

A Death At The Rose Paperworks

A Libby Seale Mystery

by M.J. Zellnik

For LLZ

Prologue : Portland, Oregon. March, 1894.

The sun had been up less than two hours, and already Andrew Matson knew it was going to be a terrible day. One of the two revolving boilers was coughing, and it looked like he'd have to take the damn thing out of commission for at least 36 hours. Or maybe longer. It took that long just for it to cool down enough to get inside and see what the problem was. And they were understaffed again. It was this new staff, he thought with a grimace. You just couldn't count on them to show up on a regular basis. Six of 'em were out today, and he didn't even know which six, since one looked just like the next to his eyes. Even after two months supervising his Chinese workforce, they all looked the same to him.

Striding across the cement floor of the Rose Paperworks, Matson gazed out over the sea of glossy black hair and once more cursed his boss's decision to replace real Americans with this cheap-as-dirt foreign labor. He was glad to see at least that the main

boiler had sputtered to life. As he passed, he watched two men toss the first rags of the day into its steaming confines. He was on his way to deal with the third, and by far, the most serious problem of the morning. Something was wrong with the hollander, the heart of the mill. A giant steel cylinder lined with rotating knife blades, the hollander could turn stripped rags into a thick paste suitable for boiling in less than three minutes. Usually it whirred and hummed all day, providing a background drone to everything else that happened in the mill, but this morning, just after the whistle marking the start of the workday had sounded, it had rasped a few times and stopped with a grinding metallic groan. Matson thought there was probably a dead bird inside, or maybe it was a rat (hardly a novelty in a paper mill) gumming up the works. Wouldn't be the first time. But today he didn't need this. By the time the remains of the poor creature were fished out, and the machine was all cleaned, it'd be lunchtime. One dead bird meant missed quotas, and Mr. Rose would have his hide. He was hoping against hope the problem was electrical.

He reached the foot of a staircase leading up to the catwalks. In front of him a couple dozen Chinese girls were bent over their laps, ripping buttons, hooks and whalebone stays from the scraps of material, before throwing them into bins sorted by color. Pure white fabric was the easiest to process, but it was the most difficult to obtain. So normally the mill made do with any fabric of a light shade, no matter how yellowed or stained, and added an extra bleaching step before rolling the resulting rag pulp into sheets of paper.

The girls were chattering in that godforsaken unintelligible tongue of theirs. Who knew what in the hell they were saying, thought Matson with annoyance. "Enough

chitchat! Back to work!” he yelled to no one in particular, and despite the language barrier, his order was clear enough. The babble subsided as he ascended the stairs, to the network of catwalks that connected the various sections of the factory. The catwalks allowed the foreman and management to supervise what went on below, and to move easily from one end of the vast space to the other without having to skirt the massive vats and presses.

The staircase Matson had climbed was the one nearest to the hollander, and so as soon as he reached the top, he could see down into its red-slicked interior. Two things entered his consciousness at almost the same moment. The first was that there was far too much blood for this to have been a bird or a rat, and the second was that, on the far side of the great knife-lined cauldron, a section of the catwalks which led to the executive offices had collapsed and was partially sunk into the hollander itself. A horrible possibility entered his mind — who else ever used that section of catwalk? — just as he noticed what could only be the remains of a human leg, still encased in a chewed-up leather boot. All thought of missed quotas fled his mind as, almost silently, Andrew Matson fainted.

Chapter 1

Libby Seale had been thinking about husbands. Two husbands in particular – the husband she wanted but couldn't marry, and the husband she already had but wished she could lose. So perhaps it was inevitable that her first thought, upon hearing about Hiram Rose's untimely death, was how lucky his wife was now to be a widow. One look, however, at the tears tracking down Adele Rose's plump cheeks, made Libby realize that this particular wife did not share her view. She quickly arranged her own features into something resembling more conventional sympathy, and hoped none of the others in the room had noticed her initial look of... well, one could only call it envy.

For three weeks now, Libby had been trying in vain to think of some way she could be rid of the man she was forced to call husband. Her marriage to Harold Greenblatt had been an arranged one. He was a business associate of her father's, back in New York City, and in the brief time they had lived together as man and wife he had alternately ignored her and abused her. Their marriage, though it was a travesty to call it that, had culminated in one particularly violent episode which had left her with her arm in a sling. The next day she had run away, taking the train from New York's Penn Station to the farthest destination she could find...Portland, Oregon.

