steve? He's such a nice guy as well as being a mindblowing talent. I don't know what else to say here, but is anyone up 4 a chat? We should get this out of our system. Maybe cry a little if we need to.

**KIDSARGENT** – Yeah, I'm up for that. Meet you in the chat room?

**STEVESGIRL** –I'll be there.

**SARGENT-OF-MY-HEART** – Count me in.

## PART ONE.

### Chicago, Illinois

The sense of urgency hit Krysten as she turned back towards Steve's room and she began to run, heart hammering as the corridor seemed to stretch impossibly. It was like a freakish dream but there, finally, was Steve's door, resisting her frantic pushing until it burst inward in a chilly rush. She stumbled into the room, taking in the only sight that mattered; Steve, alive.

But he looked wrong. When she left he had been sleeping, his face pale against paler sheets but calm. Now his face was swollen-red, his hands raised to his throat, eyes wide and bulging. Krysten cried out, horrified, and Steve went limp, dragging shallow breaths and staring around him in terror.

Krysten's steps towards the bed were shaky, her heart slowly returning to normal as she watched the high colour in Steve's face fading. He still looked terrified, but at least he could breathe again.

"Jesus, what happened?" she managed as she sat on the bed, taking one of his hands.

Steve gripped her tight. "She was here," he whispered, "that crazy girl –"

“Honey, I told you, she’s dead.” Krysten tried to sound calm as Steve shook his head.

“I know, but she ... she came back. Said she wanted to take me with her.”

The fear crept back; he truly believed it.

“Steve, you’ve been through a lot and there’s a long way to go. But it was just a dream.”

“Oh God no, *you* have to believe me!” There was panic in his voice and Krysten blanched at the raw sound of it; this was a new and frightening development.

“I think we should call somebody, you could really hurt yourself.”

“It wasn’t me! Krysten, please... don’t leave me alone in here!”

“Hush, I’m not going anywhere, I’ll call someone.”

She reached for the buzzer and kept her eyes on his as she pressed it. His childlike fear disturbed her; it had to have been one hell of a vivid dream.

The doctor’s words sent relief to the coldest parts of her and, watching Steve’s face she could tell he was reacting the same way.

“Mr Sargent; you have to understand what a powerful thing trauma can be; It wasn’t only your body that was hit by this, your mind has been just as shaken up., dealing with the fact of it happening as well as trying to heal. This kind of attack is going to have an effect in most cases but we never know what to expect. In your case it was a more than usually vivid dream, and there may well be more. It wouldn’t concern me unduly, except that you appear liable to injure yourself...”

Steve was looking almost embarrassed now, but while Krysten felt for him, she’d take embarrassed over terrified any day. She squeezed his hand, and he found a smile – it was small but it was real.

An icy draught brushed the back of her neck again and she shivered and turned to frown at the door; it was closed. She looked towards the window, then turned her attention back as the doctor continued,

“I’m going to suggest you remain under observation for a while until you start to come to terms with what’s happened. In the meantime you need good, healing sleep. I’ll send the nurse in to give you a little something that might help, and if Mrs, ah, Miss, ah...your lady here would like to stay that’s fine, otherwise we can have someone sit with you –“

“I’ll stay,” Krysten said immediately, and was rewarded with another tired smile.

It was only a moment before a nurse appeared and Krysten was banished to the chair at the back of the room. She rubbed her arms as the draught brushed by her again, and once more looked over at the window; it must be open a fraction, she’d close it later. She looked back at the bed, where the nurse was checking pulse and pupil, bandage and bedding.

“How’s the pain, Mr Sargent?”

“Okay as long as I don’t breathe...”

Krysten smiled at the thin humour and, catching his eye, glimpsed an echo of the man she had known before the freak with the gun had torn their lives apart.

She could remember the end of the show vividly, the fans really letting rip, Steve turning to her in shared triumph. She had given him a thumbs up sign, and then something in the crowd had pulled her gaze... one girl. Thin, sick-looking, her face pale and expressionless. She raised her arms and Krysten felt her blood freeze into ice-chips, sharp in her veins, as she saw the gun. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Steve turn back to see what she was looking at, and then the gun had gone off.

Steve, hit low in the chest, smashed back into the drum kit, every sound magnified by the equipment, his groan echoing across the stunned and suddenly silent crowd. For second Krysten couldn’t even move; her breath was locked in her throat, her muscles turned to water.

