

# A Twin Falls

*A High Sierra Mystery*

TERRY GOOCH ROSS

The background of the book cover is a photograph of a snowy forest at sunset. A wooden picnic ground sign is in the lower-left foreground. The sign is dark wood with white text. It reads 'INYO National Forest' in a serif font, 'PICNIC GROUND' in a sans-serif font, and 'Twin Falls' in a script font. The sign is partially covered in snow. In the background, there are snow-covered evergreen trees and a sunset sky with orange and yellow clouds.

INYO  
National  
Forest  
PICNIC GROUND  
Twin Falls



*When a soul mate dies, it doesn't necessarily mean she is gone. A Twin Falls is a story of mystery, fantasy, and friendship set in Mammoth Lakes, California. When one twin and husband are killed in a plane crash, the other, sole survivor of the crash, discovers the bond of twin-ship transcends death. With her sister's help, Janet Westmore solves the mystery of how her twin died, and foils the killer's second attempt at murder.*

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination, or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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a twin falls

my heart grows by half again

Mary lives there

## Prologue

I fell into a deep funk on my 35th birthday—the kind of depression reserved for major life milestones. When I phoned Mary, my twin, to commiserate she couldn't understand why I was upset. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that she didn't get it. After all, Mary was a successful marketing executive, happily married to a software/hardware genius, living in an Architectural Digest-type home in Northern California where her personal masseuse came twice a week to give her and her husband Bob a massage. So, of course, perhaps she hadn't noticed that we turned thirty-five. When stubbornly I listed what I believed to be the obvious drawbacks to turning thirty-five, including competing with twenty-to thirty-year-olds for work, dates, and attention by a bartender to order a drink, she had no clue what I was talking about. Dismayed at how different our lives were, I got off the phone feeling worse than I had before I phoned Mary. A phenomenon that rarely occurred.

This is why, when later in the day I saw an ad in our local weekly newspaper announcing a Mid-Life Crisis Support Group being held that evening at the Mammoth Lakes Community Center, I decided to attend.

About twenty minutes before the session was scheduled to begin, I parked in the Community Center parking lot next to the main entrance so I could scope out the other pathetic individuals who shared my melancholy. After ten minutes I decided there must be several different groups meeting at the center that evening because I saw nearly twenty people walk

in—from twenty-somethings pushing strollers to eighty-somethings pushing walkers.

About two minutes before the session was scheduled to begin, I pulled down the make-up mirror on the back of the sun visor of my Subaru Outback station wagon and checked my hair. It was light brown with a few highlights of sun regularly placed there by Michael, my hairdresser. Before I could take out my brush and start primping, I returned the visor to its original position. If I were late to the meeting, everyone would stare at me. So my messy hair and I climbed out of the car and walked to the front door of the center.

Community Center construction had been completed about four weeks prior, and this was my first time there. Through the doors, I discovered one big room—not a number of smaller meeting rooms as I expected. *Everyone* who had passed my car was seated in folding chairs with their attention focused on a slight, gray-haired woman standing next to the podium. I could immediately tell that she was one of those serene, yoga, health food, La Maze types who had met each one of life's milestones with a smile on her face. I hated her.

When I turned to make a quick and quiet exit, she said in a calming, Zen-like voice, "Don't be shy, dear. Come in and join us. I am sure our lives will be made richer by your participation."

At this point, everyone, including children in strollers and impatient little old ladies, turned to stare at me, some shouting encouragement—some giving me the thumbs up sign, a few just telling me to sit down. I had no choice but to find a chair. Of course, the only vacant chairs were in the front two rows.

I took a seat next to a woman dressed in Chico's latest casual wear who appeared to be in her early fifties. As I sat down, she took my hand and squeezed it.

"You will be so happy you decided to stay," she said.

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Her hand was damp and she smelled like garlic was one of her daily staples. I gave her a forced smile, withdrew my hand as quickly as I could, and breathed through my mouth.

As if things couldn't get any worse, the meeting leader, who announced her name was Cassiopeia, asked me to introduce myself to the rest of the group since this was my first time. Trying my best not to embarrass myself, I stood and blurted out, "Hi. I'm Janet Westmore," and quickly took my seat.

"Oh no, dear," sang Cassiopeia. "We need to learn all about you so you can become..." she glanced around the room opening her arms, "...part of our family." She pointed to a corner, where a flip chart posed a long list of questions.

"The points you need to cover are on the list," she soothed. "And, please, take as much time as you need. We care."

