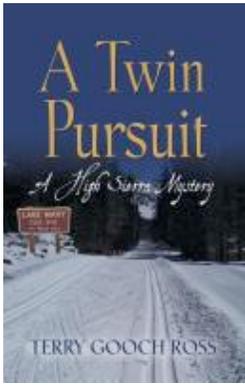


A Twin Pursuit

A High Sierra Mystery

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MPS National Forest

TERRY GOOCH ROSS



After solving the murders of her twin and brother in law, Janet Westmore retreats to her Mammoth Lakes home high in the Eastern Sierra mountains. Before she can slip back into a routine, a young homeless mother with twin babies arrives on her doorstep late one night in a blinding snowstorm - sent, of course, by Mary, her twin. And so our accidental sleuth sets forth on a snow-filled season of extortion, kidnapping, and attempted murder.

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a twin pursuit

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Terry Gooch Ross

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Chapter 11

Monday morning I overslept. I had to rush to get to Le Coquetier Café for my meeting with Bill. While hurriedly dressing I cursed myself for not setting the alarm. If I knew one thing about Bill it was that he was a stickler for being on time.

Attired in the only clean outfit suitable for a meeting I could find, a long-sleeved white T-shirt, black vest, and black pants, I grabbed my purse and headed downstairs, hoping the waitress and I would not be in identical outfits. As I flew out the door I could hear Michele in the guest bedroom pleading with Meg and Max to let her sleep just a few minutes longer. When I heard the twins squeal with laughter, I suspected Michele's pleas were falling on deaf ears. Ah...the trials of a single, working mother.

Bill's Range Rover was directly behind me as I pulled into the parking lot. Even though by a very small margin, I was gratified to have arrived first. It was thirty degrees and breezy as we exited our respective cars, so we delayed our greetings until we were in the warm, fragrant café. Before we were able to say more than hello, a waitress led us to a table in the middle of the room. Sue called to her and motioned toward the back of the restaurant where there was an oversized booth out of earshot of the other tables. I gave Sue a wave and a grateful smile.

I pulled out my notebook and pen. "That was quite a party Saturday night. How did Wes's second celebration go?"

"He actually seemed surprised when we walked in the front door and his friends popped out from every conceivable hiding place on the first floor. Deb and I just stayed for an hour or so. When we left everyone looked like they were having a good time. Except for Nicole."

“Nicole?” I asked.

“Well, judging from the whispers coming from the back seat of the car when we left the restaurant, it was apparent Nicole thought Wes’s big announcement was going to be a marriage proposal. She clearly believes their relationship is much more serious than Wes does.” Sighing, Bill continued, “Frankly, I am relieved Wes isn’t interested in marrying Nicole. She is a very self-involved young woman.”

“But I think congratulations *are* in order for Wes’s acceptance to law school,” I said. “How did you win him over to the dark side?”

Looking into his steaming cup of coffee, he said, “I have absolutely no idea. It’s funny, J. Since Wes was a little boy, he made it known that the field of law held no appeal for him. I always thought his aversion to the profession was caused by the long hours I worked, especially when he was younger. There were many weekend activities and father-son outings I missed because I was working on a case or opening a new office.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “I was floored when Wes made his announcement Friday evening. Not only was I not aware that he had changed his mind about the law, but I firmly believed he would never be interested in pursuing any profession that required additional education. I still can’t figure out how he was able to apply and be accepted to the University of Chicago without my knowledge.”

“What do you think made him change his mind?”

“In a roundabout way it may have to do with why I wanted to meet with you this morning.

“Let me start at the beginning.

“When Wes was seven years old, Alex Rossi—your dinner partner Saturday night—and his son AJ, short for Alex Jr., moved next door to us. If I recall correctly, it was late summer.

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Within minutes of their arrival in the neighborhood, Ellen went over to Alex's house and invited our new neighbors to come for dinner that evening. According to Ellen, Alex was in the process of turning the invitation down until she mentioned that she had a son about AJ's age.

"As we learned during the course of the evening, just months before the move to Mammoth, Alex had come home from work to find his son in front of the TV, and his wife and all her possessions gone. Within twenty-four hours of his wife's departure, AJ went from happy and talkative to sullen and uncommunicative. So as soon as Alex was awarded full custody of his son, he left his job and made arrangements to move to Mammoth, thinking a change in environment would be good for AJ."

Bill's mood seemed to lift a little as he continued. "Despite the unfortunate circumstances behind the move, I remember the evening as one of beginnings. AJ was withdrawn at first, but Wes didn't notice. Wes asked him if he wanted to go fishing. AJ said he didn't know how. So Wes grabbed him by the arm and told him he would teach him. He and AJ would be at the creek that runs behind the house fishing until dinnertime. And the boys were gone. When Ellen called them to the house to wash up an hour later, they returned muddy, fish-less, and best of friends. And they remained inseparable until this year."

Bill's voice caught and he clutched his coffee mug so tightly I thought it might break. The waitress's arrival broke the spell. While Bill ordered breakfast I watched his hands begin to loosen their grip on his coffee mug. By the time she left our table, he had finally put the mug down.