Then, grabbing at a speaker for support she used it to propel herself towards where Steve lay sprawled in the wreckage, the front of his shirt a drenched and glistening

deep red. Aware of the security guards landing on the girl, pushing her violently to the ground, Krysten knew with dazzling clarity, what it meant to wish death on another human being... she wanted that girl to die, with Steve's pain reflected and magnified a hundredfold.

She had dropped to her knees, frantically pressing her face to Steve's chest, her fingers to his throat, looking for signs of life. Then, pulled away none too gently, she could only watch in mounting panic as the paramedics worked over him, pronouncing him alive but critically injured before whisking him away for emergency surgery.

At the hospital she had waited in frozen agony, her heart stopping every time someone approached her, only to resume its light, fluttering beat when they passed by. The security people had spoken with her, explaining that the girl had been taken into custody, that she was sick – something wrong in her head... Krysten hadn't cared. Then she heard the girl had died... she still didn't care; she was hollowed out with terror.

Finally they had told her. Steve was going to be alright. The bullet had struck him below the heart, lodging near the spine, which had made the operation long and difficult. But he was out of danger and the relief had manifested itself as a wash of sobs that she couldn't control.

Two days after the shooting and still unconscious he was moved out of ICU. When he had finally woken, confused and distraught, Krysten had sat with him, talking softly until he had fallen back to sleep, and only then had she had left to call family and friends.

"I've given him a sedative," the nurse told her, jerking her out of the memory of that sudden certainty that something had been wrong, "he needs sleep. Don't disturb him."

The nurse left the room and Krysten sat back down on the bed next to Steve.

"Nice lady," he observed drily.

“The best,” Krysten sighed, “we’re gonna be okay, right?”

Steve nodded, reaching one hand up to brush her cheek, but the sedative was taking hold and his eyes drifted shut.

He slept.

**PART TWO.**

Steve blinked in the sunlight reflecting off the hospital forecourt, putting up a hand to shield his eyes as he felt Krysten's hand close around his. He heard shouts, whining cameras and then a bump on his cheek a microphone was shoved into his face;

"Steve, how are you feeling?"

"How do you feel about the girl dying like that?"

"Had you met Jane in person, Steve?"

"Steve, to me!"

"Will you be appearing on any TV shows now you're famous again?"

Steve glanced at Krysten, amazed at the last question, she shook her head and helped him walk a little faster towards the cab she had waiting.

"You know what it's like. There was no playing this down."

"Yeah, I remember when I was famous for the music," he mused. Krysten squeezed his hand and he smiled wearily down at her.

"Yesterday's news, right?"

She nodded.

"They'll forget soon enough."

Driving home, Steve tried not to wince as the car jolted over the uneven road. He didn't want to upset Krysten, who hadn't left his side for more than a few minutes at a time since his... episode.

*Episode.*

The word the hospital staff had used, not something he would have called it. 'Nightmare' seemed too thin a word, and he was unable to find one that really worked; the memory still made him catch his breath; the horror of her appearance, the furious words his own mind had put into her mouth. He was still unable to understand why he had rejected Krysten's jealousy theory. It just hadn't sat right with him and his

mind had absorbed that doubt, screaming it at him through Jane's empty, howling voice.

And now he was home. Krysten helped him out of the car but just the sight of his own front door seemed to lend him strength, and he took a deep, satisfied breath as he stepped inside the cool hallway. On the hall table he saw a pile of mail and a large, unopened box.

"Fan mail." Krysten smiled as he took a closer look.

"Seems a helluva lot. Birthday cards in there too?"

"I guess. And get well cards too, they've been pouring in lately. The big box of stuff arrived the day after... uh, anyway, I didn't like to go through it, thought it'd give you something easy to do. Because you're going to rest, aren't you?"

Steve grinned at the sudden steel in her voice, and put his arm around her.

"Count on it!"

"Good, because I'd hate to have to kick your ass for being a bad patient," she mumbled into his shoulder, and he pretended not to notice the dampness on his shirt.

Later Steve pushed open the door to his study. Krysten had brought the box of unopened mail in and left it on the coffee table, otherwise the room was exactly as he had left it the night before the show. He took a hesitant step into the room, waiting for the old feeling to sweep over him; of needing to write, to sing, to take what was in his head and set it down somewhere, anywhere, so it could never be lost. That feeling didn't come.

