



Bombs, intimidation, kidnapping, murder, jealousy, and soul-searching in the Sierra.

A Twin Pique: A High Sierra Mystery

by Terry Gooch Ross

Order the complete book from the publisher

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/8991.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

A Twin Pique

A High Sierra Mystery



TERRY GOOCH ROSS

a twin pique

A High Sierra Mystery

Terry Gooch Ross

A Twin Pique. Copyright © 2016 by Terry Gooch Ross

ISBN: 978-0-692-82328-6

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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.

The exceptions to this disclaimer includes some local establishments and/or their owners, all of which are deserving of your patronage: Ed Hurley, Burgers restaurant; Tamarack Lodge; Jack's restaurant; Mahogany Smoked Meats; Bishop Country Club; The Side Door; Chuck Addy of Norco; Whitebark restaurant; Mimi's Cookie Bar; Andrea Revy, the Rock & Bowl; Nevados; the Chip Shot, and Dave Schacht, the golf pro at Sierra Star.

Two Birds Press

2017

First Edition

High Sierra Mysteries also by Terry Gooch Ross

A Twin Falls
A Twin Pursuit

For information:

Two Birds Press
P.O. Box 7274, Mammoth Lakes, CA 93546

Acknowledgements

I am convinced you never know how many friends you have until you start to write a book. Based on the amount of support I have received for *A Twin Pique*, as well as the first two books in the series, I am one of the luckiest people in the world. When I asked for information, insight, or critical comments, I was never turned away. The greatest patience my friends demonstrated was when I particularly liked a passage I had just written and made them sit patiently while I read it to them. Never once a complaint.

If the list is too long, you might not take the time to read it. So, permit me to thank some of those I pestered the most. My extraordinary editor and facilitator, Diane Eagle; legal team of Pat and Roxanne Gooch; law enforcement team: Alysa and Jon Cole; and, my chocolate supplier, Sarah Bakewell. Then there are those to whom I sent copy after copy: Missy Stevens, Anna Gooch, Kate Page, Linda Delaney, Denise Boucher, and Pam Koslov. And, of course, my captive audience, my husband Ross and stepdaughter Erin.

Although I've never met him, a special thanks goes out to the designer of the Snow Star golf course logo, Matthew McIvor, a designer at Sinclair Printing, and of course, Joy and Bob Sinclair.

I decided to take the two local golf courses in Mammoth and combine them into a twenty-seven-hole course, I asked the golf pros at each course for their middle names. Voila “David Bernard”.

And, to a special individual . . . Happy Birthday, Jeff Boucher!

a twin falls
my heart grows by half again
Mary lives there

for Ross
today is as good as the before

Chapter 1

Summers are glorious in the Eastern Sierra town of Mammoth Lakes, California. At 8,200 feet above sea level the sky is so bright and so blue it almost hurts your eyes. The air smells like pine, sage, and all things mountain. Wildflowers compete for attention throughout the landscape. Purple larkspur, blue lupine, white yarrow, red paintbrush, yellow monkey flowers, and a zillion other varieties border trails, roads, creeks, and homes.

My twin, Mary, and I were sprawled out on Adirondack chairs—legs hung over the arms like teenagers, catching late morning rays that spilled across the upstairs deck. Mary was coaxing the occasional mountain chickadee to eat sunflower seeds from her hand. They were so polite. The chickadees queued up in the trees and landed one at a time on Mary’s palm. Sparrows and finches made jealous noises from the railing, but were too skittish to come closer. Steller’s jays squawked their disapproval from the roof.

Through the bird noise I could hear the faint tapping of computer keys coming through the living room door. Mary’s husband, Bob, a software genius by anyone’s definition, was always on the computer. Fleetingly, I wondered what he was working on, but lost the thought when a red-tailed hawk swooped down and temporarily scattered the congregation.

There was so much I wanted to talk to Mary and Bob about, but their deaths in a plane crash eighteen months ago had brought a new reality. Oh, Mary and Bob regularly visit.

They leave me with an occasional cryptic message in the form of a picture, website, or some other means. They saved my life when I met their murderer face to face, and have helped me in times of danger. They've even guided strangers to my door who were in trouble and needed help. But since the crash neither Mary nor Bob have spoken a word—at least not to me.

