

Set in New York and nearby Connecticut, the early months of 1970 leave in their wake a string of indelible memories for single dad Erich Mauer, all of them painful. His younger son is confined following a near fatal OD, Erich loses his management job when his company restructures, and he's bedside when his fiancée loses her battle with leukemia.

Once Upon a Crossroad

By R. M. Gibson

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R.M. Gibson

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ISBN: 978-1-63263-237-1

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2019

First Edition

Chapter One

It was a weary Erich Mauer who stirred when the cabin lights were turned on aboard American's Flight 18, an overnight 707 from San Francisco to New York's JFK, and the final leg of a long trip. A few minutes later a warm, friendly voice came through the overhead speakers.

"Good morning, folks. This is your captain speaking. Sorry about the late departure last night, but as you heard before we left the Bay Area there were connecting flights we had to wait for. At American, we don't want to leave anybody behind. And along with the delay, Mother Nature's tailwinds haven't been very helpful, so we haven't made up much time. We're figuring on being at the gate at, uhh, about eight o'clock. If we have to wait for a place to park, it'll be a few minutes after that. The weather in New York is overcast, breezy, and a chilly forty degrees. We don't have far to go now, so just sit back, relax, and enjoy that tasty breakfast your cabin crew is serving. We hope you got a little sleep, had a good flight, and that you'll come back and see us again real soon."

As Erich ate, he reflected on the events of the past few days. He'd left Sydney on Friday morning, spent a night in Hong Kong, then another in Tokyo before stopping in San Francisco to see Roxane Bouchard. They'd been lovers for a year, and she was ready to marry. Erich wasn't. A recent divorce, his second, had left its mark and taught him that he should take whatever time he needed to sort out his feelings. Roxane had grown impatient, but she was sure that his reason for arranging the stopover was to propose. After nearly three hours together, and he hadn't popped the question she expected to hear, she told Erich they were through, left him at the airport, and walked out of his life, indifferent to the fact that he had a wait of nearly eleven hours for his ongoing flight into JFK. The day they'd planned on spending together came to a sudden end, and their affair died with it on the first Sunday of November 1969. Now that it was over, Erich had few regrets. But his two teenage sons needed stable maternal support, especially Rudi, the younger of them, who'd already been into barbiturates. Both he, and older brother, Kurt, thought Roxane might one day become their surrogate mom. It was not to be.

As they were making their descent into JFK, a polite young stewardess said, "Sir. Excuse me. We're about to land. You'll need to bring your seatback into the full upright position."

"Sure. Been busy reminiscing."

The later arrival wasn't a problem for Erich. He could put in part of a day at the office before going up to Grand Central and taking an afternoon train home to suburban Seaford, Connecticut. He'd be at the station by five o'clock, a time he'd already given the new woman in his life, Brenna Walsh. Once back in his office, he'd call her to confirm that he'd be in as planned. He wasn't up to working any later than midafternoon.

When the cab driver dropped Erich off at his downtown building, 4 New York Plaza, his office partner, perky auburn haired Katie Dunne, was shocked to see him come through the door.

"Erich! Good grief, what are you doing here? You look wiped out. I didn't expect to see you until at least Wednesday. Anyhow, glad you're back safe and sound."

"I'm mostly okay . . . just look like death warmed over. Anyway, it's not life threatening, and I'm better off here and busy for a while. The nine-hour time change is a bitch, so it'll take a few days to get turned around. From the looks of what's on my desk, I'll need to do that sooner rather than later. And after I'm home I've got some catching up to do, too, you know. Be best if my internal clock is reset to Eastern Time."

Katie understood what he meant and smiled faintly. "The only personal call you had while you were gone was from Brenna. Another one, Erich? You sure do keep busy. Maybe someday it'll be my turn. Whatever, she said on Friday that if you wanted to come out earlier, she could still pick you up. Sounds like she has a special welcome home event in mind. You up to it?"

"Shouldn't take long to find out. But before we get on to other things, there's some news I think you'll find interesting. You were right about Roxane. She's history. You remember I was to meet her in San Francisco. We kept our date yesterday, took time to get reacquainted, and then all of a sudden she pulled the plug. It's over. Odd thing is, it really doesn't matter all that much. A while back, I got the feeling she'd walk if I didn't propose fairly soon, so what she decided wasn't exactly a surprise. And Lara's getting so wrapped up in her businesses that after a year of being close she's beginning to drift. Maybe I'm wrong, but that's the way it looks. So with the love of my life, Tina, having moved to Washington I'm fallin' on hard times. Brenna and I are close, but she's not the marrying kind. We just enjoy each other's company and let it go at that. No commitments. Anyway, glad she called, but I may stick with what we agreed on a couple of weeks ago."