He looked at the framed prints on his walls; Sinatra, Lennon, Elvis... others. All the greats - musicians by whom he set his own standards. He shivered as he realised that most of them had gone, and most before their time. He turned away to the sofa and sat down to sort through the mail.

On arriving home, all he'd wanted to do was climb into his own bed and sleep for a month, then of course, he'd have to deal with announcing his retirement, and all the

guilt that would bring from those who'd followed his career through all its hits and misses. But now, going through some of the letters from friends and the more familiar of his fans, he began to feel a little of his energy seeping back. The regular fan letters made him smile, and he made a mental promise to try and answer each of them now he wasn't working non-stop.

He heard familiar music from the kitchen where Krysten was preparing a light supper, and grinned; even with the real thing right here down the hall she had to play his music while she worked – claimed his voice made her forget how much she hated cooking and cleaning. She was nuts.

He picked up a small, neatly wrapped package with a colourful sticker and little smiling faces all over it. His grin broadened; he already knew who it was from, and as he unwrapped it and the slim, birthday wrapped box fell out he saw he was right.

“Happy Birthday, Stevo! Keep Rockin' your Sargent's Army! Love and admiration as always, Teesha and Suzy – AKA StevesGirl and Sargent-Of-My-Heart.”

He opened the box and saw a beautifully engraved paper-knife;

“To Steve Sargent – may you be opening fan mail forever!”

Steve turned the slender blade over and over in his hands, smiling at the inscription and the idea behind it. Maybe retirement wasn't what he wanted, just something that he had grasped at as a way of punishing himself. Looking around the study at his piles of tapes, folders full of songs, four different kinds of guitars leaning against walls and desks, the piano in the corner, he knew he wasn't ready to give it all up. Maybe he could concentrate on writing for other people, he'd been pretty successful at that so far.

In the kitchen, the music went up a notch – it was almost as if Krysten could hear his thoughts, and was trying to persuade him that what he loved doing, he should continue to do. Maybe she was right...

He picked up the next letter from the box and abruptly felt his breath crimped off; the postmark was Manchester, England, and the handwriting screamed off the envelope at him.

Her.

Steve stared at the letter realising by the post date that the letter had been mailed almost two weeks before the shooting. He wanted to laugh at himself for over-reacting, but he had the same feeling about this letter that he'd had in his chat room the night before the show; a prickling horror with no focus but his own intuition.

He tried to manoeuvre his fingers under the corner of the seal but he was shaking too hard.

“Jesus!” he threw the envelope down and rubbed his hands hard across his face, then his attention was taken by the birthday gift, now sitting back in its suede box.

He took the letter-opener and slid it along the top of the envelope, its brand new blade slitting the paper easily with a tiny hiss. He reached in and withdrew the single sheet.

Dear Steve,

I hope this reaches you in time, I want you to get it before the Ravinia Show so you know I'll be there, waiting for you.

I need you to know something to help you understand the depth of my feelings for you; the fact that I'm dying doesn't scare me anymore, I have no family – at least, none who care. But knowing that, after I'm gone, you would have continued to give those others what rightly belongs to me, that's what I dreaded. Until I realised what I had to do.

My private nurse will be bringing me to the States so I can attend your last ever show, since I cannot travel alone anymore. I'll be in the crowd, giving you the support only I can truly give, and then afterwards we'll leave together.

Until the show then, I send you all my love,

Your biggest fan

*Jane.*

Steve dropped the letter, staring in mute horror. Then he closed his eyes and the vision slammed into his head again; huge, shrieking, horrifically solid - and the memory of those cold fingers settling on his throat...

*It had all been real.*

A light, girlish giggle burst in his ear and he cried out, lurching to his feet, still gripping the paper knife. But as he moved he awoke a flare of pain, and he fought to overcome it while he stared wildly around the study, breathing hard, fear speeding his heart until it felt as if it was spinning, loose and wild in his chest. The pain increased, he might almost have been back on the stage, lying amid the debris, sucking desperately at what he'd thought were his last breaths.

He bent over, trying to deny what was happening but he could feel the icy chill brush his skin as the letter was shoved at him. He closed his eyes against it, turned his head and heard the paper flutter to the ground.