Settling back into my chair I basked in the knowledge today's visit seemed to have no other purpose than to hang out, and that suited me just fine. I would spend time with my twin and her husband any way I could.

So, I returned to the internal debate that had been occupying my brain for the past few weeks. Was it time for Ross, the man of my heart, and me to give living together another try? Our first attempt was six years ago. What Ross and I now referred to as *Version 1.0* had been a disaster. I loved to jump out of bed and chat in the mornings; Ross liked to begin his day with a cup of coffee in the dark, slowly waking up. Ross had the financial discipline of an accountant; I hadn't balanced my checkbook in years—hell, I didn't even know if I remembered how. I liked Crest toothpaste and Woolite laundry detergent; Ross used Colgate and Tide. Needless to say, the experience proved that compromise of lifelong daily routines was something neither Ross nor I was good at.

I'd thought our current situation—separate residences with lots of sleepovers—was ideal for us. At least I did until late one evening last October when a young woman and her then-four-month-old twins appeared on my doorstep homeless and scared, eventually moving into my guest room—compliments of Mary and Bob. Michele Connors and her twins Megan and Maxine lived with me for the better part of three months. During that time they became family. Now they lived in a

friend's guesthouse in Portola Valley, while Michele attended culinary school in San Francisco. I missed them terribly. My need for control and order didn't seem so important anymore. The house seemed to have lost some of its life ever since their departure in January. It felt too big and empty, and I knew only Ross could fill the void.

A chickadee landed on the arm of my chair with an inquisitive chirp, breaking my reverie. Mary must be out of seed. I glanced over. She had vanished, leaving only some disgruntled birds. The computer in the house was silent. I sighed. It must be time to go inside and get to work, and as a human resources consultant I had plenty to do.

A woman's voice rose up from below. "J? Is that you up there?" she shouted. "I hope I'm not intruding, but do you have a moment?"

The late morning sun blinded me as I glanced over the deck railing to see who was beckoning. The silhouette was unmistakable. It was Charlotte standing in my driveway, a neighbor from the end of the street.

Like most mountain houses, the main rooms—kitchen, living room, master bedroom—were upstairs so you could see out the windows when the snow came. "Sure. Come on up. The door's unlocked. You can join me for some iced tea."

I admired Charlotte. She was one of those rare people who had a strong sense of who she was and what she wanted—never looking for approval or accolades. Last year on her fortieth birthday, she retired from her position as vice president of web development for a NASDAQ-listed software company in Southern California, because it was a "young person's field," and she "didn't need any more money." Soon after, she

talked her father into selling her the family's seldom-used vacation home just down the street. The day she moved in, she marched up our cul de sac and introduced herself. Before that, the closest we'd come to meeting was a brief wave as we passed on the street on the few occasions her family vacationed in Mammoth.

Memory of that first encounter still brought a smile to my lips. When I'd spotted her out my front window, striding up the street, I thought she was a kid. She stood no more than four-eleven, and had a stocky build. It wasn't until I answered the door that her gender and age became apparent. Short, red, orphan-Annie-like curls framed her freckled face, and accentuated bright, ocean-blue eyes. Within moments I could see that two of her stronger characteristics were optimism and perpetual motion. As we became better acquainted, I learned that with Charlotte ambiguous, secretive, and patient were *not* attributes I would ever use to describe her.

Charlotte's retirement lasted about six weeks. Then she decided to supplement hiking, fishing, and mountain biking with some work. She started her own web development and software consulting business, and built a loyal following in Mono and Inyo counties within a few months. Only recently had she hired a half-time assistant to help with some of the less challenging projects.

My head was deep in the pantry, as I tried to spot some cookies or shortbread to go with the iced tea, when Charlotte entered the kitchen. My muffled greeting received no response, so I abandoned my search for a sweet to see what was up. One of the happiest people I knew stood before me, shoulders slumped, eyes red, tears streaming down her face.

“What . . . ?”

“My dad died this morning, J. He . . . he drowned in his swimming pool.”

I put my arms around Charlotte and led her to the loveseat that anchored the back-kitchen wall. Handing her the box of Kleenex from a nearby counter, I made inane soothing noises. Finally, after telling her everything was going to be all right, I shut up and just rocked her.