"I told you last spring what I thought about Roxane, so she did just about what I expected. But if times are tough, there's always me, you know."

"Katie, you're a sweetheart, and I love you dearly, but I've said it before. There isn't any way we can work side-by-side Monday through Friday and then sleep together on weekends. Still, I'm pleased you think I'm someone you'd like to snuggle with. Good for my ego. Could be I'd look at it differently if one of us leaves the company and you get around to dumping your Danny."

"When he's gone, you'll be the first to know. Then I'll name the day, the time, the place, and hope you'll turn up and let me show you what kind of partner *I* can be."

"Easy. You're way ahead of me when it comes to the subject of us."

"In that case, I'll be patient and then pounce on you when you're least expecting it."

"You're hopeless. Let it be. On a less stimulating subject, I started writing my trip report over Indonesia and finished it on the flight into Tokyo. If you can get it done fairly soon, one of us will deliver it to the boss before I go. As I remember, his name is Henning."

Katie chuckled. "No change. Still the same livewire. And about your report, I'll get to it right away."

"Speak of the devil, look who just walked in. Hi, Joel."

"Mornin', Erich. Surprised to see you here, but since you are how'd it go?"

"Good. It was a busy week. Only got in about an hour of sightseeing, and maybe half that to do a little shopping."

"I've heard from Malcolm, and he's pleased with what you were able to do for various parts of IMCO-Australasia. And I'm sure you know about this from him directly, but while you were on your way back he confirmed that he wants you to help with their search for a new personnel head. I said yes, of course. The evaluation process begins on December 15. That's firm now. It's a Monday, so he suggested that this time you might want to come in a couple of days earlier. Since it's a busy time of year, you should probably get your reservations started before you head home."

"Good idea. And if you can stand it, my trip report's done; one of us will get it to you before I leave. Whenever that is."

"You're unbelievable. Always trying to stay one step ahead of me, and you're doing it. Says something about your dedication."

"Thanks. Just trying to do a good job. You pay me well."

"Okay. See you on Wednesday, maybe. Have a good rest."

“Thanks, boss.”

When Erich finally got to his desk, he phoned Brenna.

“Hi, babe. How’re you?”

“*Erich.* Good to hear your voice. I’ve really missed you. Especially after dark.”

“That’ll change. Katie gave me your message. I thought on my way in from Kennedy that I’d wait until the four-something train we talked about. Then it dawned on me that I’d be spending the better part of a full day in the office. Truth be known, I ain’t up to it.”

“Then you’ll like my news. I’ll still be able to pick you up because I’m taking the afternoon off. The people I work with are beginning to wonder what’s going on. I’ll let ‘em guess. Can’t wait to see you.”

“Ditto. That’s my kind of good news. What I’ll do now is wait until my report’s finished and then get myself on a train that leaves at about midday. I’m really glad you have the afternoon off. It’ll give us more time to get caught up. And if you were able to make arrangements for the overnight, that’ll be even better. I’m ready for a big bear hug.”

“Mmm. I hear you. The overnight’s set, and all day tomorrow, too. It’s the way you wanted me to work it out if I could, and I’ve been able to do it.”

“Great! What I’m setting aside is to pick up Kurt and Rudi. But it’s probably best if they stay with the Engels until after we’ve had our reunion and I get my circadian clock running on Seaford time.”

“Good we did some planning before you left. Now that you’re back, I’m going to get you cornered and then keep you all to myself for a couple of days. It’s called being selfish. Or maybe greedy is a better word.”

“Ahhh, cornered is it? The southwest corner of number 710 is where I usually get horizontal. Is that what you have in mind?”

“Now *you* need to take it easy.”

“Okay. It’s just that I’m really looking forward to spending the next two days with you. Gives us time to enjoy each other’s company. We’re overdue.”

“Sure are. But I’ve got to get back at it. See you at about one.”

“I’m really pleased with all your news. Hope I survive the sluggish train ride out. Bye, babe.” He smiled at Brenna’s latest surprises and her afternoon off.

Then Erich phoned Clayton Zorn, his good friend and former boss at Essex Steel, to confirm their Friday afternoon date.