"Well you can't say you weren't warned, *Stevo*." The hollow voice mocked, the emphasis on his nickname coating the word with acid. "You were supposed to come with me - "

"Get out. Just. Get. Out..." Steve's words came out disjointed and harsh. He realised the music had stopped, and his fear switched from himself to Krysten; what might Jane do to her if she came in?

He felt a plucking at the paper-knife and almost dropped it out of pure terror, but somehow his grip tightened instead, sweeping it out around him because, dear God, if she touched him now his heart would fail him.

"I'm not strong enough," Jane sounded frustrated now, even sulky. Was she expecting sympathy?

"Then why are you here?" Steve straightened slightly, finding strength of his own in her admission. There was no reply and, as the pain eased further, Steve was able to control his breathing and stand up straight. He turned to stare at every corner of the room. Watching for movement, dreading seeing it, although he sensed she was no longer there. Where he thought she had gone to his mind couldn't even begin to explore.

The door clicked open and he jerked around, relaxing as he saw Krysten, balancing a tray on one hand. She put the tray down immediately and came over to him.

"Steve?"

"I'm fine. Just a little breathless."

"You look like crap."

"Thanks. I love you too."

"No, I mean it, you want me to call the doctor?" Krysten put a hand to his forehead, then on his chest, "it's like a steam hammer in there. Any pain?"

"Some. I'm ready for some of that medication."

"On the dinner tray. What's that?"

Steve saw her eyes dip to the object in his hand and he held it up, his own eyes registering something else, something that clenched his mind for a split second. Then he focussed again.

"Uh, gift from Teesha and Suzy," he managed, "neat, huh? Nice inscription too. Dinner looks great, let's not eat in here though..." He was babbling but somehow it was hard to stop; his screaming nerves had taken control of his mouth.

And the letter had gone.

Trembling, doubting his own clarity of thought, he had to get out of that room, give himself time to come to terms with the fact that he wasn't over the worst at all.

After all, the alternative was too shocking to contemplate.

As the days passed with no further incident, Steve understood he might have pushed his recovery too fast, that he should probably have stayed in hospital longer as they'd suggested... he understood that the trauma of coming home, of reading heartfelt letters from a selection of his "biggest fans" might have pushed his mind as relentlessly as he'd pushed his body. He understood all that. But what he *knew*, beyond the slightest doubt, was that it had happened. This knowledge was something that lived at the core of him – he might be able, even compelled, to tell it as a story years from now, pretending it to be myth, but the midnight part of him would always acknowledge its truth.

But she was gone; it was time to start back on the real life road.

He started logging on to his message board and chat room again, and as the tearful, shocked messages of the days and weeks following the shooting gave way to relief, and then the old banter and discussions of his music, the time of doubt and terror fell steadily behind them all. He was ready.

A month after the Ravinia show, Steve Sargent went into his study, for the first time without feeling the compulsion to constantly check the position of everything in the room. There was a huge pile of new fan mail on the table, it had flooded in since Ravinia, and he would go through it later. Meanwhile there was work to be done...

He took down one of the folders of half-finished songs and pulled out a sheet of manuscript paper, scanning it as he lifted it out, wondering how it would feel to immerse himself in it once more. If he could do it.

He lay the sheet carefully on the coffee table with a sharpened pencil across it, then picked up his favourite guitar and settled on the edge of his stool. The first chord he struck jarred horribly and he winced, then took a deep breath and did it again. This time he felt the old thrill as the scribbled notes on the paper came to life under his fingers. He hummed gently, almost under his breath as he made changes, crossed out, added words... he was back doing what he loved.

With renewed life he worked, and when Krysten shouted that she was heading out for an hour, he smiled; now he could really try it out. He waited for the car to disappear around the bend in the drive, then picked up the guitar again and, clearing his throat he set the tape running.

For the first time in a month that had lasted a hundred years, Steve gave his voice freedom, the hesitation falling away as he hit the notes with only the slightest tremble, and that only for a moment

He played the new song over and over, shutting out everything except the way it sounded, and even to his own super-critical ear it sounded good. He was vaguely aware that he was smiling as he sang, despite the sad theme of the song, and it was when he caught himself making a mental note to make sure he didn't do that on stage, that he realised he would perform it live. Sometime, somewhere, he would play to his crowd again.

Then cold lips touched the back of his neck.

For a second he locked up solid then, when hands dropped onto his shoulders, he lunged forwards off the guitar stool, hearing it crash to the floor behind him.