Before I could bolt from the room, the fifty-something woman next to me reached for my hand again and gave me a supportive nod. Believing my hands were already damp enough without taking hers, I took a step forward just beyond her reach. I read the list. I couldn't believe it. They wanted my whole life's story and all I wanted were some hints on how to get through a midlife crisis. The list read:

What's your name? Do you have a nickname you prefer?  
How old are you?  
Where do you live?  
Do you have a spouse? A partner? A special friend?  
Does he or she know that you are here?  
Do you have children?  
Do you have pets?  
Do you work? What do you do?

Why are you here?  
What are your passions?

I checked to make sure I didn't know anyone in the room—after all, Mammoth Lakes is a community of only 8,300 permanent residents—and seeing no means of escape, I began:

“My name is Janet, but my friends call me ‘J’ since I have always hated my given name. My age and the reason I am here are the same: Today I turned thirty-five and realized my life is almost half over and I haven't really done much with it.”

I heard some sympathetic murmurs, someone called out happy birthday, and the woman next to me say under her breath, thirty-five! What does she have to complain about?” Cassiopeia made a humming sound and everyone quieted down.

I continued, “I have a boyfriend. We tried living together but that didn't work so we just see each other a lot. I don't have children or pets.”

This time the woman next to me harrumphed, so I added, “But I have several bird feeders. I like watching the different variety of birds change with the seasons.”

I peered again at the list and said, “I work for myself. I help organizations mediate employee conflicts. I also conduct trainings and provide coaching for organizations to help people become better managers.”

I stopped, gave the list one more glance, and focused on a spot just above Cassiopeia's head. “My passions are cross-country skiing, running, and living in the mountains away from the cities.”

With a pause, I added, “And my twin, Mary.”

I ended with, “Since I have already told you why I'm here, I guess that's it.”

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As I reclaimed my seat, perspiration ran freely off my face. I sat down deliberately on my hands so the woman next to me couldn't grab one. The blood was pounding so loudly in my ears that I only vaguely heard Cassiopeia thank me for my candor and welcome me to the family. Then she started to check in with other people in the room. I surreptitiously took the announcement I had torn from the newspaper out of my jeans back pocket, quietly unfolded it, and confirmed that I would be in the room for another seventy-five minutes.

While the meeting droned on, I decided on a plan of action on how to get through my crisis. As soon as it ended, I bolted for the door before anyone could detain me with pleasantries or words of advice.

I would do what I always did when faced with a disappointment or life problem. I would go see Mary. She might not understand what I was feeling, but I knew I would feel better just seeing her. I always did.



## Chapter 1 — Three Years Later

The bed feels all wrong. The room is cold yet I can't feel the fresh air on my face from the window next to my bed, which is always open. I try to open my eyes, but they feel glued shut. I either have to stop wearing eye makeup or remember to take it off before I go to bed. Then I hear muffled voices and really begin to freak out.

I try with all my strength to open my eyes, but they won't budge. Where was I last night? Did I drink too much? Did someone drug me? I finally manage to open my eyes a millimeter. I see two people standing at the foot of my bed. Although it is dark, one appears to be a man in a white jacket. Huddled next to him is a woman in a blue smock. They are whispering to one another. Gradually, I make out a few words or think I can, because what I hear doesn't make sense. "Crash, broken clavicle, no brain injuries," some medical terms I don't understand, then "twin and her husband killed instantly."

I can't breathe. Mary couldn't, she wouldn't, die and leave me alone. I am being sucked into a dark hole. There is someone else in the room, standing to the side. It's Mary. She is smiling at me. I relax. I am just having a bad dream. I drift back to sleep.



I'm not sure how long I slept. After a while I began to understand that I must be ill or injured, because I seemed to be in a hospital room, and I could only stay awake for a moment or two at a time. Sometimes it was light in the room when I surfaced, sometimes dark. But every time I woke, I saw Mary—either sleeping in the chair next to my bed, looking out the window, or lying next to me with her head on my pillow. Each time I saw her, I knew that whatever was wrong, *everything* would be all right. Then I would give in to the overwhelming desire to close my eyes.

The first day I could stake a claim on consciousness, I woke up early in the morning. No one was around. I assumed Mary had either taken a break from my bedside or returned home. Between a demanding job as a marketing research executive for a top Bay Area firm, and her marriage to Bob, who loved to play, she had little time to spare. That Mary was not at my bedside was a good sign. It must mean I was doing well. I was healing from... *what was I doing in a hospital?*

When I tried to sit up, I realized my left arm was strapped to my chest and felt useless—the slightest movement sent a spasm of pain throughout my entire body—and I was dying of thirst. As I was about to see if my vocal cords still worked, a nurse walked into my line of sight. Attractive, athletically built, she was tending to an IV I hadn't noticed. When she realized I was awake, she started a little.