It was here in Oregon that she had met Peter Eberle, a young reporter for the Portland Gazette, and had fallen in love with him. For all the months they had known each other, she had hidden from him the existence of Mr. Greenblatt, who was still waiting for her back in New York. Somehow she had imagined that if she didn't speak of him, he would somehow go away. Ironically, her silence had led to Peter's going away instead.

Just over three weeks before, Peter had asked her to marry him. Needless to say she had been forced to turn him down. And, at that moment when his heart was at its most vulnerable, she had been forced to tell him why: she was a married woman, she had run away from her legal husband and family, and even that she had changed her name so no one in Portland would know she was married. Peter had claimed to understand, to forgive her the deception, but he had clearly been hurt. Libby hadn't clapped eyes on him or spoken even a syllable to him since that awkward day. She missed him dreadfully, and suspected he missed her too, but she hadn't had the nerve to call on him at the offices of the Portland Gazette, and he had made no attempt to see her. She feared Peter was lost to her forever. As lost to her as Hiram Rose was to Adele Rose, the crying woman sitting in front of her as she brought herself back to the present with difficulty.

Having just arrived at the Rose home moments before, Libby was still wearing her hat and coat. No sooner had she entered the house when she heard the shocking news about a tragic accident at the paper mill, and she wondered if she should simply turn around and head home to her boardinghouse. But her offer to leave the somber family to grieve in peace was immediately brushed aside. Miss Baylis, the Roses' pale-faced governess, who had drawn her aside to explain the situation, would hear nothing of it.

"Oh, no, Miss Seale, please stay and wait with us. I can't bear to be on my own with them..." she gestured towards the sofa, where Adele Rose's hand was being held by an equally distraught Eva Fowler. Mrs. Fowler was Hiram Rose's sister, and she and her husband lived next door. Libby had been hired to do some dressmaking work for both ladies, though the work was always conducted here at the Rose's much larger and more accommodating home. Though Augustus Fowler was Hiram Rose's second-in-command

at the mill, the Fowlers lived in a much simpler fashion. Libby had gotten the impression that money was much more an issue for the Fowlers than for the extravagant and ostentatious Roses.

Miss Baylis continued. “Mr. Fowler has gone off to the mill to find out exactly what has happened. All we know is that Mr. Rose fell into some sort of machine or other, and...” she paused, not wanting to get more graphic than necessary, “and Mrs. Rose keeps asking how this could have happened, and I don’t have any answers to give her. Besides, I really ought to look after the boys, and make sure they are... well, as well as can be expected.”

Miss Baylis cast a worried glance towards Hiram Rose’s two younger sons, a set of seven-year old twins named Isadore and Adolphus (Izzy and Fussy to everyone but their governess) who were over by the fire playing with the cast iron poker. Izzy already had a smudge of ash over one eye, and Libby could tell Miss Baylis was growing anxious as to what might be coming next. The twins were holy terrors, fascinated by fire, and required constant supervision to keep them from burning down the entire house. There was no sign in the room of Elliot, the oldest son, a moody boy of sixteen, and Libby wondered if he had preferred school to the gloom at home. She, however, didn’t see how she could escape, and so she said, “Of course, I’m happy to stay. At least, of course, until Mr. Fowler returns with more news. I’m sure then the family will want to be left alone.”

Divesting herself of her damp outerwear, Libby made her way to the sofa and tried her best to console the two weeping women ensconced there. Though she would not have said she was close to either woman, of the two she liked Mrs. Fowler better. Adele Rose was a rather haughty woman, with the look of a pampered lapdog. She was soft and

pink and rounded at every extremity. It took all of Libby's ingenuity, not to mention the sturdiest whalebone corset available from Sears & Roebuck, to bring Mrs. Rose anywhere near to the fashionable ideal. Mrs. Fowler, on the other hand, presented a different set of problems from a dressmaker's perspective. She was now three months pregnant, and just beginning to swell. In the two weeks Libby had been working for her, most of her work had been the mundane matter of letting out bodices and scrupulously measuring her client each visit.

