



The Decision

By Gayle Roper

Excerpt provided courtesy of www.gayleroper.com

Chapter 1

The force of the blast knocked me to the ground.

I fell into Sophie Hostetter's beautiful red impatiens lining the front walk, breaking off the brittle stems with my legs, torso, even my head. It no longer mattered whether or not the predicted frost struck tonight. The plants were decimated, a fact I grasped much more readily and with more distress than the event that had tossed me willy-nilly into them and had ground expensive licorice bark mulch into my palms and forehead.

Being thrown to the ground by forces too strong to counter was beyond my experience. When the displaced air pushed ahead by the expanding gases of the explosion hit me in the back and sent me sprawling, when the heat of the resulting fire scorched me through my sweater and turtleneck, I couldn't comprehend it. Impatiens I knew; impatiens I could understand. Exploding cars and searing heat were beyond my ken.

Instinctively I raised my hands over my head and pulled my knees to my chest, belatedly protecting myself. I tried to think, to break through the gray fog of shock. After all, I was a nurse and an EMT. I was used to catastrophe. But I usually dealt with the aftermath of other's pain, not participated in it. I was the one who bound up the wounded, not the one who lay flattened, deafened and blank-minded.

I stared at the shattered impatiens and reached out tentatively as if I thought I could repair them. A bruised and bereft crimson flower sat softly on the back of my right hand. I studied it with the intensity of a philosopher seeking the secrets of the universe in its fragile red petals. Unfortunately, even if I'd discovered some deep truth, I was too fuzzy to comprehend it. My head ached from its encounter with terra firma, and my ears rang from the concussive roar that

had filled the air. Even my vision was fuzzy, but I instinctively knew that was because my glasses had fallen off.

Somewhere in the deep recesses of my mind, the part that always responds to personal trauma with denial and trivia, I was thankful that I was wearing my uniform as a home health nurse, navy slacks and cardigan. They wouldn't show the dirt. Then I realized I was lying with my blue and white turtleneck nearly buried in soil, mulch and bleeding flowers.

Rose Martin, RN, EMT, grubby mess.

I sighed and tried to remember if I had any clean uniforms left. If I didn't, did I have any bleach alternative detergent? Or had I used it all up last week? I fretted over the issue like it really mattered and berated myself when I couldn't recall.

I sighed again and slowly my mind began to function rationally. The laundry receded, the least of my problems, and reality hit with the impact of the explosion itself.

I uncurled and pushed myself to my knees. I retrieved my glasses from the mulch and blew them clear. The great roaring continued to fill the air as I forced myself to look at the fire, not a cozy, inviting fire like in a living room hearth, but a conflagration, a pulsing sea of flames, writhing, consuming what had been Ammon Hostetter's car.

And Ammon Hostetter, nice guy and ineffectual CEO of his family's highly successful toy business.

And Sophie Hostetter, his mother and my patient. Sweet Sophie who had suffered so long and so devastatingly. Who had been going on her first outing after several debilitating weeks of chemotherapy. Who had been so excited to finally breathe outside air and watch the bittersweet bloom in the hedgerows and corn stalks get collected for silage by silent industrious Amishmen pulling flatbed wagons behind their horses.

Sophie, who had struggled so to live.

Oh God, I prayed in terror and distress. *Oh God!* My mind could form no other words. My eyes shut to block out the devastation of the fire. The Town Car was totally engulfed.

I steeled myself and staggered to my feet. I moved toward the fire, but the intensity of the flames made a close approach impossible.

I circled the car at an awkward run, hand held before my face to protect my eyes from the staggering heat, trying to see if there were some place the fire wasn't totally overwhelming, some place I could get near the vehicle, some way I could offer help.

Smoke ascended, twisting and wrapping in on itself like some mythical monster. The flames were undulating arms raised skyward, awful in their red, orange and white hot glory. The air was acrid with burning, not the warm, autumnal scent of blazing leaves but the raw odor of hot metal and burning tires.

My heart fought the realization that there was no life-saving care I could give here. Finally, sobbing, I stumbled toward the house to call 911.

I'd almost reached the front door of the Hostetters' great home on the golf course when a second explosion rocked the early November afternoon and knocked me down again. This time it wasn't brittle impatiens that took the brunt of my fall but my forehead as I struck it against the first riser of the shallow cement front steps.

