

Love, Your Biggest Fan.

By Terri Pine

Chicago, Illinois.

“Dear Steve,

I know we’ve never met, but I wanted you to know how much you mean to me, how much you’ve influenced my life and how much I love your music.

I hope that you can send me a little something to hold close to my heart when I think of you.

Love always,

Your biggest fan,

Jane.”

“Close to her heart, my ass!” David laughed as he threw the letter back to his friend. “Close to something sure, but I wouldn’t bet on it being her heart!”

Steve grimaced.

“I prefer to believe what she says, thanks,” he said, scribbling his name on a photograph and stuffing it into the envelope provided by his fan club. “Hey, this one’s over in England. Whaddya know, I guess I do still have fans over there after all.”

He finished scribbling and filling the envelopes, his thoughts wandering as he carried out the mindless task. Krysten; the song he was writing for the Disney film; the book he was currently reading; Krysten; where to have dinner that night; Krysten...and he was unaware of the smile that played across his lips as he worked. Finally he was done and the pile of envelopes was dumped into a large box and despatched back to the fan club for distribution.

Manchester, England. Two weeks later.

A tired-looking girl collected her post from the mat before dragging herself back up the three flights of stairs to her rooms. Halfway up she saw, among the final demands and invitations to renew car insurance she never had, a white envelope postmarked "United States." Her heart clenched, then leapt. Her step grew lighter, quicker. In her rooms once more she sat huddled over the one-bar electric fire, huge sweater pulled down over her knees, and opened the fan club stamped letter with trembling fingers.

She pulled out the picture. An old one, but she knew he looked just as good now and she felt tears pricking her eyes at the sight of him. So beautiful, so strong and proud as he held the guitar aloft, sweat glistening along his forehead and soaking his sleeveless T shirt in patches. Nowadays he wore his hair shorter, but he still had that impish grin and the gorgeous green eyes were still clear and direct.

Jane brought the picture slowly up to her face, tracing the outline of his signature with awe-struck delight, and pressed it against her cheek. She felt sick and elated at the same time. *He* had held this, *he* had taken it and written his name upon it...*he* was all over this glossy picture. She kissed it gently, her tears sliding down her cheeks, puddling off her chin and falling unnoticed onto her thick, woollen jumper.

She pressed the picture close to her heart, rocking back and forth in her cold rooms, warmed by the thought of him.

Steve Sargent didn't make the records he used to. He didn't have the high profile he'd enjoyed since the eighties but now, at thirty eight he was settled in his career, writing and producing other artists and recording his own music when time allowed. He was happy. If he wanted a reminder that he was still moderately popular all he had to do was visit the websites his fans had set up, and the official one run by his fan club. Or check his fan mail.

This evening he had an appointment with the manager of a boy band for whom he was writing, and afterwards he was meeting up with Krysten for dinner...he smiled in anticipation and finished shaving, wiping the foam off his chin with a theatrical flourish. Tonight he would ask her to marry him, although they both knew that it was merely a formality – having been

together for twelve years they knew that they were going to spend the rest of their lives together. But now they wanted children and a proper homelife it was time to make it legal. He couldn't wait.

The appointment took longer than anticipated, and Steve finally took his leave with the contract tucked securely in his pocket; another hit song was already in the making, he knew that. It was a good feeling. Arriving at the restaurant, he paused just inside the entrance to stare at the woman seated alone at the bar. Her long blonde hair was tied neatly back in a french plait, her graceful neck was arched over as she pulled a long sip from her drink, and one leg was hooked over her knee, the skirt slipping enticingly away leaving her smooth bare leg visible almost to the top of her thigh. As he watched her, she lifted her head to look at him. A frank, appraising stare which raised gooseflesh on his arms as he took in the ravishing contrast of blonde hair and deep brown eyes. She smiled slowly, lazily. He walked towards her, and as she stood up to meet him he pulled the contract from his pocket and flicked it with his fingernail.

"Signed, sealed, delivered..."

"I'm yours!" she finished, laughing as she put her arms around his waist. "So it's all settled then?"