She said with a warm smile, "Good morning. I didn't realize you were awake. I'm your R.N., Erin."

She paused to see if I understood her, and continued, "The doctor will be in shortly. Let me get you some water."

She brought in a cup with a straw and held it for me to drink. "Slowly. Just take a small sip."

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But I was thirsty and took a big gulp. I nearly choked to death. Whatever was wrong with me included broken ribs.

By the time I was able to breathe normally again, a doctor had entered the room. The nurse moved to the end of my bed. The doctor introduced himself as Dr. Paul, and after some requisite poking and prodding, he set his face in an oddly sad smile and began.

“Do you know who you are?”

“Janet Westmore?”

“Do you know where you are?”

“In a hospital?”

My eyes told me this was true, but I still couldn’t remember coming here or even needing to come to a hospital, for that matter.

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

I hesitated. What was the last thing I remembered? I had gone to see Mary and Bob in Portola Valley after concluding a sexual harassment investigation for one of my clients in Mammoth. I had been anxious to leave town before the results of the investigation became public. Fortunately, a neighbor was driving to the San Francisco Bay area, so I hitched a ride with her. Portola Valley is an upscale rural community, halfway between San Francisco and San Jose, which meant she wouldn’t have to go too far out of her way to drop me off. When it was time to return I was hoping I could convince Bob to fly me home in his recently acquired single-engine plane.

My stay followed its usual pattern. In the mornings Mary and I ran just a block from her home on Alpine Road—a scenic route that borders the Windy Hill Open Space Preserve—a favorite of cyclists and joggers. We went shopping for clothes and other items I couldn’t afford. The three of us went out to dinner every night and drank too much wine. It had been easy to talk them both into coming home

with me. They loved the Eastern Sierra, especially skiing on Mammoth Mountain this time of year, with its more than 3,100 vertical feet and 3,500 skiable acres of sunny California early spring skiing.

Bob was flying us to Mammoth in his Cessna Turbo Skylane Mary and he had named Oscar. Mary and I named all our vehicles; Bob's plane was no exception. The only thing Bob loved more than his plane, fast sports cars, skiing, and anything by Mozart, was Mary.

Bob was at the controls next to Mary, listening to Mozart's Grosse Messe, looking at peace with the world. Mary was trying not to fall asleep. I was in the seat behind her alternately trying to figure out how to use the Smartphone she had talked me into buying and feeling airsick. Small planes are not my favorite things. Then... I felt a sudden rush of nausea. "What ?!?"

I hadn't noticed her move. Now the nurse was standing next to my bedside holding my hand gently.

That was when Dr. Paul, clearly concerned, but with little inflection in his voice, said: "The airplane crashed. Both your twin and her husband were killed instantly. You were thrown from the plane. Fortunately, some backcountry skiers saw the plane go down, and Search and Rescue was able to get to you within an hour or so of the crash. That was two days ago. You suffered multiple injuries mostly along the left side of your body, but none are life threatening, and you will recover over time. I'm sorry."

I protested, explaining Mary had been by my bedside every time I awoke over the last couple of days; that she had even lain next to me while I drifted in and out. I must have become hysterical, because as I was trying to convince them they were wrong, I saw the nurse play with my IV. Moments later I fell back into black sleep.

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When I came to next I saw the silhouette of a tall man staring out the window next to my bed. He must have sensed I had awakened, because he turned toward me, revealing a head of dark chestnut hair, strong features, and tear-filled brown eyes. It was Ross, my longtime lover and best friend. As soon as our eyes met, I started to cry. He held me. We cried together until we were both exhausted.

Still holding me, he said, "I am so sorry about Mary and Bob." His voice cracked and he said in a slightly shakier tone, "I thought I had lost you. I don't think I could have handled that."

This gave way to more crying.

Sounding more in control, he said, "People have been trying to see you since you arrived two days ago. We placed a "do not disturb" on your room and phone. Is there anyone you want to see?"

It didn't take much thought to respond, "No, I don't think I could bear to see anyone except you right now."

Over the next few days, I learned that along with lots of cuts and bruises, I had broken my left clavicle and left radial arm bone, cracked four of my left ribs, bruised my lung, and suffered a concussion. According to Dr. Paul, the trauma, the concussion, and my twin-bond with Mary probably accounted for my certainty that I had seen her in the hospital room with me my first few days there.