Pain lanced across my skull, along my neck and flashed down my spine. Groaning, I rolled on my side and reached up a shaking hand. I found broken skin and blood. A swelling had already developed, but I felt no pain. Shock, I diagnosed.

I turned back to the blaze, pulsing with renewed life, and saw with horror that pools of fiery gasoline were spreading from beneath the car, rivers of flame racing across the drive.

"My car!" I yelled and ran raggedly to the white sedan with Lancaster Home Health Group stenciled on the side along with the agency logo of a blue cross with the outline of a house superimposed over the cross. I threw the door open, wrenched the keys from my slacks' pocket and hit the gas. I drove out onto Rt. 23 and parked the car as close to the property's privacy hedge as I could. I didn't think the fire would get this far.

"911," I whispered as I rested my aching head on the steering wheel for a minute to ward off vertigo. My eyes were watering from the smoke and my ears still rang. Even the air here on the far side of the hedge reeked with the odor of burning gasoline. I grabbed the car phone and punched in the emergency numbers.

After I made my report, I called my office to tell them I wouldn't be able to make my last two calls. Madylyn, our whiney office manager, was not pleased.

"Deal with it, Madylyn," I snapped and slammed the phone down. I wasn't up to cajoling or peace making right now.

I slid from the car and crept back around the hedge to see whether the fire was still raging so wildly. It was. I looked with a strong sense of unreality at the scene and beyond to the house.

And I froze at what I saw through the pulsing waves of heat and smoke.

Standing at the front door of the mansion, mouth agape, shock in his eyes, was Peter Hostetter watching the conflagration.

“Oh, God!” I prayed inarticulately once again. Tears of sympathy wet my face and a vise gripped my stomach, tightening, tightening until I felt I might implode from the pressure. His mother and his older brother!

I skirted the site of the accident and raced up the front steps “Peter!” I laid a hand gently on his arm as I shouted to be heard above the roar of the fire. “Let’s wait inside until help comes.”

He didn’t hear me. He didn’t even see me.

I grabbed him and shook. “Peter!”

He looked at me without recognition, confusion struggling with vagueness in his eyes.

“Peter! It’s me, Rose! Come inside while we call for help!”

His eyes slid from me to the car.

“Ammon,” he said, his voice barely audible through the ringing in my head. “Mother.”

I swallowed against my tears. “I know,” I said, pushing against him, trying to move him into the house, away from the terrible inferno. He held his place against me for a short minute, then sagged suddenly against the jamb. When I felt his body give, I pushed as hard as I could. We went flying into the vast entry hall, knocking against the pair of antique balloon back chairs Sophie had found just before her devastating bout with cancer.

We struggled to stay upright, grabbing the curved backs of the chairs for stability.

“Sit here,” I ordered when my head stopped spinning. I pushed him down, and he folded passively under the pressure, collapsing on a petitpoint seat, disoriented and sweaty, gray. His breathing was shallow and his pupils were great black circles as he stared out the open front door. I rushed to close it, blocking his view.

In the distance we could already hear sirens, not surprising since the fire company was right down the street. Help was near.

I sank into the twin of the chair Peter sat in and swallowed against tears.

Peter looked at me and shuddered. “I was almost in that car,” he said.

I nodded. “I know.”

“I was going with them on the ride.”

I nodded again.

“I just came in for some sunglasses.” He clutched them in his right hand. He looked at me wildly. “That could be me out there!” His voice climbed the scale with every word, his emotional chaos obvious.

“But it isn’t,” I said, reaching to pat his hand again. “You’re fine.”

“Right,” he said, pulling back from my touch. “I’m fine.”

When he pulled back, his elbow cracked against the chair back, and the pain made him flinch. He swung around to see what he’d bumped, swearing as he rubbed at the ache.

“Your mother loved these chairs.” I said as I trailed my fingers over the curving arch of cherry that formed the back of my seat.

And she had. In a house filled with valuable antiques and reproductions, Sophie had prized these chairs with their mauve needle point seats worked with delicate bouquets of cream, pink, crimson and green.

“It’s the petit point that makes the chairs valuable, so I don’t let anyone sit in them,” she’d told me once. “They date to the 19th century.” She grinned. “That’s why I keep them in the hall. Everyone gets to see and admire them, but no one uses them because no one sits in the hall.”

“Mother loved beautiful things,” Peter whispered as he stared at the wedge of seat visible between his legs. He continued to rub his elbow absently.