"Yup. And I'm playing Ravinia in the fall. Makes sense since BoysBanned are gonna be playing there too."

"Well you'd better make sure that gets onto your website before one of the fans finds out and demands to know why they weren't told," she warned. Steve nodded.

"That can wait til later, I'll e-mail Jimmy when I get back," he promised, taking hold of her and pulling her close. Then, a huge smile on his face he dropped down on one knee right there in the crowded bar and took Krysten's hand.

"Will you marry me?" he asked solemnly. Krysten dragged him upright and, to the amusement of the onlookers, nodded with a mock boredom.

"Yeah, why not?" Then she laughed. "Now *that* better get posted on the site even before the Ravinia details!"

The following morning, Steve found himself with a rare half hour spare, and sat down to e-mail his webmaster the latest news to be posted on his site. He checked the message boards first.

“Oh, shit...too late!” he grunted a few minutes later. Krysten appeared at his elbow, yawning, and passed him a cup of coffee.

“Not the engagement, surely?”

“No, thank god. But someone already posted about the contract, and appearances at Ravinia.”

He pointed to the message at the top of the bulletin board. It was typical of many regarding various snippets of news:

“SARGENTOFMYHEART; Hey, what’s this I hear about Steve teaming up with BoysBanned? I just checked out their official site and it says that Stevo’s writing for them and they’re all gonna be at the Ravinia Festival in Chicago this August!! *whoo hoo* <does a happy dance> Tix for me!!! I’ll keep y’all posted!!!!”

“You’d better mail the webmaster right away,” Krysten said sensibly. Steve slipped his arm around her waist and nuzzled the belt of her robe.

“Now?” he asked plaintively. Krysten grinned lasciviously.

“Well, maybe it can wait half an hour!” she admitted, pulling him to his feet and leading him back to their bedroom.

At last. The internet. Jane sat down at her computer, the unmistakable feeling of being ‘connected’ in more than the traditional sense filling her body – here, at her fingertips, the world that belonged to Steve Sargent. She typed in the address of his website, her heart squeezing painfully as the message on the screen told her she had found it. She stared at the screen, willing the picture to load.

And there he was. A new picture too, with short hair, neat, slender physique, the familiar, amused smile just visible at the corners of his eyes...quickly she scanned the menu at the side of the page, her brow creasing as she realised how much there was to look at. How

would she ever catch up with it all? Finally she pressed the button for the message boards. It would be interesting to see what other fans thought of him now, if there were any still out there.

A moment later she drew a shocked gasp. These people...how could they *possibly* feel the same as she did? They called themselves things like; "Stevesgirl" and "Number One Fan!" Ridiculous, it was obvious that they were just here for fun, not out of any love for Steve...there were even messages that didn't even mention him at all, just some silly conversations about "sargent-of-my-heart's" bloody cat!

Jane swallowed a couple of the pills that made her feel good again, and continued surfing, greedily clicking on pictures and saving them to her computer. She devoured the official site and then found the links page that took her to all the other pages that fans had made.

As she read the dedications on these pages, she grew more and more irritated, although it was laughable really...these people actually believed they loved him! If they knew how much she herself cared they would soon realise that what *they* felt was minor interest in comparison. With her it was the real thing. How many of *these* girls had to fight back tears at the mere thought of him, or panicked when, unable to find any information about him anywhere, wondered if he were even still alive? Her mouse clicking became quicker and angrier as she read of the places these so-called 'fans' had been to see Steve in concert, and even met him afterwards. And there were the photographs to prove it. Jane saved those too, vowing to learn how to edit them as soon as possible so that only Steve remained in each picture.

At the end of the morning, when her eyes were too tired to see properly, she felt she had caught up at last and paid another visit to the message board to see if anything new had happened. It had. Here at the very end, was news at last; Steve was apparently going to be writing a song for some boy band she'd never heard of. *And* he was going to be appearing at the Ravinia Festival in his home town! Jane drew a deep, shaking breath and took two more pills. She was going to be at that show, no matter that it would use up her whole savings account... what had she been saving for, if not this?

