

Lavender and Tears

by Christy Noel

He checked his pocket watch, still doubting that the woman he loved was alive. How was it possible? During the five years since the train accident had robbed him of her, he had believed Susan was dead.

Footsteps sounded in the hall, and he turned away from the window, leaning upon his cane.

The wooden door opened, and the chief of police entered. “You’ve got half an hour,” he said.

Henry nodded.

The chief stepped aside, and the guard escorted the prisoner into the room.

He sucked in a sharp breath. Until this moment, he had never fully believed the news reports.

The door closed, and they were alone.

The woman stared at the floor. Pale and drawn, she lacked her former vivacity. Her plain black dress made her seem pasty and unhealthy. Yet, even without her stylish clothes and rosy complexion, he could not mistake her identity.

“Susan?” he whispered, fearing she would vanish like a wraith.

She lifted her chin. The sight wrenched his heart: her eyes—once shining black pearls—now reflected dully.

“Susan—don’t you recognize me?” His own appearance had changed little. He wore a dark frock coat and vest, very similar to one she’d once said complimented his hazel eyes. “It’s me, Henry.”

“I don’t know you.” Her gaze was frosty and impassive.

“Don’t know me?” He frowned, wondering at her lack of recognition. He moved even closer. “You once told me you loved me.”

“I don’t love...” She abruptly stopped.

His eyes pleaded with her.

“Henry?” she breathed. Her expression shifted. “But you’re...” She gasped. “You’re... you’re dead.” She shook her head. “You’re dead!” Her voice rose in pitch, and she repeated herself, shaking more and more violently.

He rushed forward and held her tightly until her tormented cries subsided. Her frame, frail and weak, hardly resembled the lithe body he remembered.

At last, when she had regained some of her composure, she looked up, her face blotchy and streaked.

“How is this possible?” she asked, searching his countenance. “I thought you’d perished when the train jumped its tracks.”

He shook his head. “No. I was injured,” he explained, tapping his right leg, “but the rescuers pulled me from the snow.”

“I never knew—they told me there were few survivors.” She took a single step back, contemplating his appearance carefully.

“I went home to convalesce. My leg was badly broken.” He reached out and caressed her dark hair, cut unfashionably short. “How did you survive?”

“My memory is hazy.” She paused. “I was thrown clear. I remember... fire howling through the carriages... people screaming as half the train plunged into the river... snow tumbling from the night sky.” She absently traced a hairline scar above her right eyebrow. “I wandered in a daze, blood dripping into my eyes. I eventually collapsed. The next thing I remember is waking up in a strange bed, where a woman tended to my wound.

“She told me that only a few people had survived. When I made it to the city, I looked up the official accounts. None of them mentioned you,” she added, her voice hushed and strained.

He had seen the reports himself—they had been sketchy—not surprising, considering the chaos of that night. He asked why she hadn’t contacted her family; he knew her father, a rich merchant, had not heard from her.

She averted her eyes. “I had planned to,” she said slowly, “but the situation soon changed.”

“I don’t understand.”

“When I lost you,” she said, as if he were still dead, “my life lost its meaning. In my loneliness, I fell in with some of the local partisans.” She walked over to the window, her arms folded protectively across her chest. The gray sky silhouetted her. “I realized I could help them.” She turned and leveled an earnest gaze at him.

“They were fighting to right social injustice. The local aristocracy was ignoring the plight of the commoners. While they feasted, people starved in the streets.”

Susan had always felt torn between worlds, Henry knew. Her family’s humble background conflicted with the wealth created by her father’s success.

“So, you helped them?” he asked. “And then they betrayed you, and set you up to take the blame,” he stated, explaining what he believed to be the true events behind the wild accounts in the papers. “One of your new friends murdered the Archduke, and let you take the punishment.” He sat down heavily in one of the wooden chairs.

Susan drew back, hiding her expression.

“It doesn’t matter. We’ll make the authorities see the truth. There must be some way to show them how they betrayed you.”

Trembling, she leaned against the window sill.

Henry rose and approached her, gently resting his hands on her shoulders.

“Everything will be okay, Darling. I won’t let them hang you.” He kissed her silken, lavender-scented curls. “We’ll find a way.”

She twisted in his arms. Fresh tears welled in her eyes.

“What is it?”

“You don’t understand.” She spoke so softly that he could barely hear her.

“Of course I do,” he insisted. He gently brushed a tear from her cheek.

“No.” She withdrew from his embrace and faced the door.

He couldn’t make out her next words. “Pardon?”

“I’m guilty.”

Full of disbelief, he stared at her. “No—no, you must have been framed.”

“I’m guilty,” she said more forcefully, facing him. “I killed him.”

Henry’s eyes grew wide and he gripped his cane unsteadily.

A new, foreign emotion flickered in her gaze.

“And he deserved it. I only wish I had succeeded in killing his wife, too, before they subdued me.”

The acid in her words burned into his heart.

Footsteps sounded in the hall.

“How could—” he stammered, his throat dry. “Darling—”

The door opened. “It’s time,” said the chief.

A misty expression smothered the smoldering cinders in her eyes. Susan rushed forward and kissed Henry once, passionately, before letting herself be led out. “I’ll always love you.”

Before Henry could find the strength to respond, she was gone. The chief nodded and shut the door, leaving him alone.

Stunned, he stared blankly at the wooden panel. Her lavender scent lingered in the air, and the salt from her tears clung to his lips.