

For Erich Mauer, changes abound. There are financial uncertainties and a caring affair eventually comes to an end. In time, Erich leaves New York, moves to the Northeast and launches a promising new career. It's there that he also meets a charming young woman, so both his professional future and personal hopes show promise.

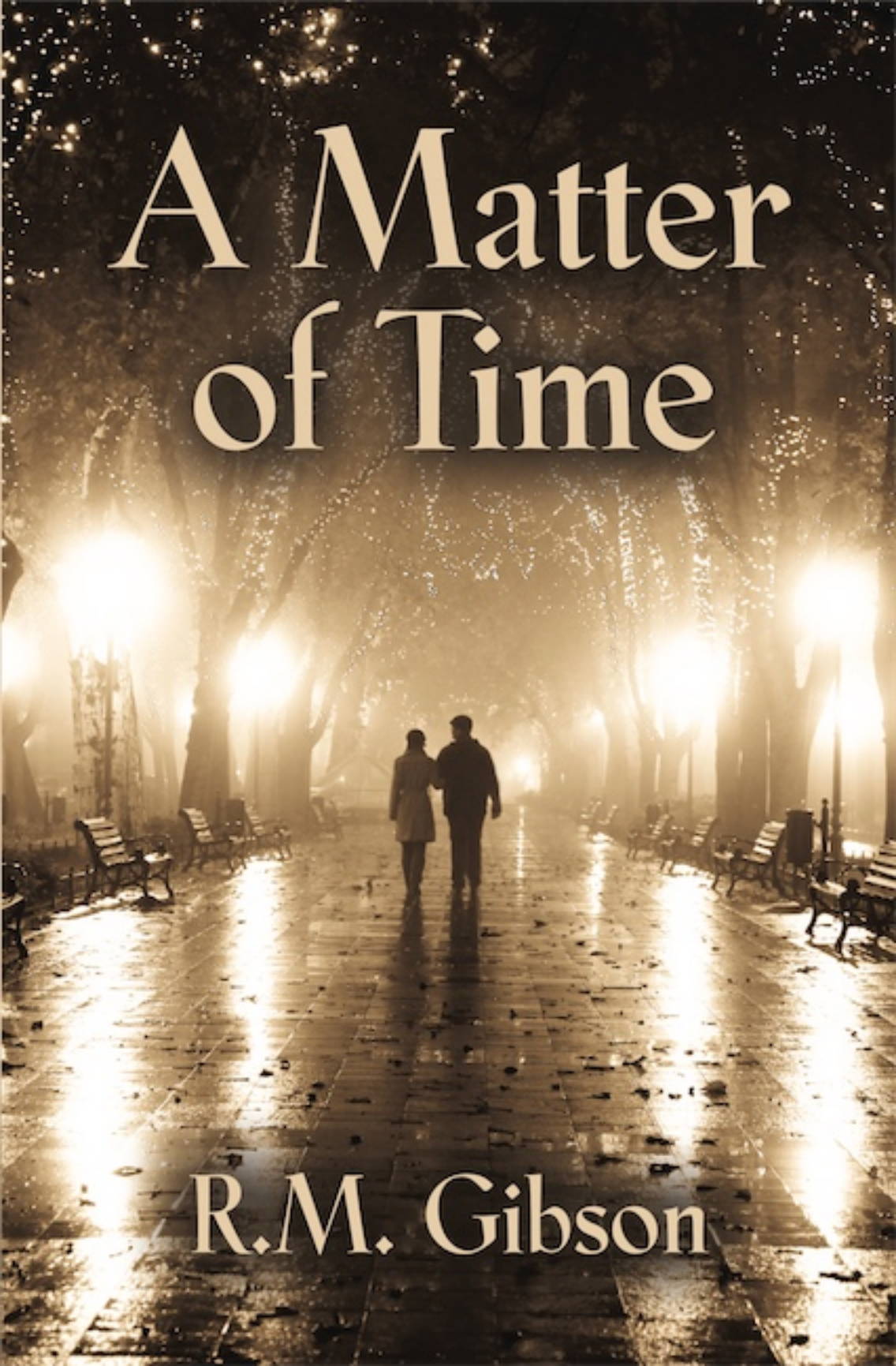
A Matter of Time

by R. M. Gibson

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A romantic scene in a park at night. A couple is walking away from the viewer down a long, paved path. The path is lined with trees and benches. The scene is illuminated by warm, golden light, possibly from street lamps or the setting sun, creating a soft, hazy atmosphere. The ground is wet, reflecting the light. The overall mood is intimate and nostalgic.