Eventually she calmed enough to sip some iced tea.

“I’m sorry, J. I was just so angry I couldn’t be alone.”

“Angry?”

She made a face as she spit out, “Maybe if Dad’s girlfriend Steph wasn’t so self-involved Dad would be alive . . .” She began to cry again, grief and anger battling for dominance.

We were on our second glass of tea before she was calm enough to continue.

“Sorry. When Steph called, all she said was that Dad drowned. I had to push really hard to get the whole story.” She stood and started pacing the kitchen.

“Stephanie said that when she and Dad returned from their morning jog, he decided to cool down by swimming a few laps in the pool while she went into the house and showered. It wasn’t until more than *two hours later* when she was finished with her idea of breakfast—some green gook she makes in a blender—that she realized Dad hadn’t come in. *She* became *annoyed* and went to find out what was taking him so long. That’s when she discovered him floating face down in the pool with a gash on his head. She called 911, but didn’t bother

calling me until the cops finished with her and she got back to her apartment—*four hours after she found him.*”

“Your father had a gash on his head?”

“From what I could pull out of her, the paramedics and police think Dad had some kind of a medical episode as he was getting out of the pool, and hit his head on the side when he fell. Of course, they won’t know until after the autopsy.” Charlotte stopped pacing and took a slow, deep breath. “I booked a seat on tomorrow morning’s L.A. flight. I should be at Dad’s house in Cheviot Hills by early afternoon.”

“Is there anything I can do for you while you’re gone?”

“Say a few prayers for my Dad,” she said softly. With more vigor, she added, “Perhaps you should say a few of those prayers for Steph, too—that bitch is going to need them.”

Anger seemed to have a calming effect on Charlotte. Her tears were gone, her breathing even.

“I take it you’re not one of Steph’s biggest fans?”

“Hell no! Dad is seventy, Steph is forty. She graduated from high school the same year as my brothers.”

“That’s awkward. Aren’t your brothers younger than you?”

“By fourteen months. You know I wouldn’t even mind the age difference if she wasn’t such an obvious bimbo. Mom died more than ten years ago. Dad was almost catatonic for the first few years—all he did was work, eat, and sleep. When he told me last year that he’d started seeing someone, I was thrilled . . . until I met her. . . .”

Charlotte was interrupted mid-sentence when my cell started blaring Chicago's "Does Anyone Really Know What Time It Is."

I grabbed the cell off the table and turned off the sound. "Sorry. I completely forgot. That's my alarm reminding me I have a meeting in fifteen minutes. I can't be late because I called it." Charlotte said simultaneously, "I'm sorry. I really didn't come over to rant about Steph."

We walked to the front door and hugged. Charlotte promised to call when she returned from her father's. Before I could close the door, she turned and said in a very businesslike manner, "Oh, I almost forgot. Have you met Zach, the guy I hired to help with the business?"

"No. I knew you hired someone, but that's all."

"His name is Zach—Zach Moore. His tech skills are solid, and so far, he's been reliable," she said, staring blankly, as if she had lost her train of thought.

"That's nice, Charlotte. Uh . . . but why are you telling me this?"

She shook her head as if to clear it. "Sorry. I guess this morning's events left me pretty spacey. If you see him going in and out of my house while I'm gone, it's okay. Don't call the police. He's working on a deadline for one of my clients."

I smiled at her sudden concern for safety—Mammoth is one of those places where people seldom lock their doors, much less pay attention to who is coming and going from a neighbor's house. I could tell by the way Charlotte scrunched

up her face in response to my smile that she didn't think it was an idle concern. "You better describe him," I said.

"Good point," she said seriously. "He's in his late twenties, about five eleven, long blond hair. Sort of looks like a surfer."

"He should be easy to spot. I'll keep my eye out for him, and if I see someone other than Zach, I'll call the police."

"Thanks," she said gravely, and headed down the street.

Chapter 31

“Is something wrong?” Helen asked as she and Berta approached.

“Huh?” I was still staring at the empty corner. I shook my head. “Sorry. I guess the excitement has my head reeling . . . Wow, a former President? How did you pull that off?”

Both ladies beamed. Berta was sharing the details of their conquests when David handed us each a drink and a small plate of mini tacos with guacamole. “Ross should be in momentarily,” he whispered to me.