“Hey, Erich. Good to know you’re back. You’re on my calendar. I want to hear all about your trip, but I’m off to a meeting and gotta run. I’ve found a new place, The Bodega. See you there at about five thirty.” He gave Erich the address and added that they might have one too many.

His trip report finished, signed, and delivered, Erich listened to Katie’s summary about the status of their various projects. When she’d finished, he decided he’d given IMCO management all they had a right to expect at the end of his long trip. He gathered up all his stuff, said goodbye to Katie, and hailed a cruising taxi for the ride up to Grand Central.

On the train ride out, Erich’s eyes took in the bleak cityscape. He found it drab compared to Australia’s delightful spring weather, and his lids grew heavy from looking at too many familiar scenes. Drowsy as he was, though, he couldn’t take his mind off Lara Renzo. By chance, their paths had crossed in the laundry room of his building almost a year ago. It was shortly after he’d met Roxane at a conference in Las Vegas. Taken with Erich, she’d come east to spend several days with him and had flown back to Vegas on Monday, Veteran’s Day. It was the following Saturday afternoon that he and Lara met. Other than the various machines in the room, they were alone and she’d made a brazen comment about his messy sheets. They’d shared a chuckle, talked some, and then taken with her charm, Erich had invited her up to his place while their clothes were washing. They’d shared glasses of potent homemade Italian red wine. Later that afternoon, their defenses lowered, they’d bedded and found paradise. Since then, they’d been lovers and constant companions. But Lara’s focus was different now, and Erich was beginning to think their romance had about run its course. Unlike his reaction to the end of his affair with Roxane, he’d hurt some if his relationship with Lara came to an end. Worn out from his travels, and by the thought of what might be, he dozed. It was only from force of habit that he awakened in time to get off the train at Seaford Station. Years of conditioning. Pavlov would’ve been proud.

Shuffling off the old coach, Erich and Brenna spotted each other at about the same time. She waved. He smiled. Then she greeted her returning road warrior with a warm hug. It felt especially good.

Raven-haired, attractive and well-built, Erich’s eyes liked what they saw. “No need to ask how you are,” he said. “You-look-absolutely-great!”

“Good to know the clothes I picked out and the extra time I took getting ready this morning were worth it. The other part of it is that I’m also showing you how glad I am that you’re back.”

“It’s interesting to think about what I’ve just done, but it’s also good to be home again—and to see you. But the news is I’ll be going back to Australia in about six weeks. More about that later.”

“Not much doubt that you’ve had a long trip. It shows. Best thing I can do is get you home so you can relax before we go out for dinner, assuming you’re up to it. Maybe you can take a nap. I’ll keep you company. After all this time, it’ll feel good to be close.”

“I like your idea, but I shouldn’t nap. Except for the morning I got to Sydney, I haven’t done that during the day since I was about three months old. Mother likes to say, ‘You were such a pill’. I need to stay up. Otherwise it’ll take forever for me to get on local time.

“Well, I’m yours for the next forty-plus hours, right up to Wednesday morning.”

Glad you could work out having tomorrow off, too. You really are making my homecoming special.”

“When you look back on it in a few days, you’ll be able to confirm it. But if we get friendly too soon, we might never get to dinner.” Her mischievous smile was priceless.

Brenna pulled into a visitor’s parking space at 17 Mianus Ridge, and then the two of them made their way up to Erich’s apartment, number 710. They were both glad to be back in his comfy nest and its familiar walls.

Erich shed his blazer and pants, badly wrinkled from the long hours on flights all the way from Tokyo. His aim was to put on something casual. But as he was undressing, and despite what Brenna had said, so was she. What followed was driven by passion.

Fatigue had set in, so Erich was far from his best. But they loved, and both soon reached a place that took the edge off their having been deprived. Then, for only the second time in more than thirty-nine years, Erich napped. He slept for nearly two hours. Brenna watched him, fascinated with his face and the lively mind, now mostly at rest, which was hidden beneath his head of disheveled hair. What was he dreaming about that made him smile slightly? Then, thinking about their relationship, she had to admit that she was fond of Erich and also taken with all he’d done during the past two weeks. She cared about this man, someone who’d almost certainly never be her husband, but she always felt a special kind of warmth when he held her close. It was good seeing him at peace. But she wondered about their future and where their paths would take them. Probably in different directions since the lives they led were different.