"No! You're not going to perform again," her voice came from somewhere dark and desperate. Turning, he realised that she was no disembodied voice this time, she really was there, exactly the way she had appeared in the hospital.

“How did you...how can you...” Steve gestured at her overblown form, his terror mounting at the realisation of her ability to crush him where he stood.

“You did it, Steve. You sang for me – “

“Not for you, never for you!”

“Then who? Surely not for the strumpet-bitch-whore – “

“Stop it!” Anger was working for him now.

“Where is she anyway?”

“Out.”

“Good thing for her.”

Steve went cold. “What do you mean?” his whisper wiped out all the good his anger had done.

“It’s clear that whatever you do, you do for her,” Jane said, “so if you won’t come with me I’ll have to take her instead. You won’t have the heart to sing anymore. It’s you or her. You choose.”

“NO!”

Even as he cried out he heard the car outside the study, and broke towards the window. He reached for the catch to release it; he had to warn Krysten...

Fingers fumbling, he felt icy movement behind him and felt rock hard arms fasten around him, pulling tight as he grabbed at the window catch, cutting off his breath until his fingers tore loose, unable to hold on any longer. He tumbled back with Jane underneath him, gasping and flailing his arms in the slim hopes of breaking the agonising stranglehold on his waist.

Then she was gone in a rush of frigid fury, and he let out a deep groan, his forehead pressed against the cool leather of his guitar stool. He stayed like that for a moment - until he realised, with a sickening jolt, why she had left him.

“Krysten,” he whispered, struggling to his feet...

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“Hey! How you getting on?” Krysten called as she dumped her keys on the hall table. She hooked her coat on the rack, waiting for his response. There was nothing. Frowning, she pushed open the study door and peeped around. A second later an icy hand closed on her wrist and she was jerked forwards, her teeth shutting hard together, catching her tongue. Her yell of pain and fright was cut off at the sight of Steve stumbling towards her, his face white, stricken. The door slammed shut behind Krysten and only then did she glimpse the owner of the cold, marble-hard hand clamped to her wrist.

She screamed. So loud she thought her throat would tear, and through it she heard Steve’s cry of anguish, but she couldn’t look, not again. The horrifically tall creature clamped a hand across her mouth and Krysten gagged on the dusty smell, and greasy, slippery feel of the skin, but still couldn’t open her eyes. The next moment she was slammed up against door, her breath knocked out in a grunt of pain and terror. She squeezed her eyes shut tighter, her own hands raised to try and rip the oily, putrid obstruction from her mouth. She tasted blood where she had bitten her tongue, heard her own pitiful whimpering, and then in a moment of clarity she realised what was happening;

Jane!

Steve had been right; no hallucination – even as the thoughts ordered themselves in her silently shrieking head, Krysten felt one hand find her throat and the other leave her mouth to join it. The pressure intensified, the pain spiked deep, and Krysten opened her eyes opened at last, pleading for her life.

“JANE!”

Krysten heard the voice from a great distance; all was black with tiny shooting lights at the corners of her vision... the pain had robbed her of the strength to fight. But then the voice came again, and it was commanding; the killing grip eased as her attacker turned to pay attention. Abruptly the hands fell away and Krysten fell, sobbing to her knees, retching, clutching at her throat, hissing thin little breaths.

“Go on, do it!” Jane’s voice, and it was the first time Krysten had heard it but she felt the terror ripple through her anew at the hollow, triumphant shriek. She raised her head the little she could, and blinked rapidly to clear the tears that flooded her eyes and spilled over onto her cheeks. What she saw chilled her far more than any ghostly hand; Steve was kneeling, and...

“No!” she tried to scream, but heard no more than a hoarse whisper. Steve looked at her, she knew he was trying to tell her sorry in a hundred ways, but there were no words. He adjusted his grip on the paper knife he held over his heart, and turned his gaze back on Jane.

“I’ll go with you, just... leave her alone,” he said, his voice catching; he was terrified, Krysten saw, but he would do it. He looked at her again, then, as if he wanted to carry her image with him, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, his knuckles white on the engraved, silver handle.

Filled with a fury she had only experienced once before Krysten lunged at Jane, punching at her, trying to ignore the disgusting sponginess and gritty-slimy skin. Her blows released a vile, spoiled meat stench that wafted over her like a rotting blanket, making her stomach clench.