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Chapter One

When a distraught Erich Mauer got home from fiancée Tina Conti's funeral, his older son, Kurt, was waiting for him.

"You don't look too good. You gonna be okay?"

"Not much choice." Struggling with his emotions, he added, almost inaudibly, "So young....so unjust; a cruel, painful day I'll never forget."

"Yeah, really."

"You know how I felt about Tina. But she's gone, and the plans we'd made were buried with her this morning." His words evoked the image of her coffin being lowered into the open grave. That was all it took. Erich finally buckled under the weight of his grief and cried. "I...I hurt all over. Sorry."

Kurt, uncomfortable seeing his dad in tears, wasn't sure what to do. Then, without thinking, he reached out, gave him a firm hug and added, "It's a real bummer, and I'll miss her, too. She was always super nice."

As Erich wiped the tears away, he agreed. "That was my girl. But I haven't said much about how hard this has been, so maybe I should start talking about it. Might help me adjust. If you get bored, say so."

"It's okay."

"Tina was a lot younger than me. You know that. Didn't matter. We were a good match and would've had a great marriage. But much as I wanted all the pieces to fit together, I've known for quite a while that our little dream was about to turn into a nightmare. When you went with me in May, you saw how much she'd changed. She wasn't ever sick, so seeing her waste away was torture. And these last few days have been a bitch."

"I know. Glad I didn't have to go to the funeral."

"Leaves you with better memories. But life goes on, and I've got other stuff to think about. One is to find a job. So far, there haven't been many openings for a guy like me. And people can probably guess that I'm not up to par. I need time, which I don't have, to start getting my act together."

Kurt didn't fully understand the extent of his dad's dilemma, so he changed the subject. "You had two calls. One was from Rudi. He wanted us to know that he got to the state's rehab camp okay on Monday and said Maine's neat. He likes it up there and thinks he'll have a great summer. The other one was from Brenna. She's coming up for a while after she gets off work. Said she wants to check up on you. She's being a real good friend."

"She is, but there's more to it than that."

"If she likes you, isn't that good? I think you need somebody like her."

“Sure, but a few minutes at a time may be all of me she can handle. It isn’t easy getting used to the idea that death is forever. But when it takes a sweetheart like Tina, someone I was close to for nearly three years, you find out about pain. She doesn’t have any now. It’s those of us she’s left behind who do. I’ll get over most of mine someday, but there isn’t any way I’ll ever forget her and what we meant to each other. What’s certain is that the pages that’ll someday tell my story will be different now. So maybe it’s Brenna. Maybe it isn’t. For sure, I’m not getting any younger, and without a job I don’t have a whole lot to offer.”

Before Kurt could say anything other than, “You’ll be okay,” Brenna was at their door.

“Hi, guy. You probably know it already. If you don’t, it’s time somebody said it. You look awful.” Having called a spade a spade, she hugged him tightly and held on. It was something Erich badly needed.

“You lost your mother not too long ago, so you know something about the hurt that won’t go away.”

“Sure do.”

“Tina and I hadn’t married yet, but you knew about our wedding plans.”

“I did. But you can still count on me being here to lean on.”

Kurt liked what he was hearing.

After they’d talked for a while, Brenna left for her little brick cape on Wisteria Drive to feed her two boys, Alan and Scot. Once she’d gone, Erich asked Kurt if he’d like to go out for a bite. “I’m not in the right frame of mind to work in a kitchen that’s filled with all kinds of good memories. At least not tonight. But I suppose it doesn’t matter, because there aren’t many places around town that don’t have at least a couple of resident ghosts.”

“Yeah. Guess so.”

“How ’bout we go back to Mr. Huskyburger? They’ve got their own collection of bad vibes from the time Essex Steel was being gutted like a fish. Won’t be any worse than other places we know.”

After they’d eaten and were back home again, Erich went through the pockets in his suit before he hung it up. In one of them, he found the note that his former colleague, Katie, gave him at the funeral. She’d copied what Peter Fitzhugh at IMCO–Australasia had sent up by telex. They were that his family had a friend in Sydney who’d be on her way to London but would be stopping in Los Angeles and New York to do some sightseeing. Would Erich be willing to show her around Manhattan and other places of interest that were nearby? Their friend’s name was Tracie Dunhill.