“She loved you,” I whispered back, but if he heard me, he gave no sign.

Rarely had I spoken truer words. Sophie had loved both her boys with a fierceness born of the unexpected blessing of late-in-life babies. Though these babies were both men now, towering over their mother with strong, hard bodies and equally strong, willful spirits, Sophie’s dedication and intense affection had never waned. If anything, it had increased in the three years since their father’s death.

“I’m probably the only person who loves them for themselves,” Sophie had told me one day as we sat waiting for the bag of chemicals to drain into her wasted body.

“They are such wealthy young men that people want to get close to them for all the wrong reasons.”

“Don’t they say it’s just as easy to fall in love with a rich man as a poor one?” I asked with a smile.

Sophie laughed. “So they say. But I want the girls Ammon and Peter finally choose to marry to love them like I loved Tom. All the money makes it hard to discern true feelings. I mean, my

boys are wealthy enough that they'll be hard pressed to spend it all, even if that's all they do for the rest of their lives. And it had better not be! Or their wives either!"

I laughed at her outrage at the thought of her sons and their non-existent wives becoming lazy spendthrifts.

She looked at me speculatively. "You aren't looking for a nice, rich husband, are you?"

I thought of Ammon and Peter. Ammon was tall and fair like his father had been. In fact he looked amazingly like the pictures of Tom Hostetter that sat in marvelous ornate frames all over the house.

There was the cowlick on the right hairline that forced their hair to be combed with a swoop of fair hair over their left eyebrows. There were the blue eyes and nearly invisible lashes and brows. There were the half smiles that quirked one side of their mouths.

Sadly I often suspected that this physical resemblance was the extent of Ammon's similarity to his brilliant and principled father. Not that Ammon was weak or unintelligent. He was just ordinary. A regular person. Someone most families would be proud of, even boast about, but who didn't hold a candle to his clever, inventive father.

Peter by contrast was Sophie's image, short, dark and with her intensity, if not her God-heart. He was handsome, but her fine, aristocratic features were blurred a bit in him, like he was a poor copy in which the colors all ran a bit about the edges. Her great, almost black eyes gleamed with life. Peter's merely saw things. Her quick mind made her conversation lively and thoughtful. Peter merely talked.

"Ammon is the older son and his path has always been Hostetter, Inc.," Sophie told me one day.

"Sort of like primogeniture in Olde England?" I asked.

"It's what Tom always wanted. Besides no company can have two men in charge. Someone has to be the one who calls the shots. Now it's Tom. Some day it will be Ammon."

"So what's Peter supposed to do?" I asked. "Go into the military or the clergy like younger sons used to?"

"Whatever he wants," Sophie said. "Whatever he wants."

But what if he wants Hostetter, Inc, I thought.

It appeared that Peter wanted many things. I was with Sophie one day when he visited her and shared a wild and difficult to follow investment opportunity in which he had just invested.

"Mom, you won't believe the potential!" His face practically glowed.

“I’m proud of you, Peter,” Sophie said, her voice warm with encouragement as she patted his hand.

He grinned back, pleased to make her pleased.

She watched out her window that day as he climbed into his BMW convertible.

“He’s going to do so well making his own way.” She smiled sweetly as he turned out of the drive and roared away.

I must have looked skeptical because she hastened to add, “Don’t worry about him. He may not get to run the company, but Tom left him as much money as he left Ammon. Ammon and Peter each got a quarter of his worth, and I received half. And the boys will share mine evenly when I die. Of course most of it is in Hostetter, Inc. stock, but there’s enough income from the stock that Peter can try his hand at making his own fortune without having to sell his shares.” She spoke with total confidence in her son’s abilities.

He can make his fortune if he’s clever enough, I thought. And if his income from the stock continues. And it continues only if Ammon’s clever enough to keep the business going. And if no one comes along with a new company that knocks Hostetter Inc. from its pedestal. And if the economy stays healthy. And if. And if. And if.

What a lot of ifs.

As I sat beside Sophie the day she offered me either of her sons, I contemplated Ammon and Peter. Certainly they were nice enough to look at, could be exceedingly charming if they felt like it, and had that assurance that comes from being raised with money. But for some reason they never spoke to my heart.

“You want to know if I’m interested in either of your sons?” I was genuinely touched that she thought someone like me might make a good mate for these men. “I can’t think of a nicer thing you could say to me.”