Jane caught at her hands, shoving her back against the door again.

“If he dies, I’m coming too, you won’t separate us,” Krysten said, her voice regaining strength, and Steve opened his eyes again in shock.

“No, you can’t. This would mean nothing – “

“Then don’t do it!”

“You don’t get it, “ Jane screamed suddenly, “you *never* got it, bitch-whore. ” She turned from Krysten to Steve, and Krysten sensed she was confused but she didn’t know if that was a good sign or not.

“It wasn’t you, you never mattered!” Jane told her finally, sounding surer now, bending at the waist and gusting foul air into Krysten’s face, “I just couldn’t let – “

“Yeah, you couldn’t let the world have my music when you couldn’t,” Steve sounded weary now, as if he’d heard it too many times.

“What?” Krysten was astonished at the naïve thinking, surely Steve didn’t really believe that? “That’s total bullshit, Jane, you’re lying to yourself as well as to Steve.”

“I am NOT!” Jane reached for her again and this time when she grabbed for Krysten’s throat, Krysten caught her bony, grit-slimy wrists and was able to stop her from squeezing. She felt the thrill of hope as she realised Jane was losing something; strength? *Substance?*

There was a sudden flurry of icy movement, and, letting go of Krysten, Jane pushed the button on the tape recorder to play the looped tape. Krysten seized her chance and started towards Steve, heart racing with panic and hope.

She didn’t get far. Jane stooped beside her with freakish speed and seized a clump of her hair, dragging it back so that her head was tilted up into the grey-blotched, rotting mess that was Jane’s face.

Steve’s first notes filled the room, hesitation giving way to increasing confidence, and as Krysten heard the sudden joy of release in that voice she felt tears burn her eyes.

“That music is what’s bringing me back here!” Jane screamed at her. “I can’t go, while that music plays; even your stupid CD almost did it on the first night Steve came back! But it wasn’t enough, I wasn’t strong enough; he couldn’t see me!”

“But why do you have to kill him?” Krysten could feel the strength returning to the hands that held her, and it took all her courage not to try and wrest herself away.

“His music kept me alive, and his music is keeping me here – no more Steve, no more music...”

“You’re either lying or stupid,” Krysten said, keeping her voice deliberately cold.

Jane’s face contorted further and she clawed her fingers, stabbing them down towards Krysten’s eyes, stopping inches away. Krysten flinched but did not try to pull back or turn her head although her heart lurched with dread. She swallowed hard, hearing the click in her taut throat.

“It’s not just about the music, it’s him. What he’s doing, it’s driving you crazy but you need him to do it! But him giving his life to save mine would prove his love for me. Would that let you *rest in peace*?”

The music stopped briefly as the Steve on the tape picked meditatively at part of the song that had been bothering him. In the relative quiet, Jane again urged Steve to fulfil his promise.

“When you let her go I’ll do it,” he replied, low and calm. It was that calm that told Krysten for certain that he would go through with it, and she had the sudden, intense fear that Jane *might* actually let her go.

But she could feel Jane weakening again, and not just because of the lack of music. Even as she thought that, the song started again and she kept her voice below the sound as she reached up and seized the front of the billowing hospital gown that Jane wore. Steve didn’t need to hear this...

“Take a look around the room, stupid, look at the pictures.”

She watched Jane follow the instruction, and saw the realisation slowly creeping across the ruined features, but she spoke it aloud anyway, to drive the point home.

“No more Steve, no more of his music, right? Right. You never hear Elvis on radio these days, or the Beatles, or Ol’ Blue Eyes, do you? Think again, sister! You’ve already made him halfway famous again, if he kills himself to save me, he’ll be a fucking hero! You won’t be able to turn on the radio without hearing that voice!”

“Stop it!” Jane let go of her, her hands going to her face in confusion, dragging the loose skin down until her eyes looked like pools of congealed blood in the mottled greyness.

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Steve watched, the letter opener held loosely in his hand. The music was too loud, he couldn't hear what was going on, but he saw Jane let Krysten go. Relief shot through him, followed by a gut-slammng bolt of fear. But a promise was a promise, and Krysten wouldn't be safe until Jane was gone.