The next time I looked up from my conversation Ross had indeed entered the room. He was part of a tight little group of men—Brian, John, and Ross—hanging on Olli’s every word. Perceptive as ever, Helen said, “Don’t worry, J. She seems to have that effect on every man she meets. You should have seen Denis when Olli dropped some papers by the house.”

It was almost seven o’clock when the gathering broke up. I was pleased. As usual, more work had been accomplished after the meeting than during it. I picked up my bag and looked around for Ross. My heart sank a little. He was standing where I last saw him. The only difference was that David had made it a party of five.

Ross held out his hand as I approached. “We were just talking about going out for some dinner. How does that sound?”

The first response that came to mind was “absolutely not,” but even I knew that would be a mistake. Trying to squelch my jealousy, I said, “It’s going to be pretty difficult to find someplace to eat on Saturday night at the height of the summer tourist season.”

Both David and Ross nodded in agreement, looking disappointed. I was quietly elated.

Brian grinned. “I have an idea. Come up to Couloir. There’s no real staff yet, but I have food and wine. We’ll just have to prepare it ourselves.” He looked boyish and slightly embarrassed. “Please do,” he implored. “Only the architect, the construction crew, and a few staff have seen it. You’d be my first guests.”

While I wasn’t anxious to watch four men fawning over Olli, I was excited to see Couloir. Brian made a few calls before we formed a mini parade of four cars driving toward the base of the Sherwins, on the east side of town.

The small parking lot was surrounded by pine and fir trees at the base of the mountains. Exiting our personal rides, we climbed into a huge off-road vehicle and began the journey up the road. “No vehicles will come up this road except the hotel’s off-road fleet,” Brian explained. “In another two weeks there’ll be a garage and valet station just the other side of those trees.”

“A garage?” John made a face. “Doesn’t sound like that will make a very good first impression for your guests.”

“I think you’ll be surprised. All the hotel’s buildings, including the garage, are mirrored—the outside walls reflecting the landscape. The roofs are all tiered and planted with flora native to the Sierra.”

“Wow,” said Olli, her eyes wide.

“How about light pollution?” Ross asked. “I know a lot of folks in town were concerned Couloir would ruin our night sky.”

“We took those objections quite seriously. As with my other hotels, we followed the guidelines set forth by the International Dark-Sky Association for all the lighting. And because of the uniqueness of the Sherwins, instead of one or two large buildings, we clustered small dwellings, placing all the ground lights between the buildings and the mountains, not toward the meadow or town. Even our fire pits outside each room-pod are set into the natural rock formations, with low fires and low to the ground.”

Brian reached another cluster of trees. Momentarily stopping, he said, “Ladies and Gentlemen . . .” and drove through the trees, sweeping his arm toward the mountain. “Voila!”

A collection of small and medium-sized mirrored dwellings shimmered in the setting sun. It was hard to distinguish the natural scenery from the buildings’ reflections. Trees, wildflowers, and alpine bushes lined streams that meandered between the structures. A few of the more cube-like dwellings at the end of the property seemed to be suspended from trees. The blurred boundary between nature and man-made took my breath away.

Brian beamed as he led us through the entrance, which, true to his word, was between the structures and the mountain. He must have sensed how impressed we were since no one had uttered a sound except for David whose “this is freaking unbelievable” spoke volumes.

Rocks, plants, and water had been used to ensure the lobby was an extension of the outside. As we crossed the threshold our eyes were drawn to the windows. We could see west for miles—the meadow, the town of Mammoth Lakes, the Sierra Crest, and Mammoth Mountain.

The interior décor was modern, tasteful, and sparse. Wood, glass, and more rock, accented by muted earth tones, gave the impression we’d just entered a five-star campground.

All five of us gawked as we followed Brian through the lobby to a rock wall. When he pushed an invisible panel, the wall disappeared, revealing the lobby bar. There was even a welcome surprise. Waiting patiently on one of the wood and glass tables a silver tray held a bottle of Perrier Jouet Belle Époque Brut and five crystal champagne flutes.

When Brian popped the cork, we all started talking at once.

Our first round of praise ended as we finished the champagne. David eyed the bar. “Is the bar open?”