She went back to the main introduction page to find the 'news' section, and immediately saw that an announcement had just been made. As Jane read it her vision darkened, her hand clutched the mouse convulsively. She read it again. And again...

The summer went by quickly. The Ravinia festival crept closer and the song that Steve had written for BoysBanned sailed happily up the charts on both sides of the Atlantic. He began to get more and more letters, his popularity increasing as word got around that the "eighties pop hero" was the man behind the boys' latest hit single.

"Dear Steve.

If you only knew what you do to me; when I think of you, or see a picture of you it makes me cry. You are everything to me, and I wish with all my heart that there was something I could do to make you understand. I just heard you're marrying Krysten, I hope she realises how lucky she is, but I know I love you more than she does. She doesn't realise what she has.

Please, please write back to me...just to see your name makes me want to cry.

Love, your biggest fan

Jane."

"That the girl from England again?"

"Yeah, one of them. Turns out there are more than I thought. Good thing, the Internet!"

Steve turned the letter over and scribbled quickly on the back, before shoving into an envelope and tossing it onto the pile.

"She write a lot?"

"Almost every week."

"Should I be jealous?" Krysten grinned, sliding towards him and running her hand through his thick dark hair. He turned to her with a smile, and she realised, with something of a jolt, that he was probably more attractive now than he had ever been. Funny that no matter how many distraught females wrote to him he still didn't fully understand the power of his attraction.

“Jealous? What do *you* think?” he smiled, holding her eyes with his. He kissed her and she melted into him as she always did, her hand brushing lightly down his jaw to his chest, loving the clean lines, the strong shoulders and the steady beat of his heart through his shirt. Her hand dropped into his lap and she felt him smiling against her mouth.

Three thousand, eight hundred miles away, Jane sat bolt upright in bed, her forehead beaded with sweat, her fingers tingling for no apparent reason. She reached out and snapped on the light, wondering why her head was suddenly full of heated, swirling erotic thoughts. It was Steve of course, he was always the hero of her fantasies, but why right now? and why was her hand reacting as if a mild electric current had run through it? She grabbed a couple of pills and lay back, her heart thumping, her hand questing unconsciously beneath the covers until she found the source of her dizziness. As her breathing came sharper and faster, Steve smiled at her and raised a hand to touch her face. She shuddered and fell limp.

The following day she went back to the message boards, determined that this time she would enter a comment herself. She had to make these people understand that they were no more than flitting shadows in Steve’s eyes, they were deluding themselves...she was the one who mattered, the one he was doing it all for. He had as much as told her so, writing that he appreciated her support more than she knew. It was there, in black and white in the latest fan club newsletter, in a section called “A letter from Steve.”

She pulled up the message board and read the most recent entries, fighting back the urge to scream as she saw more messages by “stevesgirl” and “sargent-of-my-heart”. These two were the worst, making a game of pretending how much they loved Steve, but at the same time passing judgement on his music. How could they do that? She herself could never criticise his songs; his voice was part of what made her heart beat, part of what kept her breathing day in, day out. She read the messages out loud, putting on a falsely squeaky American accent to amuse herself. But it was brittle amusement and the hot, angry tears betrayed her true feelings.

“SARGENT-OF-MY-HEART; Hey, stevesgirl, you heard that rare track I told you about yet? What did you think? IMO it's kind of slow for the guy, you know? Not his best, but cool to get it.”

“STEVESGIRL; Yep, heard it. I agree tho...not that gr8, but that VOICE! Man, oh man!! <LOL>”

Jane hit the 'reply' button fiercely. The message window popped up, asking for her name, e-mail address and message. She subsided, wondering whether to give her real name. She decided she would, just in case Steve read the messages.

“JANE; Hello. I'm from England and have been in love with Steve since about 1989 or so. I don't have any of the rare tracks you talk about all the time, but I think you should be grateful...”

Jane paused; should she put “gr8ful?” No. That was plain stupid when there was plenty of time, and room, to type the full word. She hated all those initials and abbreviations people seemed determined to pepper the screen with.

“...grateful to be able to get any of them at all. I read the messages on here and it seems like you don't appreciate Steve at all. Hardly any of you ever even talk about him, except to criticise. None of you really understand him like I do. HE knows how much I care, and he knows I'm his biggest fan. EVER.”