Later, rested some and showered, Erich suggested they go out for an early dinner. Brenna agreed. Before they left, he told her about his meeting with Roxane, at least some parts of it, during his stopover in San Francisco.

“She’s gone, just like Katie and Tina, my secretary at Essex Steel, said she’d be. They’d both met her and were sure she wouldn’t wait more than a year. By coincidence, maybe, it was exactly one year—plus a few days. It was Tina who said that most women would hang on until the end, and maybe beyond, so she couldn’t understand how Roxane might have the will to shut off her feelings, her affection, like a light switch. But she did it. And know what? I really don’t much care. Part of it, I guess, is that I found out she’s sixteen years younger than me, not eight like she said. I’m certain that being married to her wouldn’t have lasted, and there was no way my psyche could handle another divorce. And Lara? I think we’re headed in the same direction. Difference is, she matters. Another couple of weeks, and we’ll have known each other for a year. That seems to be the magic number, and it explains why I need to be patient. It’ll take a year, maybe longer, for me to know if a relationship feels right and it has a good chance of working out.”

“I can relate to that. But, two things. First, you can expect Brenna Walsh to be around for more than a year. Second, don’t count on me being the permanent squeak in your bed. I told you pretty much the same thing when we first met. I’ll be your companion, but there probably isn’t a ring, or another altar, in my future. I like you, Erich, maybe more than I should, but I want to keep things between us just about the way they are. And another thing. Since you and I have gotten close, I’ll have to decide if I should keep helping Lara out at her shop on weekends, assuming she asks. Could be that seeing our long friendship fall apart is the price I’ll pay for taking over her place in your life.”

“It’ll be something for the two of you to work out. Why don’t you just cool it and see what happens. And how you feel about us is fine. It means we don’t have to spend much time thinking about romance, or trying to figure out where our relationship is headed. Now, dear heart, I’m not just tired, I’m hungry, too. How ’bout some dinner?”

Erich decided his Mustang could probably use some exercise, so he drove to a restaurant they liked: The Ingleside.

“We’re in a rut, kind of,” Erich said later. “Let’s go someplace else tomorrow night. Problem is, Tina’s shadow is in lots of the other restaurants. Same thing with coming back here if someday we decide we’ve had enough of each other. It’s because we ate here the night we met, so it’ll

always be our place. I said that at the time. There'd forever be an image of you sitting at one of the tables. Guess I'm a hopeless romantic."

"I know. It's one of the reasons I like you. But you were going to give me a rundown on your trip, and the other one coming up."

Erich went into more detail than was necessary, but Brenna seemed interested in every bit of it. He talked about the stops along the way, including Athens, Tehran, New Delhi, Hong Kong, Manila, and also his business in Sydney. Then there were the stopovers in Hong Kong, Tokyo, and San Francisco on the way home. By the time he'd finished, they'd long since finished dinner.

Over an amaretto, Erich said, "The reason I'm going back to Sydney in December is that the head man down there, Harry Malcolm, wants me to interview candidates for his personnel director's job. The current guy is retiring, and they need to find a replacement. Yesterday. The search should've been started sooner, but that was out of my hands. Before I left at noon, we tried to work out another round the world trip, but there were sectors, as they're sometimes called, that were sold out. Not important. Malcolm said I should travel smarter anyway. What he meant was that I should fly west, straight down and back, but make a stopover in the Fiji Islands. So, I'm doing that. I leave here on December 9 and get home on Christmas Eve. But once I'm back, I don't suppose we'll see much of each other over the holidays."

"It's still a ways off, but we'll work something out. I'll be busy during the holidays themselves, but we should be okay otherwise."

"I'm taking time off starting the morning I'm back. With both Christmas and New Year's Day on Thursday, my five vacation days turn into almost two weeks off. So if you're free, there'll be time to do whatever."

"Good to have your schedule. Family comes first during the holidays, but I'll work around them. Count on me fitting into your days off. On second thought, I shouldn't get to be too much a part of your vacation, or your life. I might get to like it too much, in spite of what I said earlier."

"Before we find out if I have enough energy left for nocturnal delights, I have a little something for you."

Erich dug into a pocket of his jacket and pulled up a small box. Smiling, he handed it to Brenna.

After a brief pause, she opened it. Inside was a magnificent black opal from Australia's Lightning Ridge area that he'd brought back from Sydney.

Brenna's radiant blue eyes came alive. "Ohhh, Erich. It's stunning. How can I ever thank you?"