Brian laughed. “As I said, the materials are here, but we have to do our own preparations. Since you asked, David, why don’t you take everyone’s drink orders and make the drinks. You should find everything you need behind the bar. The rest of us will be making dinner in the kitchen.”

Once David had our libation preferences, Brian herded Olli, John, Ross, and me through a double door, into a dark, windowless room. When he turned on the lights, we let out a collective gasp. In stark contrast to the room we just left, the kitchen was bright, sterile, and utilitarian. It was approximately a thousand square feet of white and stainless steel, configured into six peninsula-like work areas, accessible on three sides. Stainless shelves were adjacent to each work area, housing kitchen tools, platters, and dishes. Large walk-in refrigerators anchored each side of the room; grills and ovens resided in the center of the space. In addition to the overhead lights, industrial-pendant lights illuminated all the food prep areas.

Stacked neatly on one of the workstations was a note with six neatly tied bundles. Brian picked up the note, and muttered to himself. It sounded like, “Good thinking, Missy. I wish I’d thought of it.”

He turned and handed each of us a package. As we untied the bundles, Brian said, “Thanks to our chef Missy, you each are an official member of the culinary team for the evening. Here is your uniform, which, of course, you may keep.”

Olli was the first to get her package untied. She squealed, “This is so rad.” She looked around; color shot to her cheeks. “Or doesn’t anyone say that anymore?” She held up a chef’s hat and apron, each had a small “couloir” embroidered on it.

Clad in our new kitchen duds, we were each given a piece of paper explaining our individual assignments, and where we would find the foodstuffs and tools. It turned out Missy must have hurried up to the kitchen after Brian phoned her and performed most of the food preparations, because our jobs were easy.

Midway through our tasks, David entered, clad in the same apron and hat, carrying a tray of drinks. “Isn’t this freaking unbelievable?”

In response, we all started talking at once, and didn’t stop until we had prepared and devoured grilled salmon, asparagus, and an heirloom tomato salad in tarragon vinaigrette. By the time we moved outside to a low fire pit with our cappuccinos and Courvoisier, Couloir’s first guests finally ran out of questions and praise for Brian, and turned our attention to one another.

John studied Olli. “What’s your status, Olli? Married? Divorced? Attached?”

Next to me, Ross stiffened when John mentioned divorce, but after a moment Olli responded playfully, “And why might you be asking me these personal questions?”

“Touché,” he said, arching an eyebrow. “Just wondering whether you are available.”

Brian and David leaned forward in their lounge chairs, their interest evident. Ross suddenly stood. “Thanks for the tour and a great dinner, but I think it’s time for J and me to go home. Pointing at Olli’s admirers, he added, “Unless you feel you need protection from these three, Olli?”

I was surprised by Ross’s sudden desire to leave. Perhaps he was uncomfortable with the conversation’s direction.

“Are you sure?” Brian asked. “I was thinking we could take a stroll around the grounds. It’s almost a full moon.”

David shook his head. “I’ll pass, too. I need to be at the golf course by five tomorrow morning.”

At the same time, Olli jumped to her feet, saying, “I’m not ready to call it a night. A walk sounds perfect.”

Brian smiled at Olli. “Great.”

John, whose eyes were also focused on Olli, said, “Count me in.”

Brian handed Ross the keys to the off-road transport and asked him to leave them in the vehicle. We said our goodbyes, and headed off in opposite directions. When I turned to offer one last “thank you,” I stopped before I made a sound. John, Olli, and Brian were walking up hill behind the property, Mary and Bob following a few yards behind.

About the Author



A southern California native, Terry Gooch Ross moved to the Eastern Sierra with her husband in 1993. She earned her living as an independent consultant specializing in leadership and organization development.

Terry lost her twin Mary suddenly in 2001. In an effort to get her grief under control, Terry began writing a mystery series set in the High Sierra—*A Twin Falls*, *A Twin Pursuit*, and now *A Twin Pique*— in which Mary and her husband Bob make regular appearances.

Terry Gooch Ross

Terry divides her time among family, friends, work, and spending time in the mountains she loves.



Bombs, intimidation, kidnapping, murder, jealousy, and soul-searching in the Sierra.

A Twin Pique: A High Sierra Mystery

by Terry Gooch Ross

Order the complete book from the publisher

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/8991.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**