This was frustrating, but Libby couldn't afford to complain since it was precisely this need for constant alterations that was responsible for Libby's employment. And Libby needed the work. Her previous tenure, at Crowther's Portland Variety Theater (as a wardrobe mistress) had been abruptly terminated when the theater closed. Now she was making ends meet by doing piecemeal work for Portland's elite while she looked for a new permanent position. Her friend Charlotte McKenock, daughter of one of the city's richest men, had provided her with introductions to a dozen or so wealthy and influential matrons. But other than a few small one-day jobs, the work she was doing for Mrs. Rose and Mrs. Fowler was her only regular source of income.

Though there were many available seamstresses in Portland, two factors had tipped the balance in Libby's favor when Mrs. Rose had been choosing whom to hire. The first was that Adele was an Easterner, like Libby, and it pleased her to have a dressmaker who had worked in New York's Gold Eagle Dressworks. Libby had firsthand knowledge of the high-society fashions which were only now, a year later, reaching the cities on America's west coast. The second factor, much as Libby disliked to admit it to herself, was her religion. Though she herself had made no mention of it, Adele had ended

their initial interview by asking point blank if Libby were Jewish. Stammering, Libby had answered in the affirmative, fearing that an anti-Semitic Mrs. Rose would then ask her to leave by the back exit. She was surprised when Adele only smiled and said, “Good.” It transpired that the Rose family was also Jewish, though like Libby herself they had altered their name (Rosenberg to Rose in their case, Seletzky to Seale in hers) in order to sound less Hebraic. The admission shocked Libby, for she would never have guessed. Even now, after two weeks working in the house, she had seen no visible signs that the household was run along traditional Jewish lines. There was no menorah, no mezuzah by the door, and she knew for a fact that the cook had prepared a pork roast for supper one night. As surprised and a bit discomfited as she was by this, Libby could not afford to hold their assimilated ways against the Roses, since they were her employers. And, as a woman who had abandoned her husband and fled her family, she had no right to sit in judgment over anybody.

Libby sat on the sofa beside Adele, and patted her hand. “Oh, Miss Seale... how could this have happened?” Adele wailed, “I don’t understand.”

“Adele, please try to control yourself,” Eva Fowler said gently, but with a hint of disapproval. Mrs. Fowler was in more control of her emotions than her sister-in-law, despite the fact that it was her brother who had been killed. “Augustus will be home soon, and we will find out what happened. You must be strong for the children. Hiram would want...” she faltered, and for a moment her emotions rose to the surface. She swallowed her putative sob. “Hiram would have *wanted* you to be brave.”

The two women leaned into each other and Adele cried softly. Libby sat uncomfortably wondering how long it would be before Mr. Fowler would return. She

tried to feel sad that Mr. Rose was dead, but she had barely known him. She had met him only once, a week before, when he had paid her for the work she had done, and had not liked him on that occasion. He had insisted on paying her himself, since he did not allow his wife to handle money. He had queried every line of the invoice she had written up carefully detailing the hours she had worked and fabrics she had purchased. Libby wondered who would be responsible for paying her in Hiram's absence. Now that the entire household would need to be fitted with proper mourning attire, a great deal of new work was bound to come her way. She had to pretend to cough to hide the smile that followed the thought.

The crumpled ball of paper flew across the newsroom and hit its intended target smack in the middle of his forehead. Peter Eberle looked up, annoyed. Across the large room, filled with currently quiet presses and overflowing trays of type, a grinning John Mayhew raised his empty hands in a gesture of innocence.

"Sorry, Petey. I just wanted to see if you'd even notice." The lanky editor strode across the room, and perched on the edge of his star reporter's desk. His face showed both amusement and concern, as he leaned in to talk to Peter. "I have to tell you, you haven't seemed very alert lately." He paused for a moment, regarding the man before him. Peter's face was pale, and there were deep circles under his eyes.

"I'm fine, John, really I am." Peter picked up the paper ball and lobbed it into the trash can.

Mayhew pressed on, "I have noticed we've been seeing a good deal less of your friend, Miss Seale for the past few weeks..."

“I might have known I couldn't hide anything from a newsman of your perspicacity.” Peter tried to smile, but it wasn't very convincing.