Erich sat on his bed to think about how to deal with this latest ripple in his string of trials. At another time, he'd welcome getting to know Ms. Dunhill. However, having just come from Tina's funeral, he wasn't up to being a host, no matter what the circumstances. Then, drifting into a reflective mood, he thought back to April of '67 when he and Tina started working together—and on into early '70 when Essex Steel was being acquired. In those final weeks before the takeover was completed, they became lovers and were immersed in a fervent affair they knew couldn't last. At issue was that Tina wanted a family, something Erich could no longer deliver, so they said tearful goodbyes and went their separate ways: Tina to a subsidiary of an Australian company located in suburban Washington, and Erich to IMCO, a major Wall Street firm with worldwide operations. But it was by pure chance that they were both in Sydney on business and, improbably, ran into each other. Erich knew that today was the summer solstice, the longest day in the northern hemisphere. He couldn't help but think back to the last one, December 21, when it marked the beginning of Australia's summer. It was also the last of the three days in Sydney when Erich and Tina's love was rekindled and a new chapter in their lives began. His recollection was so clear, that of seeing Tina off to the U.S. at Kingsford Smith Airport, the happiness they felt when she decided that Erich was more important than family, and the prospect of their finally having a life together. It was never to be.

Late on Thursday afternoon, Erich called Katie to ask that she telex Fitzhugh and tell him about his situation. "Be best to let him know that the timing is all wrong. Anyway, if Ms. Dunhill can find her way around metro Los Angeles, she shouldn't have any problem with New York. Having lived in both places, I can say that."

"I'll get to it right away, but is there anything else I can do? You'll have some rough days before the last couple of months, and especially this week, don't hurt so much. Be glad to help out."

"You're a sweetheart, Katie. Thanks. But if your meaning is to keep me company overnight, something I think you've had in mind for a while, you know that I have to give you the same answer."

"I'm also willing to be patient, you know."

"You've been that right along. Sure. But for now I think we should leave things the way they are, even though I've always felt you were special."

"I like hearing that. You know how I feel, so I've been kinda lost since you stopped coming in every day. It's not the same place without you here."

With just about everyone else gone, our floor is *so* quiet. It's almost like a morgue."

"You don't need to remind me of what was. I've been through enough of that lately. Seeing my girl draw her last breath is about the hardest thing I've ever had to face. Anyway, you don't need this. Let me know what Fitzhugh has to say."

"If you're coming in next week, I should have his answer by then. Take care of yourself, Erich. You're important."

"Thanks, Katie. Hearing that helps. I will be in next week if only so I can give you a hug. It'll be my way of showing you how much I appreciate having your support."

"I'll be ready. Always have been. Bye, partner."

"Have a good weekend, gal."

Brenna spent much of Saturday with Erich and felt he was making progress toward getting his life back in order. She was committed to offering her compassionate support while also hoping that their past relationship could be resurrected. When she came back for brunch on Sunday, he smiled, albeit faintly, which showed her that his broken heart was starting to mend.

"You're tough, so I know you'll live. Whoa! Sorry. Wrong thing to say. I just want to get back the guy you were before everything went bad. Seeing you down bothers me."

"Just stay close . . . be patient. Given time, I'll be okay."

"I hope so. And something I wanted to tell you before closing the book on everything that's happened. It's that I ran into my friend, and your old flame, Lara, on Friday afternoon. While we were talking, I thought she'd want to know about Tina. When I told her, she gasped and her face turned white as a sheet. She never said a word, but it was obvious that it hit her pretty hard. I remember her saying early last year that she really liked the girl even though she felt the two of you had gotten involved. End of story."

"I've wondered what her reaction might be. Appreciate your telling me. They got along well when Lara came down to Forty-eighth Street to see where I worked. Italian bloodlines helped, I guess. It was right before Christmas of '68, and it was Tina who supplied the homemade red wine Lara drank the afternoon we met down in the laundry room. She told you about it. We wound up in bed while our clothes were drying. My kind of accomplice." Erich smiled thinly. "You remember. You had some of it, too. Came from one of Tina's grandfathers, and I still have a bottle left."

Just after midday, Brenna left for home. Shortly afterwards, Erich drove Kurt to JFK. He'd be taking a non-stop TWA flight to Los Angeles to spend the summer with his mother. Before they got to their goodbyes, Kurt volunteered, "I'll tell Mom it wasn't your fault that Rudi got into trouble. I don't think she understands, so I'll fill her in on what happened."