Erin stayed with me during the day and Ross stayed at night after he got off work. At least once a visit, each would gently try a new line of reasoning in their quest to convince me Mary had died in the crash. Their efforts were unsuccessful. I steadfastly held onto the knowledge Mary had been by my side through my first few critical days. Eventually, Erin and Ross abandoned the gentle approach, and

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they brought in newspaper accounts of the crash, which listed Mary and Bob as fatalities. Only after reading all the articles several times did I begin to accept the fact I was the only survivor.

By day three Erin and Ross had me standing and taking walks around my room. The same day, the hospital sent in a social worker, whom I politely declined to speak with. On day five I met the physical therapist who would work with me to regain strength. By day seven I was told I could go home as long as someone stayed with me.

Ross and I didn't live together—we had tried cohabiting several years ago and discovered we were both independent, stubborn, liked things our own way and living together would only end in disaster. Regardless, he took a leave of absence from his job as a ski patroller and made plans to move in until I could take care of myself. I vowed then and there to rehabilitate as quickly as possible for the sake of my independence and our relationship!

## Chapter 2

**I**t was snowing as Ross drove up the cul de sac to my home, so it took me a moment to see the get-well banner, ribbons, and notes all over the front of the house. As we pulled in the driveway, I saw the flowers, casseroles, and bottles of wine cluttering the front porch. My driveway had been plowed and the snow shoveled off my decks. I was overwhelmed. Since I first woke up in the hospital, the world had been so small—limited to Ross, Erin, Dr. Paul, the physical therapist, and my grief. I was hit by the veracity of that old cliché, for the rest of the world life still went on.

“A lot of people wanted to be here to welcome you home,” Ross said. “I told them that you aren’t ready for company yet. But I couldn’t stop them from letting you know they care. I hope that’s all right.”

I couldn’t speak. All I could do was nod in appreciation—for Ross and for my friends.

It proved a difficult journey from car to bedroom. Mine is a small two-story home. Like many folks who live in snow country, most of the living areas, including the master bedroom, are upstairs. Ross had to half-carry me up the stairs; every step made me want to scream. For the next few days he had to help me in and out of bed, help bathe me, and prepare meals for me. We left the phone off the hook and avoided listening to the messages on the answering machine, though

Ross did mention more than a few times that the machine was full.

I was sulky and despondent, and spent most of my time either crying or staring off into space. I preferred to keep the house dark and the music off. At some level I knew how difficult it was for Ross, who was walking on eggshells trying not to upset me.

If I hadn't felt so sorry for myself, I might have appreciated the unusual restraint he showed. I don't think I could have tolerated the same sullenness and petulance from him. Usually I am far more tolerant than he is, but that had changed.

After a week I began to be able to fend for myself. While I wasn't ungrateful, I knew my continued irritability and lack of responsiveness was straining our relationship. So I declared myself healed enough to care for myself and sent him back to work and to his own home. Despite my moodiness Ross continued to come over every evening to check in on me, to buy my groceries, and get my mail. He never asked how I was doing or what I did that day. He just listened—often to my depressed silence. Then after a respectable time, he kissed me on the forehead and left.

Gradually my body began to heal. As an avid runner—okay, jogger—I was used to a physical regimen and I knew how important it was to recovery. I weaned myself off the painkillers and the sleep aids Dr. Paul had given me, ate a healthy diet, went to physical therapy three times a week, and religiously completed the home exercises the therapist gave me.

My spirit, however, did not begin to heal. At first I was angry. How could God take them and leave me? Just look at the ledger.

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Mary and Bob had been exquisitely aware of their surroundings from the moment of their births, marveling at the opportunities that lay before them. I had been painfully unaware of my environs until I was thirty, always taking things as they came, planning for nothing.

Mary was a division level manager in the top high-tech marketing research firm in the Bay Area, and Bob was a hardware and software genius who had survived all of the high-tech downturns and gained a noteworthy reputation as a survivor and innovator. I was a former human resources professional who couldn't stand working in one organization for more than a few months, so I had become a consultant who mediated conflicts and trained people to manage in the organizations I wouldn't work in.

Mary and Bob had been happily—really happily—married for seventeen years. I was twice divorced and couldn't live in the same house for more than a few days with the man I loved.

Mary and Bob contributed much of their free time and about \$100,000 a year to a private nonprofit in the Bay Area that helped abused and neglected children. I had never seen \$100,000 and didn't even like children.

After anger came guilt. If I hadn't taken on the sexual harassment investigation... If I hadn't so misjudged the volatility of the assignment... If I hadn't run to Mary's to avoid the shit-storm I knew would follow as soon as the results of the investigation were made public... If I hadn't taken refuge in their home... If I hadn't talked them into flying home with me... They would still be alive.



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