She looked at me, uncomfortably perceptive as always, at least about everything but her sons. “Thanks but no thanks?”

I smiled as gently as I could and nodded.

She sighed. “So I’ll keep praying. There’s got to be a pair of nice girls out there somewhere who will like them instead of their money.”

“Maybe they’ll find someone like you,” I said. “You liked Tom for himself, not his money.”

“That I did,” she agreed. “But then he didn’t have money when I married him. The wealth came as a great surprise to me.”

“To Tom too?”

“He always said not. He always said he was going to become filthy rich, and he did.” She smiled. “He always told me he achieved in spite of my lack of faith. I always told him that he achieved because of my lack of faith. He just had to prove me wrong.”

She smiled tremulously and stared at her hands. A great diamond glittered on her left ring finger. I couldn’t imagine how many carats it was, but I was surprised that a frail little woman like her had enough strength to hold it up.

“I miss him so,” she whispered. “You can’t imagine how I miss him! There’s nothing quite as empty as a double bed with one person in it.”

I’d reached out and grasped her hand, and she’d held on for dear life. The pain of widowhood had not dissipated in three year’s time, and I knew from my mother that it didn’t in fifteen year’s time either.

Suddenly the sirens outside stopped, and the muffled sounds of car doors slamming and people shouting filtered in to where Peter and I sat. It wasn’t long until the front doorbell rang.

A uniformed cop entered the front hall and stood with his arms away from his body in that policeman stance accommodating all the gear hanging from his belt.

“Are you two all right?” he asked.

Peter and I nodded.

“What happened?”

“The car exploded,” Peter said. “And I was almost in it!”

The cop looked at Peter’s neatly pressed chinos and oxford shirt under a navy cable sweater. “You were near the car when it blew?” he asked politely.

“No. I was in the house getting my sunglasses, but I was supposed to be in it.” He patted his chest pocket where the glasses bulged slightly under his sweater. “I just ran back for them. The glare, you know. I was supposed to be in the car!”

The uniform nodded and looked at me. I could see him assessing my grubby clothes and abraded forehead.

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

I nodded. I glanced down at myself. “I had just tucked a lap robe around Mrs. Hostetter and was walking back to the house when the first explosion came. It knocked me into the flowerbed. The second on knocked me into the front steps.” I indicated my forehead.

The cop nodded. “I want the two of you to remain here and talk to the detective assigned to the case. Why don’t you wait here, Ms. –“ And he waited for my name.

“Rose Martin. I’ve been Mrs. Hostetter’s home health nurse.”

He nodded. “That your car outside the hedge?”

I nodded. “I was afraid it might catch fire too.”

“Right.” He pointed to the balloon chair I’d just vacated. I sat down again gratefully.

“You, sir,” he said to Peter, “can wait in the living room.”

Peter hesitated. “But my mother and my brother.”

The policeman looked questioningly at him.

“The people in the car,” I said to the officer. “Sophie and Ammon Hostetter.”

The cop looked at Peter. “And you are?”

“Peter Hostetter.”

“Well, Mr. Hostetter, if you’d wait in the living room for the detective, I’d appreciate it. And if there is any news from outside, I’ll see that you get it. And I’m sorry for your loss.”

Peter blinked. “Thank you.” He turned and walked to the living room.

It was almost two hours before the police were finished with me. The detective on the case turned out to be a guy named Lem Huber. I went to school with his younger brother Al at Twin Valley High School. I knew Lem as the football star three years older than Al and me, then as the college man who showed up at Al’s high school games to cheer for him. Most recently I had run into him at the hospital a couple of times when my ambulance runs and his investigations overlapped.

“Well, well, Rose Martin,” he said when he came in.

I felt my tension level diminish dramatically when I saw him.

“So tell me everything you know,” he said as he sat in the companion balloon chair. “Nice and slow and nice and detailed.”

He let me talk without interruption. Then he questioned me politely about what I had said, asking the same questions from several different points of view. I answered as thoroughly as I could, but it all came down to one thing as far as I was concerned: through some terrible accident Sophie and Ammon Hostetter had died.

When Lem finally told me I could leave, I sighed with relief. I grabbed my medical equipment, my purse and keys and rushed out the front door. Fire equipment and emergency vehicles still filled the drive and lawn, many with lights revolving, all with static pouring from their radios. The fire was long extinguished, but all the attendant chaos of a crisis was present, including men and women in a variety of uniforms talking and laughing, now that the immediate need was met.