I steered the conversation to less emotional ground, knowing Bill would tell me everything in his own time. "Friday evening Alex said that he works for you. Does that mean he is an attorney, too?"

“Yes. He is. In fact, it was on that first evening at our house when I learned Alex had taken an indefinite leave of absence from a four-person law firm in Santa Barbara. That’s where he and AJ lived before moving to Mammoth. I remember Alex being surprised when he learned that not only was I an attorney, but I was in the early stages of building a business law practice.

“Within a few weeks of that dinner, I hired him.”

Bill paused when the waitress returned and set down our breakfast plates. “That was a nice coincidence,” I said. “You were hiring attorneys, and one moves next door.”

“Actually, while Alex is a good attorney, I hired him because he is a better supervisor and trainer of young attorneys, and that’s what I needed him for.”

Noticing the puzzled look on my face, Bill asked, “J, How much do you know about my business?”

I shrugged. “I just always assumed you were the head of...you know...a...a run-of-the-mill law firm.” Realizing my response sounded less than flattering, I tried to amend. “You know...a group of attorneys...who....”

Bill smiled at my discomfort. “Before we proceed, perhaps I should describe what my run-of-the-mill law firm does.”

Embarrassed, I just nodded.

“I knew I was going to be an attorney by the time I was in high school. But I didn’t want to be an ordinary lawyer. My dream was to create a practice that offered more than just legal services. I wanted *my* firm to provide business counsel, as well as legal counsel. So I only hired attorneys with two equally strong talents. At first, the firm was comprised of attorneys who were CPAs or MBAs. As we expanded and our client base grew, the secondary talents became more diverse. We now have lawyers who are electrical engineers, scientists, hydrologists, even medical doctors. We went from one small

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office in Mammoth twenty years ago, to fifteen offices covering California and Nevada.”

I was mortified. “I had no idea. I guess your practice *is* a little more than a run-of-the-mill law firm.”

Bill laughed and turned serious. “Alex started working for me almost fourteen years ago. I have always thought of him as the best hire I ever made.

“But I’m getting off point. Anyway, whenever a new attorney starts with the firm, I require the new hire to spend his or her first six to twelve weeks in Mammoth, learning our core values and business strategies—in essence, becoming part of the team. Alex has run our new hire orientation-training program and supervised the new attorneys since he joined the firm. The firm’s success is due in great part to his skill in working with our new recruits, introducing them to our clients, and integrating them into our projects. He’s been the firm’s biggest asset. At least he *was* until last February....” Bill’s voice became hoarse and barely audible. “When AJ died.”

Chapter 13

I drove from the Café to the elementary school for my meeting with the principal, Linda Taylor.

As I entered the school I couldn't help but pray that whatever Linda wanted to talk to me about was mundane. After the morning's discussion with Bill I was not sure I was up for anything emotional or complex.

Linda stood in the hall waiting for me in front of her office door, and I knew my prayers would go unanswered. Long blonde hairs had become dislodged from her normally perfect French braid. With little ceremony, she led me into her office. Even before I sat down, her words tumbled out in an uncharacteristic jumble. "I am so glad you could meet with me this morning. The situation is getting out of hand. I didn't know who else to call, J. I know that once again I am going to ask you to help me with something a little removed from your usual line of work, but this job requires great sensitivity and..."

"I've never seen you this rattled, Linda," I interrupted. "Slow down and start at the beginning. Whatever it is, I am sure we will be able to handle it."

She took a deep, calming breath, straightened her back, folded her hands, and placed them on her desk. She gradually returned to her self-possessed manner, and let out a sigh, "I'm sorry, J. It is just that another one of the dreadful emails arrived this morning, and they are getting worse."

"You are right," she said, seeing my confusion. "I must start at the beginning."

"This summer James Myers came to my office and asked to speak with me just as I was about to leave for the day. I don't know if you have ever met him. He is a contractor in town who made the renovations to three classrooms and the cafeteria this past summer."

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Linda paused to see if I recognized the name. When I didn't, she continued. "I'm surprised you haven't met him. He has a very good reputation, even if he is a little standoffish. His best quality is his follow up. The renovations were complete in August, but he still stops by and makes periodic inspections. Anyway, what I thought was going to be a quick conversation with James turned into something a little more..." Then she recounted their conversation:

"May I speak with you for a few moments, Linda?"

Sorting through folders on my desk trying to decide which I needed to take home with me, I responded without looking up, "Sure, James. I was just getting ready to call it a day. What brings you to school?"

"Just making sure all the improvements are working as they should." Then he added somewhat awkwardly, "Do you mind if I close the door, it's um, a little personal?"

The nervous tenor of his voice caused me to look up from my files. James's forehead was damp with sweat. That got my attention. The James Myers I knew was always distant and controlled.

With the door closed, James sat in the visitor's chair in front of my desk. "Last month my mother learned that she has six to twelve months to live. She has a rare form of leukemia."

I started to offer my condolences, but James silenced me with a raised hand. He continued, "She contacted my older brother Peter who lives in Santa Fe, and asked him—she begged him really—to return to Mammoth and stay with her for her final days."