Her mouse pointer hovered over the “submit” button while she re-read her message, then she clicked.

Message Sent.

The days moved on. Steve and Krysten worked, planned their wedding, entertained, partied and made love. Steve wrote nine songs in the space of two weeks, all of which he knew would be accepted by the various artists who had approached him. The arrangements for Ravinia were made, announced and changed many times. Tickets went on sale and were snapped up almost immediately. Life was good.

Jane logged on to stevesargent.com after staying away for a few days, she'd been too annoyed by what she saw there. But something pulled her back – something as basic as needing to be in touch with his world again. She stared at the menu for a moment before taking a deep breath and clicking on the message board icon. With rising fury she read what they had written.

“STEVESGIRL – Hi, Jane and welcome to our happy little group! I understand how you feel, believe me. We all joined here feeling we were the only fans left, but once we got to know each other we realised that we all felt the same. We're ALL his “biggest fan! <LOL> so you're in good company! Hope you post again soon! Teesha.”

“NUMBERONEFAN – Welcome, Jane. Nice to see a new face, we all love Steve just as much as you do, don't worry; you're not alone! Karen.”

And more of the same. The patronising bitches *still* didn't get it! She swallowed two more pills and started to feel better almost immediately. It was taking more these days, to achieve the same effect, but whatever helped was okay with her. And it would be the show soon, they'd see who Steve acknowledged as his biggest fan. She snapped off the computer.

Steve paused, his head ached and his writing hand was sore. He needed a break. Throwing his pencil down on top of the manuscript he was working on he went outside to take some air. He needed to wake up and fast; the show was tomorrow and there was an arrangement on one of his songs that just wasn't working. Ironing out the wrinkles last minute was ordinarily a challenge, and one which kept him awake and alert long into the night. This evening, however, he couldn't focus. Krysten was out and he had no distractions...so why couldn't he work out the problem with his usual enthusiasm? He hummed the song through, trying to find the missing answer. It wasn't there tonight. Something was buzzing around in his head, but it wasn't the solution to his composition...it was more like a feeling of something in the air that whispered of evil, so how crazy did that make him? Shit, no wonder he couldn't think straight.

With a sigh he gave in and finished for the night, hoping it would come to him if he stopped trying so hard. At home he wandered about aimlessly, unable to believe that he was actually bored the night before a performance. Finally he sat down in front of his computer and logged

in to his chat room under the usual assumed name. It was full of excited chatter about who was going to the show, demands for details, details, details by those who weren't, and speculation about what the set list would comprise. Resisting the urge to post a message himself, he watched the conversations unfold for a moment, enjoying the banter, and then jerked upright as a newcomer joined. He couldn't explain the way the skin prickled on the back of his neck, or the way his hand suddenly felt clammy as he gripped the mouse tightly, but something about this girl made him sweat big time.

Logged in under the name "janesargent," she was quiet to begin with, checking out the way the conversation was going before leaping in. Sensible etiquette in a chat room, but for some reason this time he felt as if she were a physical presence in the room with him, and on nervous impulse he checked over his shoulder. He knew that 'lurking' was a common internet term for someone in a group who said little or nothing, but in this case the phrase had taken on a far more sinister meaning. Her silence was a heavy thing, he could almost hear her breathing, could almost feel the burn of her gaze between his shoulder blades. How could he know that she sat at her computer consumed with hate? And yet he did. Somehow.

"Speak..." he whispered at the screen, willing her name to appear again with a line of dialogue. As if reading his mind, someone else in the chat room invited her to introduce herself.

"Hi, janesargent! ur very quiet. Where r u from?" Steve leaned forward, urging her silently to respond, but she didn't. The others quickly gave up and carried on chatting amongst themselves.

He felt the sweat breaking out on his brow, still unable to explain it to himself. He was about to log out and go for a shower when she 'spoke'.

"I'm going to the show tomorrow, I've come all the way from England. Do any of you really love Steve?"