Police officials were examining what was left of the Town Car under high voltage lights. Yellow scene-of-the-crime tape was draped all over the lawn.

I was so consumed with relief that I could finally leave that I was unprepared for what I saw. Memories long buried leaped at me, overwhelming me, choking me, a kaleidoscope of emotions tearing reason and control from me. My stomach heaved and I grabbed one of the porch pillars to keep from falling.

“Rose?” Lem Huber spoke behind me and his hand came out to help support me.

I swallowed once, twice and tried to contain the incipient panic swelling inside, the great beast who waited in the shadows to devour me whenever my guard was down.

I pushed myself away from the pillar. “I’ll be all right,” I said with what I hoped sounded like assurance, though I suspected I was so white he wouldn’t believe anything I said even if my voice had been steady, which regrettably it wasn’t. “Too many memories.”

Lem nodded as he continued to hold my elbow. “This was pretty bad,” he agreed. I made a little noise he took for assent, and I allowed him think that it was the horror of today’s events that had overcome me. It was safer that way.

Lem raised an arm and waved, and next thing I knew one of the firefighters was holding up two fingers and asking, “How many?”

“I am not concussed,” I said.

“Now how would you know?” he asked with a smile.

“I’m a nurse,” I said.

“Ah,” he said, as he studied the knot on my forehead in the porch light.

“And an EMT.”

“Good for you, sweetheart.” He poked around the injury. “But even a First Responder like me knows this needs to be cleaned out and disinfected.”

“Ouch.” I flinched as he got too enthusiastic. “So clean it.”

“Inside,” he ordered. This time I sat in the kitchen and squirmed as he painted my forehead orange with mercurachrome.

“Hey,” I groused. “Couldn’t you have used Bactine or something less obvious?”

“They don’t give me Bactine.” He stepped back and studied his handiwork. I didn’t like his smug grin.

I took my orange forehead and my sagging energy level and went outside again. But this time I was prepared. I had my thoughts firmly in neutral as I walked across the yard and out to my car.

I drove into Lancaster and to the Home Health Group office, my mind a careful blank. I pulled into the parking area behind the office and parked the car, concentrating on nothing. I unlocked the back office door and put all my supplies away, signing the supply sheets and requisition orders, thinking only of pleasing Madylyn. I got into my blue Civic and started for home.

I hadn’t gone very far when my mind, never very quiet at the best of times, exploded. Images flashed through my mind with the relentless pulse of the light strip on a police cruiser. Fire, crushed impatiens, sirens, static, yellow police tape. Surviving brothers with sunglasses. Firefighters with mecurachrome. Polite detectives with fine brown hair that floated every time they turned their heads.

And rushing white water, swollen and angry, creaming over rocks.

And the inevitable, “Rose, what have you done!”

It didn’t take much intelligence to realize just how close to the edge I was.

“I’m fine. Really. I’m fine.” I repeated it aloud to myself like a litany. Maybe if I said it often enough, it would become true.

But coming out of the house and seeing those lights and hearing that static had brought such a rush of agony that I was unlikely to feel fine for quite some time. I hadn’t had this strong a flashback in years.

You’re being stupid, I told myself. You’re a nurse and an EMT. You deal with emergencies much too frequently to be spooked like this.

But that’s when I’m the healer, the helper. I fix the problems. I don’t cause them.

But you didn't cause the problem today.

No, I didn't, but I didn't prevent it either.

Like you could have. What are you, prescient?

I shrugged away that bit of logic and went back to the real crux of my distress.

But I was the cause then.

The little voice that had been answering me back was uncomfortably quiet. Suddenly I knew I wasn't going to make it home. I felt the bile rise in my throat and swallowed desperately against the impulse to vomit. I felt the tears begin, blurring my vision until I could barely see the road. I felt the shaking start deep in my stomach and I knew it would radiate outward until my whole body shook.

Oh, God!

I blinked madly, desperately.

Oh, God! I have to get off the road before I fail again, before I'm the cause again.

And I saw the answer to my prayer loom out of the darkness, a white farm house with green trim, clean and orderly and known. I pulled into the Zooks' drive, shoved the car in park and fell to pieces.

Read additional sample chapters, and get information on Gayle's latest releases at
www.GayleRoper.com!