He raised the knife again, the blood rushing around his body in torrents of adrenalin. He felt sick, dizzy, but at the same time filled with resolve. Turning the blade again, he caught sight of the inscription and felt a twist of regret for the girls who would be hit so hard by this. The tip of the blade pressed through the thin fabric of his shirt, he felt the coldness touch his skin and he wondered, as he had before, if he would have the strength to do it— what if the pain took hold too fast, prevented him from pushing the blade all the way in? He would have to shove hard, once, no hesitation. And pray.

Taking one hand off the handle he wiped sweat onto his jeans, then did the same with the other, trying to control the shaking.

“Okay, step away from her, Jane, I'm ready. “ His voice, trained over the years to rise above background music, carried easily across the room, and he saw Krysten turn to him with panic in her face. Jane also looked at him, and what he saw made him hesitate, hope suddenly sparking in his blood.

Jane stood over Krysten, not moving away – yet at the same time she was further away. It took a moment for Steve to realise she was smaller, closer to natural human size. The music ended, the last sounds on the tape were the crash of Steve's guitar stool, then the hiss of empty tape, then silence.

“Steal the man, the music remains,” Krysten said, turning back to Jane, her voice becoming more gentle, “but you know what else? Even if you could somehow stop the music, the man would still be here. What he’s prepared to do here – is that about music? No. You think you know him? You don’t. This is the man that I know. Only me. And whatever you try to do to us, you’ll never change anything that was between us...”

Steve wanted to go to her as he heard her voice cracking, tears choking her as surely as the hands that had fastened about her throat had done, but he could see the figure standing above her staring at him in dismayed understanding – he couldn’t risk moving now. Instead he spoke.

“Jane, I understand you wanted part of what I had to give all for yourself, I understand something of what you were feeling; there have been people I’ve admired so much I’ve wanted to touch their lives, just for a second, to have them acknowledge my existence. Sometimes it didn’t work out, sometimes it did...” he locked eyes with Krysten briefly but then turned back to Jane.

“You can be sure I’ll never forget you. And not just because of... what happened,” he tried to smile, “but because you made it all the way out to the show, because you wrote me all those letters, because you were my biggest fan.”

He heard the words echo in the room, wondering even to himself how much of it was sincere, but it didn’t matter now; she was fading, her evanescent form losing the awful, mottled-flesh appearance, her hair falling in a light, silky curtain onto shoulders that suddenly seemed squarer, straighter. Her figure was slight again, her eyes and skin glowed briefly and he had a glimpse of what she had been like before her illness, before the death that had taken her so soon after she had fulfilled her terrible intention.

“I was, Steve, I really was,” she whispered, her voice now that of a young girl, the howling shriek no more than an exhausted memory.

"I know. Thank you," he found the smile, from somewhere in his heart he found it, speeding her on her way to wherever she was going now.

And then it was just the two of them, kneeling together in the middle of the room, motionless in the aftermath. Then Krysten leaned over and touched Steve's face, and they both moved at once, holding each other with passionate relief.

"She was wrong, you know," she said at last, when they were finally able to loosen their desperate embrace.

"About what?"

"She wasn't your biggest fan,"

"No? Not sure I'm gonna be able to take any more where that came from," he smiled but she could see the lingering fear in his eyes, echoed, no doubt in her own.

"So who is?" he asked, glancing at the fresh stack of fan mail on the table.

"I am." She smiled up at him, "think you can handle that?"

He gave a soft laugh.

"Guess I could give it a try," he replied, bending his head to kiss her.

### **Manchester, England.**

Wendy paused as she looked around the flat. It had been a month since Jane's death, and the place stank. Musty and horrible. She opened the window and stood in the middle of the room, roll of heavy duty black bin liners in one hand, and sighed.

What kind of family wanted nothing to do with their dead daughter's belongings? Okay, so she was a fruitcake who'd tried to kill some singer, but even so ... And now the landlord had practically begged *her* to do it just because she lived downstairs, though they'd barely even spoken. Well, it might be okay; she might have some decent stuff. There was the computer for starters.

Wendy sighed again and started to bundle clothes and books into the first bin liner. Moving to the small portable stereo she glanced at the stack of CDs next to it, and flipped idly through them. They were all by that Steve Sargent guy of course. The empty cover of one of them caught her eye and she whistled. Wow, this was a nice picture...

"Yummy," Wendy muttered, "You're not bad at all, do you sound as gorgeous as you look?" She pressed the play button on the stereo and picked up the CD cover again; the man in the picture seemed to stare right into her soul, making her shiver, and then the music started...