At once lines of text appeared congratulating her on making such a long trip, and assuring her that Steve was their favourite artist. Her response was immediate.

"No – I mean REALLY love him? Like I do. I bet you don't."

"Yeah, we all love him. Why do u think we don't?"

"hey, janesargent – was that u on the message board a while back?"

CHAT ROOM – janesargent has logged out.

Steve sat back, running a shaking hand through his hair. What the hell was this? She was just another fan, but something about her was so freaky. He made a mental note to ensure his security people were extra vigilant tomorrow night. For once he regretted his habit of throwing away the hundreds of photographs he received from his female fans, a picture of this girl right now would be more useful than he could have imagined.

Jane took a swallow of water to wash down the pills. She took the crumpled, signed picture from her pocket with shaking fingers, ignoring the pain that ground and scraped inside her head. Stress. Tiredness. Stupid pills taking too long to work. Looking at Steve's face in the picture she pulled a deep breath into her lungs and let it out in a long moan. It helped. The ache in her heart when she thought about his life, a life that didn't include her, made the pain in her head seem insignificant. Tonight he would know for sure that his biggest fan was in the crowd, he would see her smiling at him, see the love in her eyes, see by the very fact that she wasn't jumping up and down and screaming, that she was the one serious fan that every performer knew they had. And he would smile at her. It would be enough, finally, for him to acknowledge her that way. For her to know that, even for the briefest of seconds, she had touched his life.

Her travelling companion looked at her, concern in her face. Jane waved her away; she had served her purpose just getting her this far – she couldn't have done it alone – but now she *wanted* to be alone with her thoughts, and her music. She unwound the wire from her personal stereo and fitted the earpieces firmly, closing her eyes as she pushed the play button, and feeling her whole body relax as the familiar voice breathed peace into her heart.

The show was a success, the atmosphere was relaxed and easy. Steve played a popular set and cracked his favourite jokes, enjoying the wild applause and the laughter. Nothing had come of the unsettling feeling he'd had the night before and he began to think he'd been overreacting. Probably just tense about the show, but none of the fans seemed the slightest bit strange or intense. Of course there were the usual twenty or so people who just stood

stock still amongst the frivolity and stared fixedly at him throughout the show – he was supposed to be used to it but it still gave him a *frisson* when he realised that he was actually adored by these people. More than anything he hoped he lived up to the expectations he had created.

He played his encore, and happily received the last of the applause that still made his blood sing after all this time. He couldn't give this up, not totally, he knew that. He grinned and waved at the laughing group of fans at the front who always turned up to his shows – they were like family by now. He waved at the crowd, and turned to the side of the stage to blow a kiss to Krysten. She blew one back, and gave him a thumbs up sign. But as he returned it he saw the blood drain from her face. Her mouth dropped open, her expression melting from shared triumph to one of horror. She was looking out over the crowd and as he turned to follow her gaze, he saw.

It had to be her...the girl from England, Jane. As his shocked eyes focused on what was in her hands he saw frantic movement from his security people but knew it was too late. He didn't even have time to move. The gun must have bellowed but he heard nothing.

Jane had waited until she was sure there was no more music. Her arms were weak, her heart fluttering and trembling, her head on fire. She raised the gun, holding it with both hands and aimed it at the man she had loved since the age of twelve. She saw his expression turn from easy happiness to shock, fear and finally pain as she squeezed the trigger. His crisp white shirt bloomed deep red and he was flung backwards, smashing into the drum kit and bringing it crashing down around him. It was only a second later that she herself was pushed to the ground, her neck snapping back with the sudden impact of two huge security guards on her frail body.

But it was over. She had done it. As her arms were dragged behind her she could hear the hysterical screams; fury, confusion, denial...it was all there. The pain in her head intensified, she knew it wouldn't be long now, but it didn't matter anymore.

Hospital. Glaring white ceiling, a fuzzy taste in his mouth, dry lips and aching eyes. A cool but shaking hand on his brow.

“Welcome back,” Krysten whispered, tears falling freely down her tired face. She looked exhausted, she should get some rest, he thought abstractly. He tried to move, to tell her that she should sleep, but numbness prevented him. Vaguely he was aware of machines close to his head, the discomfort of tubes in his mouth, a heaviness in his chest. No pain.