"Appreciate it, but what she chooses to believe isn't important. The Connecticut juvenile people, meaning Nate Kaplan, and I did all we could to keep him on the right path. That's what really matters. At least to me. Now, have a good trip, behave, and I'll see you at the end of August."

Erich was alone now for the first time since late summer last year. How special it would have been to spend these two months with Tina. "Had she lived." Those words again, the ones her papa, Aldo, had used just after Tina died. "They'll always be there," he thought.

The following Tuesday, Erich went back to the office to start taking his personal effects home. They included two oils that Erin Riley, an artist friend, and onetime lover, had given him. Katie was glad to see her ex-boss and her hug confirmed it.

"You got a telex from Fitzhugh yesterday. Says he's sorry about what happened and completely understands. He'll be telling their friend that she'll be on her own when she's here."

While Erich was in the office, he called former boss, Clayton Zorn, to see if they might have an early dinner on Friday. But since the long Fourth of July weekend was coming up, Clayton said he'd have already left for Cape Cod to spend the holiday at his folk's house on Long Pond. They promised to talk after he was back.

Erich continued to make progress. Still, the road to finding inner peace seemed agonizingly slow. His cherished memories of Tina remained, but the pain associated with their interwoven lives was beginning to ease some. Just having Brenna close was good therapy, but by late July Erich's bodily needs made their presence known. He phoned Brenna to ask if she could come by after work.

"Got a problem?"

"Not really. Well, sort of. I discovered this morning that Erich Mauer is getting back to normal. You're astute enough to know what I mean."

"I am, and I do. Your timing is good, so you don't have to ask twice. It's been a while. I'll be up right after work."

Erich was indeed very much alive, and without much delay they joined each other at a place called paradise.

“I’ve missed this,” Brenna said. “Guess you did, too.”

“It’s taken time, so I was past due.”

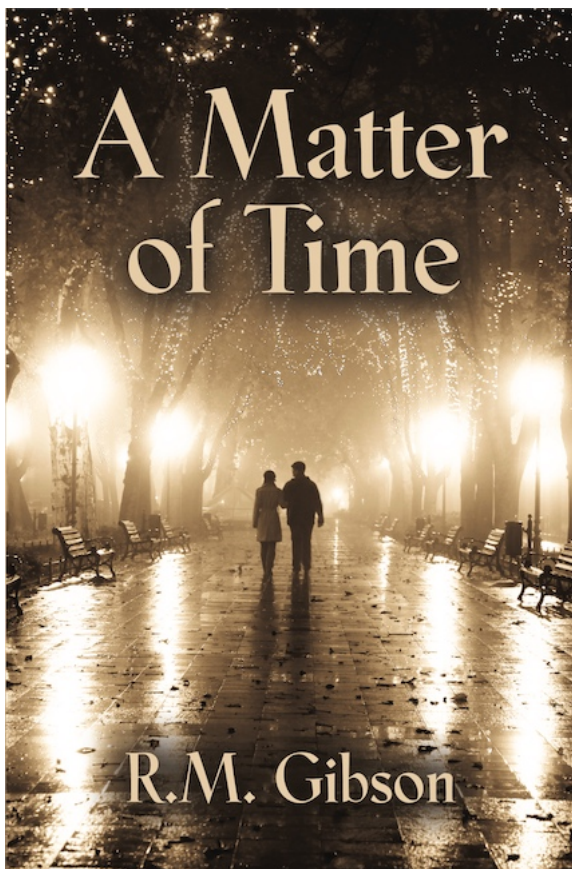
“No need to explain. I’ve got the evidence.”

“If you’ll come back on Saturday, we could pick up where we left off.”

Brenna smiled. “After a trip like we just had, I’ll come back every afternoon this week if you want. I’m very ready, very willing, and very able,” she assured him.

“Why not? Given our motivation, it shouldn’t take long and you won’t be too late getting home.”

“I’ve been ready for several weeks but knew I’d have to be patient. You’re back to you being you. I’m delighted.”



For Erich Mauer, changes abound. There are financial uncertainties and a caring affair eventually comes to an end. In time, Erich leaves New York, moves to the Northeast and launches a promising new career. It's there that he also meets a charming young woman, so both his professional future and personal hopes show promise.

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