“Don't waste your five-dollar words on me, Eberle. You can't intimidate me into backing off. Truth is, I'm wondering if I should be worried about you.” Wary of seeming too overbearing, Mayhew went back to his desk and sat facing Peter.

Peter knew he owed his boss the truth. “I'm sorry, John. I haven't much wanted to speak about it, but you are right. Lib— Miss Seale and I have parted ways... but it was on completely amicable terms. Believe me.” He rubbed his face, “Besides, a man like me needs his freedom. And maybe I'm just tired. You've been working me too hard, that's all.”

“Working you too hard?” The older man laughed. “I'd say things have been pretty quiet around here since Miss Seale—” he cut himself off. “Since the fuss over at the Variety was finished up. Fact is, I'm about getting ready to send you out to cover the church choir beat, or to ask you to write a scathing expose on the latest hemlines from Paris. Of course,” he paused, “that might require that you get a quote from a local seamstress.”

Not meeting Mayhew's eyes, Peter rearranged the blotter on his desk. “The last time I checked, there was more than one seamstress in Portland.” After a brief pause, he looked up, and there was a little more of the old fire in his gaze. “Say, John, do you suppose there might be a story in that? I mean, something about the rise of new tradesmen and business people setting up shop here in town. I noticed when Jack Harkness dropped off the latest Portland Business Listings, the damn thing was twice as many pages as last year's edition, even though the national economy is still doing so

poorly.”

Before Mayhew could form a reply, the bell at the front counter rang. Both men looked up to see a dark-haired youth, too impatient to wait for a response, come bounding back past the front counter. Mayhew chuckled, “Half-Cent, I didn't expect to see you until Friday to clean the presses.” Billy, or Half-Cent as he was affectionately known by all the newsmen at the Gazette, had been hanging around the newspaper offices since he was in knee-pants. The nickname had started as a comment on the fact that little Billy was even smaller than the so-called “penny boys” who sold the Portland Gazette on the city's street corners. Though now fourteen, and almost as tall as Mayhew, the nickname remained. Half-Cent did regular odd jobs around the Gazette in exchange for training on the mechanical business of running a newspaper, and John Mayhew, with no family of his own, had come to regard the boy as something of a surrogate son. He was teaching him everything from how to set type to how to write an eye-catching headline.

“I just saw the police heading out of town,” Billy panted, out of breath from running. “I found out they're heading to the mill... I heard one of them say the body is too mangled to even move... if you hurry, you can get this into the afternoon edition, right? I came to tell you as soon as I heard about it!”

“Slow down, Billy. What mill?” asked Peter, already pulling on his jacket and stuffing his notepad in the pocket.

“That's what I'm trying to tell you! There's been some kind of accident, over at the Rose Paperworks! Hiram Rose himself, all messed up something awful in the machinery. When the workday started, some of the Chinese they got working there found him!”

“Hiram Rose, eh?” Peter reviewed what he knew about Rose: wealthy Jewish

industrialist... family in Portland for two generations... paper mill one of the most venerable of Portland's businesses, but one of the last to use the old rag-paper manufacturing methods, and at the center of some recent labor disputes that had flared up right around New Year's, if he remembered it correctly. Rose had fired all the white workers, replacing them with Chinese who would work for much less. He would have to remember to look up the specifics later, when he had a chance. But now he needed to head out.

“Here you go, Half-Cent,” he said, slipping a quarter into Billy's grateful hand as he ran out the door. He called over his shoulder, “Save me some room on the front page below the fold, John! I'll be back here in time to write up what I have before we go to press!”

Elliot Rose was hiding behind the garden shed. He supposed his mother and aunt would be wondering where he had run off to, but he couldn't stay inside that room one more moment, pretending a sorrow he didn't feel. The frantic message had come from the mill with the news of the accident just as he had been about to head off to school, and he found himself wishing the news had come five minutes later. Instead, he was housebound, at least until his uncle returned from the mill with more information on just what exactly had happened to his father.