“Just keep on being the Brenna Walsh I’ve gotten to know. Call it an early Christmas present. I didn’t know your ring size, so I couldn’t have it set. Anyway, there wasn’t time. If we can get to a jeweler during the holidays, you can pick out the ring. It’s part of the deal that I couldn’t get done in Sydney. But don’t think of it as an engagement ring. I just wanted to do this because you’re important. Another way to say it is that I think you’re special.”

“I don’t get misty-eyed very often, but you’ve almost gotten to me with this. It’s elegant.”

“Now, let’s go back to number 710, do some cuddling, and then see if I have any oomph left.”

“I’d like us to try. If it doesn’t work out, I’ll understand. You’ve had a rough seventy-two hours, so I won’t worry about it since we have tomorrow. I like the idea of sleeping late on a Tuesday. I owe Sis. You remember Colleen. She’s a sweetie.”

When they were home, Erich burned what little energy he had left to do what Brenna had in mind. Contented, she snuggled up to Erich as their loving, and their day, came to an end. He badly needed rest and sleep came instantly. Feeling at peace, Brenna smiled amiably before she slept.

On Tuesday, Erich’s body clock was so disoriented that he felt worse than when they went to bed. So he squandered much of the morning trying to decide if there was any chance he’d live. It was a lot like the Sunday morning in Sydney when he went down and slept for almost sixteen hours. “I don’t know about international travel,” he grouched. “It’s debilitating.”

“You’ll be fine. Just take it easy. I promise not to put a move on you. At least not until later.”

A quiet day, a very dry Gibson over ice, a high protein dinner, and Erich did feel better by the time they got home. So much so that he was nearly his virile self later in the evening.

Brenna purred afterwards. “You’re almost back to normal.”

On Wednesday morning, the two of them slept later than usual. Didn’t matter. Brenna would most likely get to her job at the Metro Agency on time. As office manager, she had some small perks, like being a little bit late. When they finally started their day, Erich walked Brenna to her car. They both savored their affectionate hug and gentle goodbye kiss. Then, into the garage, Erich brought his Mustang to life and headed toward the parking lot across from Seaford Station. Brenna was at work by nine o’clock. Erich was more than an hour late.

When he got to the office, Katie smiled brightly and greeted him with her always cheerful, “*Good* morning,” and then added, “I thought maybe you were taking the day off.”

“No, I waited until Brenna was ready to leave. She works for the biggest insurance agency in Seaford and doesn’t have to be in until around nine. But I could’ve used another day. The turnaround hasn’t been easy.”

“Especially when you have someone to look after.”

“It took some effort, but I managed.” There was a hint of envy in Katie’s thin smile.

“You had a call from Lara at a little after nine. Since she called here, I guess she doesn’t know you’re back. Anyway, her message was that they just found out that an uncle who lives up in Worcester, Massachusetts has lung cancer, so she and her mother are going up to see him over the weekend. She said you’d know that her shop is closed on Mondays, and with Veteran’s Day coming up the day after, she’s taking a four-day weekend and will call you when they’re back. I took everything down. Here are my notes.”

“That’s really sad news. He’s been like a father to her after her dad was killed in a rail yards accident several years ago. She and this uncle have been really close. Why do these things happen to such good people? Makes you wonder if the Lord hasn’t abandoned her Uncle Gino.”

“Do you want me to get her on the phone?”

“No. It may not be the right thing to do, but we weren’t to talk until Friday. She has enough on her mind, so I’ll let it be and call her then. We were going to spend the weekend together.”

“Her being away ruins your plans, but her trip has priority.”

“Lara will need lots of support when she gets back, and I’ll be there for her. She’s certainly has been for me when I needed it. I know what she’s going through. The man is special to her. But it’s best not to dwell on it further until she has a better idea about where things stand. Now, what’s on our schedule this morning?”

“First item is an update on your trip back to Sydney. You got confirmation from the travel department late yesterday that your reservations are all set. Your December 9 departure is on BOAC’s Flight 591 and it’s been confirmed. It leaves at 3:00 p.m. The return flight gets you into JFK just before eight on the morning of the twenty-fourth. Not much time for Christmas shopping.”

"I'll do it en route—and in Sydney if there's time. I'm stopping in Fiji, as you probably saw. I'll have two days there going down, and about twenty-four hours on my way back."