“She’s dead,” Krysten told him. At once the memory flashed into his mind; the girl – so ill looking, her skin taut on her long, pale face, her thin, visibly shaking arms raised to point the gun at him. She had been crying so hard...how could she have seen to aim? Krysten tried to explain more, through lips that sounded tight with the effort of assumed normality;

“They said it’s because we’re getting married. All the publicity. She was crazy with jealousy.”

Something about that didn’t sit right, though...surely there was something else? Maybe because he hadn’t responded more personally to her increasingly desperate letters?

Something...

“They can’t figure out how she got the gun into the country, especially with all the stepped up security since September eleventh, but the police said it was probably because she had so much medical equipment with her...must have been easier to hide it or something, but this...God, so *planned*, Steve, I...” Her voice broke as she began to cry again, and Steve wished he could take her hand and hold it, make her understand that he was okay, he was going to be fine...he didn’t hurt at all.

Except his heart. There was an ache there that he didn’t think he’d ever lose, one that wasn’t caused by any bullet. How could he perform now, knowing that he inspired this kind of anger, that someone would wish him dead? He silently thanked God that if it *was* jealousy, the girl hadn’t taken her revenge on Krysten instead of him.

As Krysten talked, explaining how the girl had died in custody shortly after being arrested, Steve felt his numb body coming back to life. He began to feel tingling in his feet and fingers, and his eyes grew heavy as he fought to keep them open. His brain wanted out before the pain kicked in.

He must have drifted off, still listening to the sound of Krysten’s beautiful, low voice, lulled by the familiarity. When he awoke he was alone and the lights had been turned down. The tubes were gone from his throat something he knew was a good sign. His mind turned to the

tragedy of the girl who had died. Something in her brain, Krysten had said; he was fuzzy with the details, but she had died two days ago, while he was still unconscious. He wondered if she knew he was still alive, and hoped not. If she wanted him dead, at least let her think she had succeeded. Crazy, but he almost felt like he owed her that. He shifted slightly, feeling the pain flare, screamlike, and then settle to a low, background hum.

The door slowly opened. A massive figure appeared framed against the light from the passageway. As he blinked, trying to identify it, his mouth dried up, his breath faltered, his forehead tightening in terror. It couldn't be her, but how could he deny what was there in front of his eyes?

She was paler than ever, her eyes dark and burning in the white face. This though, was no illusion of ethereal, gossamer ghostliness...the face was sunken and patchy grey with the white, the hands blotchy and bloated. These hands drifted waist-high as she glided towards the bed, her hair whipping wildly around her head. When she spoke her voice was a deep hollow sound, an empty howl emanating from the darkest cave in a world made of screams. The realm of The Dead manifested in the rotting body of this girl.

"You were right. It *wasn't* because you and that strumpet bitch... *whore* ...were getting married. *You* know I'm not that shallow, don't you? I did it because I couldn't let the world have what I no longer could."

"I don't get it..." he croaked, forcing the words out of his scraped and raw throat. The first words he had spoken since the shooting and they were directed at a ghost...this had to be a dream.

"I was *dying*, you shit-stupid! It was only the thought of you that kept me alive so long...how could I let you stay out there without me? But now you can come too. Let's not invite the *strumpet-bitch-whore* though, Steve. Let's just make it you and me. Just like it's always been..."

The apparition stood over him, huge she was. Terrifyingly so. Her head almost touched the ceiling, her hands still hovering unnaturally. As she smiled at him through bloodied and crooked teeth, Steve felt an enormous sense of betrayal and helpless fury building in his shattered body.

Ghosts can't hurt people, they don't have the power!

How many times had he heard this, drawn comfort from it as a child? If you don't show any fear it'll go away. If you close your eyes and count to three, when you open them it'll be gone.

Steve wanted to go to every child in the world and scream at them...

"They're lying! Ghosts CAN hurt you...if they want to, they can KILL you..."

And as Jane closed her mottled, frozen hands on his throat he knew it was true.

The End.

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