He looked inside the shed for Matt, the estate handyman, but it was empty. Sometimes Matt would let Elliot puff on one of his cigarettes, after they had worked in the garden together. His father disapproved of cigarettes – not just for Elliot, or not even just for sixteen year old boys, but on general principle – they were “only for those

without money, or class, or any hope of rising in the world.” God, how Elliot hated his father when he spoke in that pompous tone, puffing away on his (eminently respectable) pipe. To tell the truth, Elliot hated his father all the time. It dawned on him he no longer needed to wonder whether his father approved of anything he did, and a smile lit up his pale features — a smile that would have scandalized his mother, had she been able to see it. A cigarette, a whole one just to himself he decided, would be just the thing to mark this strange and yet somehow exciting day. Sadly, Matt was not in the shed, or the stables, and Elliot was out of places to look.

Elliot peeked around the corner and regarded the back of his house. He would have liked to stay hidden, but the chill March wind and the remnants of the morning's light rain had left every possible place to sit damp and uncomfortable. He stepped onto the back lawn, and gazed up at the windows of the family parlor, where his mother, aunt and brothers were gathered. No one was looking out the window, and so he felt safe in staring at the scene captured in the window's frame, imagining it as a painting. Every lamp in the room was lit, to augment the weak, wintry sunlight. Their glow made the figures stand out from the walls of the room, made the whole room stand out from the almost monochromatic purplish-blue of the March morning as well. Outdoors everything was dark and grey, but the scene in the parlor, despite the sadness, was bathed in gold, as if it held some sort of magic, promising a brighter future. His mother was cradling Izzy in her lap, weeping into his towheaded curls. It called to Elliot's mind some sort of religious painting, such as the Pietá that hung in the chapel at his school, St. Sebastian's.

Oh, how his father would have hated him making that comparison! Hiram Rose despised the fact that his son studied at a Catholic school, but his wife had been adamant

that the boy couldn't attend public school, and there were simply no Jewish secondary schools to send him to. Besides, his mother had argued, St. Sebastian was renowned in Portland, and many of the town's upper-crust sent their children there. His father, faced with opposition from both his son and his wife, grudgingly acquiesced.

Elliot loved St. Sebastian's, not that he cared one way or the other about Jesus, but because the school offered students the option of taking classes on the history of art. Elliot had proven such an avid student for the past three years that Sister Mary Abigail, who taught the classes, had arranged for him to take a private tutorial with the man commissioned to paint new altar pieces for the school chapel. For one glorious afternoon a week, Elliot spent three hours learning from a real artist the secrets of mixing pigments and linseed oil to make paints, about stretching and preparing a canvas, and the basics of composition. The work he was doing with Mr. Avenier made him realize just how bad the childish paintings he had done just the year before really were, though his mother had cooed over them. One, in particular, a view of the roses by their side porch, she had even insisted on framing. It now hung in the dining room, embarrassing him at every meal with its juvenile technique. He could tell his father viewed it in much the same light. Hiram Rose never insulted the painting outright in front of Elliot, but sometimes he rolled his eyes when he caught sight of it as he pulled his chair up to the dinner table.

It was Elliot's goal to go to the Academy of Fine Arts in San Francisco to study, when he left high school next year. It was a plan he knew his father was... would have been... totally against. The two had fought about it just a few weeks before. His father had made it clear he expected his oldest son to join the family business upon graduation. "Now listen here, Eli..."

Elliot hated being called Eli, and nobody but his father used the nickname. According to his father, Eli was a more manly name. Elliot, he said, was only for little boys. But Eli was far from the worst of the names his father called him. Sometimes he called him “Ellie”, or even “Nelly Ellie” when he was playing baseball (badly) in the summer, or racing horses with his cousins along the frozen riverbank in the winter (he inevitably came in last.) Most hurtfully, though, his father sometimes called him “Violet”, mocking his desire to be a painter, or whenever Elliot made a comment to his mother regarding the beauty of the light, or a particularly lovely flower. Hiram missed no opportunity to belittle Elliot's artistic aspirations, and as for making art a career, his position was steadfast. “The mill has been providing for this family since the day my father opened its doors in 1871. I'll not see it run by some stranger, nor see you turn your back on it. Mark my words, Eli, the Rose Paperworks is your destiny.”

Elliot's cheeks flushed as he remembered the fight, but his heart grew light at the thought that never again would he hear that hated voice call him “Violet.” Now there was nothing standing in his way of becoming the great painter he knew he could become.

A flurry of motion inside the house caught his attention, and he scooted closer to the window to see what was going on. He saw Miss Seale, the seamstress, following the maid out into the foyer to deal with whomever must just have arrived. He wondered if it was the police. Imagine, the police here in his own house! Deciding that it was really too chilly to hang around all morning in the backyard, he headed towards the rear door to rejoin what remained of his family.