"Travel also said that on your return you'll have about a seven hour layover in Los Angeles before you fly overnight into Kennedy. BOAC will put you up at a hotel near the airport. It's their Flight 592 from Sydney to New York, including your stopover in Fiji and theirs in Los Angeles. Here's the itinerary."

"Not ideal, but I guess that's it. Okay, it'll give me part of another day to get turned around. Christmas will probably be a train wreck. May sleep through it. So, what else is on our plate?"

"The usual requests for support, and a workup that I've started for a trip to Chicago on the sixteenth that Joel wants you to make. These are the notes I took while he was talking about it. Looks like another get acquainted trip more than anything else. Then he wants you to start thinking about a trip to London in April to visit IMCO Ltd. Here's what he scribbled out. He'd have talked to you about it himself, but he had to make a quick trip to Detroit. Something came up, and he left on Monday evening. It's way early, but while it was on his mind he wanted you to have his ideas about what he thinks your agenda should be."

Erich and Katie busied themselves with the more important items first, then tackled less critical requests. Not much work was needed on the Chicago trip as it really did look as if he'd be going out to meet with his contemporaries. The London trip was far enough off that it'd keep until after he was back from Sydney.

Before he went to lunch on Friday, Erich phoned Lara to find out how she was doing and to see what her plans were.

"Hi babe, I'm back. Katie gave me your bad news. You're still leaving today?"

"Good to hear your voice. Feels like you've been gone forever. Yeah, we'll be on our way around four. Sorry I can't keep our date, but you already know that this is the uncle I told you about last Thanksgiving. He's my favorite and the father I haven't had since we lost Dad. It's a trip we have to make. And it looks like I won't be able to see you at Christmas either. I know you'd planned on it, but it'll be for the same reason. We really don't have any choice."

"I understand. It's important to be with family at a time like this. Just let me know when you think we might be able to get together."

“Maybe the following weekend.”

“Not ideal. I’m going out to Chicago on Sunday, the sixteenth, but maybe you could stay over the night before.”

“Been a while since I’ve seen you. I’d like to come over, even if it’s only for one evening. That’s better than not seeing you at all.”

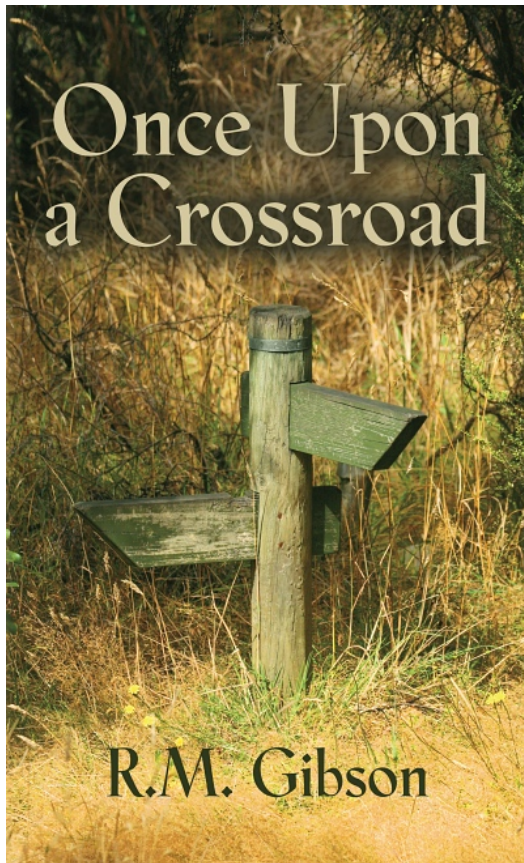
“I’m going to Sydney again in early December and won’t be back until the morning of Christmas Eve. But I imagine you’ll have already left for Worcester by then. So, see you a week from tomorrow. After that, we’ll have to figure out what’s doable.”

“It could always be a week night. With our schedules, we’ll have to be flexible. I’d like that. You’re still important to me.”

“And you are, too. So I’ll plan on your staying over on Saturday night next week.”

“It’s a date. I’ll try to get away at midafternoon. Now that I have some help, it’s easier for me to do that, and it’ll give us a little more time together.”

“Good. See you then. And drive carefully.”



Set in New York and nearby Connecticut, the early months of 1970 leave in their wake a string of indelible memories for single dad Erich Mauer, all of them painful. His younger son is confined following a near fatal OD, Erich loses his management job when his company restructures, and he's bedside when his fiancée loses her battle with leukemia.

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