While James paused, looking down at his knees, I ventured, "I am really sorry about your mother, but I am not quite sure I understand why you are sharing this with me."

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James's head jerked up. "Sorry. I just thought you would want the background. Peter needs a job. I wondered if the night janitor position is still open."

Still confused, I rummaged through my desk drawer and found what I was looking for. "Yes, it is. Here is an application. Just have Peter complete it and return it to the office." I snapped my briefcase closed and began to rise, but James was making no move to leave. "Is there something else?"

"You have never heard of my brother, Peter Myers?" His words, tinged with incredulity, were more a statement than a question.

I shook my head no, but I'm not sure he noticed. His voice was a little more strained; he stared pointedly at me as he spoke. "The Peter Myers who was driving home from working on the Mountain fifteen years ago and hit two children sledding down their driveway into the street? That Peter Myers?"

I fell back down into my chair. I replied softly, "No, James. I wasn't in Mammoth fifteen years ago. What happened?"

James stared at a fading green potted palm in the corner of my office as he related the story in a low monotone. "Not much to tell, really. During his senior year of high school, Peter worked on the weekends as a ski instructor. He had a late lesson that evening, and was driving home about six—it was February so it was becoming dark. Kelly and Eric Silverston, two children who lived down the street from us, were playing on their sled. Apparently, they would go to the top of their driveway, sled down it into the street, then do it all again. When Peter turned into our neighborhood, the two kids had just slid into the street. Peter claimed he never saw them. I don't know if they ever saw him. The five-year-old was killed instantly; his seven-year-old sister lost the use of her legs.

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“The police declared it an accident, so no charges were ever filed. But that really didn’t matter: Life for Peter in this town—hell, for Mom and me, too—changed. Everyone thought he was probably driving too fast, or maybe he had a beer after work.” James’s tone took on an edge. “Basically, they all believed it had to be his fault. No one ever would have thought to blame Kelly and Eric’s parents for letting them sled onto a public street in the dark.

“Once the investigation concluded, Peter left town. One morning I went to his room, and instead of Peter there was a note telling Mom and me that he thought it was in everyone’s best interests for him to leave Mammoth. A couple of months later, he wrote us from Santa Fe, New Mexico, to tell us he was okay. He didn’t even stay to finish high school, he just took his GED.”

“But that was a long time ago,” I said. “Most people won’t remember something that happened fifteen years ago...”

The look in James’s eyes stopped me mid-sentence. There were tears in those eyes, but I was not sure if they came from his anger, his frustration, or something else. I closed my mouth, sat back, and waited.

“The whole situation was devastating to my mother. Right after the accident, the principal called and told Mom he thought it would be a good idea if Peter and I—I was a sophomore—didn’t go to school until the investigation was over. He thought our presence might be disruptive. He included me in his banishment since the older sister of the kids Peter hit was in my class. He said Mom could stop by once a week and pick up our schoolwork.

“Mom would go to work at the courthouse, where she was a clerk, and hear people whispering about how her son had run over a five-year-old, and made a seven-year-old a paraplegic. Then at night she would try to act cheerful, telling us

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everything would be all right, and help us with our schoolwork. Eventually the police found Peter was not at fault. But everyone had already made up their minds. They still whispered and stared.

“But I think what hurt her most was that Peter left without telling her. She went into a deep depression—nothing I did could get her out of it.” Looking down at his lap, he added, “When Mom got the prognosis I tried to talk her out of asking Peter back home because I was afraid it would dredge up a lot of bad feelings, but Mom insisted. Now she wants me to find him a job. I thought a position as a night janitor would work best—no one will see him, and he can spend days with Mom while I’m at work.”

“So you hired him?” I asked.

“Yes, though he is significantly overqualified. Apparently after he finished his GED, he completed two years at Santa Fe Community College then went on to the Institute of American Indian Arts where he graduated with honors. He designs and makes onyx and lapis jewelry, and has earned himself a strong regional reputation.”

“You admire him,” I chided. “I can tell by the way you talk about him.”

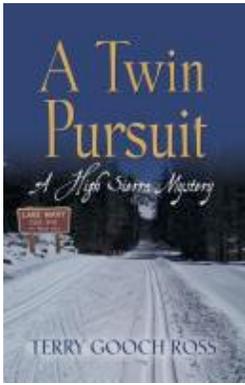
“I do,” Linda admitted. “He started as the night janitor at the beginning of August. He is always on time. He keeps to himself, but when approached he is friendly. His work is thorough. I can leave him a note about something that needs cleaning or fixing before I leave for the day, and in the morning the task is done. Nothing is beneath him. He is the perfect night janitor.”

“Sounds like things are going well,” I said slowly. “So why do you need me?”

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Linda's face returned to the grave expression she wore when I arrived. She took a manila folder off her desk and handed it to me. "This is why."

There were several sheets in the folder. The top sheet was an email addressed to Peter Myers. The email contained a blurry black and white picture of an accident scene. Squinting, I could make out two small children sprawled unnaturally on a snow-covered street with a broken sled in the background. Under the picture three words were typed in a bold, red font: "YOU WILL PAY."



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