It was what Libby had feared. Or had half feared and half hoped when the maid had come into the parlor and announced that there was gentleman from the newspaper at the door. “Peter!” she said, her voice momentarily failing her. She said again, more steadily, “Peter.” She noticed he looked tired, and slightly thinner than when she last saw him, even though it was only a few weeks before.

If Libby had been somewhat prepared to see him, Peter was entirely taken aback to see her. “Libby... Miss Seale!” He found he was unsure how to address her, and he was afraid his discomfort showed on his face. Too quickly, to cover his embarrassment, he went on, “What are you doing here? I mean... oh, of course... are you doing some dressmaking for Mrs. Rose?”

“Your reportorial skills are as sharp as ever,” she said tartly. As soon as the words left her mouth, she realized that sounded more curt than she intended, and in a softer voice, she continued, “Yes, Mrs. Rose has hired me to make some dresses, and her sister-in-law needs some alterations done.”

A short silence stretched awkwardly, and she moved forward as if to embrace him. At the last second, she shifted course and stepped around him, regarding him with a seamstress's eyes, noting the way his jacket hung loosely on his shoulders. “You've lost weight.” She suddenly wondered if she should invite him to supper with her and Mrs. Pratt some night. Would he come? They were still friends, weren't they?

“I've been very busy at the Gazette these last few weeks,” he lied.

“You mustn't neglect your health,” she replied primly. Dear god, why did she sound like her mother? She was acting like a tongue-tied schoolgirl! She wasn't his nursemaid, for heaven's sake! Suddenly, she remembered what she had been sent out into

the hall to tell him. “Mrs. Rose asked me to come out here and speak with you. As you can imagine, the family is quite upset, and they aren't interested in talking to the press right now.”

“Tell me, what are they like? The Rose family, I mean? Have you met Hiram Rose?”

Peter was getting that look in his eyes that she remembered so well from their time together, the one that meant the wheels in his head were turning as he was trying to piece together a news story. When he looked at her now, it wasn't with the social discomfort of a few moments before, but rather as a news source. “Yes, once. He's... he was a businessman, I suppose, first and foremost. I get the feeling that he...” she stopped herself. “Peter, I really shouldn't be talking to you about Mr. and Mrs. Rose. We are here in their home, after all, and besides, I feel it's not my place to give my personal opinion about members of the family. I hardly know them.”

Peter gave his crooked smile, for he knew Libby too well. “So, I take it you don't particularly care for them?”

She flushed. “I didn't say that!”

“Oh, come now, I know when you get that look on your face that you have some definite opinions, and usually not positive ones.” She smiled back at him, but didn't offer anything more. He changed the subject, aware that if he didn't tread carefully, she would probably just send him on his way. “Do you know who will take over the mill? Will there be some sort of investigation? Is it possible it might have been foul play?”

She raised an eyebrow at that last question, remembering all that had happened between the two of them the last time foul play had crossed their path. Thank heavens,

this time, the sudden death that confronted them didn't have anything to do with either of them personally. There was no chance they would end up putting on their investigative hats again for Hiram Rose.

The doorknocker gave two loud, authoritative knocks, causing both Peter and Libby to jump slightly. Almost instantly, the housemaid came in from the kitchen, and without even acknowledging Libby and Peter, swung open the door to reveal two middle-aged men. One was stocky and full of energy, the other taller but somehow less noticeable.

The shorter, heavysset one spoke, "Sorry Maisie, I seem to have misplaced my key, somewhere, or I wouldn't have knocked. I..." He suddenly seemed to notice the look of astonishment on Maisie's face, and Libby's behind her. "Oh, I'm sorry, Maisie... Miss Seale... I'm sure this must be something of a shock." Then he noticed Peter. "Who the hell are you," he seemed to remember his manners, "...sir?"

"Peter Eberle, Portland Gazette." The way Peter said it it came out almost a question.

"Ah, yes. Well, sorry you've come out here on a wild goose chase young man. Then again, maybe it's best to quash this thing before it gets all around town." The man extended his hand to Peter, "How do you do? I'm Hiram Rose."