

The Day She Died

By Bill Garrison

Chapter 1

Darkness pulled at John Michaels. It weighed him down like an anchor. Tendrils of memories and light penetrated his subconscious and lifted him toward the noise hammering against his mind.

Buzz, buzz, buzz, followed by heavy silence, not the usual “Dora the Explorer” from the living room television.

Would today be any better, or would Renee still not look him in the eyes?

The musty smell of dirty laundry wafted to his nose. Twisted covers. Brightness.

Brightness! Why hadn’t Renee or the kids awakened him?

He threw the covers aside and swung his feet to the floor. He sat at the edge of the bed and looked around in stunned silence.

Heart pounding, he tried to make sense of the sight before him. This had to be a dream. But dreams were never this real, the smells never this strong, the colors never this bright. He squeezed his eyes shut, but he knew nothing would change. This was real.

Buzz, buzz, buzz.

He shut off the alarm.

He sat on a twin bed in a small apartment. Not just any apartment. His old Village Square efficiency, the place he lived during the fall of 1992.

Could it be an elaborate prank? Would Dennis do something like this? Would Renee let him?

John stepped to the window. Overgrown weeds shot up through cracked asphalt. His dark-gray 1988 Grand Am with the racing pinstripe, a car he’d relegated to the junk pile many years ago, sat in perfect condition to left of the front door.

He turned back to the room and took it all in. The bed with its sagging mattress also served as chair and couch. The ironing board, a permanent fixture along the wall, doubled as more shelf space.

The dirty laundry formed a pile in the corner between the bed and the wall. His pride and joy during college, a Compaq 386 computer, sat on top of a rickety computer desk that had taken him hours to put together. A TV rested on a milk crate with a VCR perched on top. It had been luxury . . . twenty-two years ago.

Clicking at the window made him jump.

The window air conditioning unit powered up and began delivering ice cold air.

This wasn’t a joke. It was his old apartment.

The phone sitting on the dresser rang.

John stared at it. Four rings. Five. Six. No answering machine. No Caller ID.

Should he answer it? He shrugged. Why not? “Hello.”

“Are you coming over or what?” He recognized the voice right away. Dennis Vance. Music pounded in the background, the Fresh Prince’s “Summertime.”

“Um, sure. What time?”

“Now would be good. Don’t forget the money. I have the tickets.” Dennis hung up.

Tickets?

A memory slammed into his mind. *The Red River Rivalry*. The Oklahoma Sooners vs. Texas Longhorns football game at the Texas State Fair. Dennis had gotten him seats on the forty-five yard line. His hand tightened around the phone.

No! It couldn’t be.

He swallowed, and his gaze darted around the room for anything that would tell him the date. He dropped the receiver on the dresser. His trembling fingers grabbed the *Oklahoma Daily*, the college newspaper, off the kitchen counter. A cockroach scurried away.

His heart pounded as he focused on the date.

October 9, 1992.

The day Kim disappeared.

The worst day of his life, and he was living it again.

He slammed his fist into the refrigerator. The appliance shook, and a framed picture of his parents and siblings fell from the wall onto the vinyl kitchenette floor. The glass shattered. He shook the pain out of his hand. You didn’t feel pain in dreams.

He grabbed a pair of Levi’s off the floor and pulled them on. They fastened easily, a sensation he hadn’t experienced in a while. After putting on a Sooners sweatshirt, he stepped into the tiny bathroom.

He leaned toward the mirror and stopped cold. A smooth face with thick, dark hair stared back at him. No wrinkles and no gray. Somehow, someone or something had reached into the life of John Michaels, forty-five-year-old coffee shop owner, and transported him back into the life and body of a twenty-three-year-old college student.

How had this happened? And why? Fear stole into his heart, but he pushed it away. He had a chance to make a difference, to change the past.

He grabbed his watch off the ironing board. Two-fifteen. The tickets could wait. He still had time. He took his wallet and keys from the ironing board but couldn’t find his phone. He threw clothes and papers across the room looking for it. He’d lost the stupid thing again.

No, wait. He halted his frenzied search. He didn’t have a cell phone in 1992. No one did. He picked up the cordless phone again. His fingers clenched the receiver as he dialed Kim’s number from memory, even after so many years.

The phone rang. And rang again. No answer.

“I can do this. I can do this.” Where would Kim be? Another memory hit him. The police had talked to all of her acquaintances, but never figured out her exact movements that day. Except for one thing . . . she had last been seen going to Gittinger Hall on the South Oval of the University of Oklahoma campus.

Chapter 2

As John drove across campus, the craziness of his situation hit him. A forty-five-year old stuck in a twenty-three-year old body. He couldn't hold back a laugh, but he shook it off. Nothing funny about this. Tragic, maybe. Desperate.

He sped onto Boyd Street. The trees overhead towered above the old, ornate houses like they always had and probably always would. Turning south on Elm, he entered the heart of the west side of the campus and pulled into the lot closest to Gittinger Hall.

Why so many empty parking places? A memory surfaced. Classes were always cancelled the Friday before the OU-Texas game to give the students more time to get to Dallas.

John entered the three-story brick building and tried to get his bearings. The English Department was on the third floor, wasn't it? As he rode the elevator, he braced himself to spot Kim rounding a corner or talking to a professor. What would it be like to see her again?

He only found deserted offices, and classrooms with nothing but empty chairs and cleared tables. A young girl smiled at him as she walked past, but he encountered no familiar faces.

On the second floor, two guys huddled at a table, going over a stack of papers. John cleared his throat. "Excuse me. I'm looking for Kim Addison. She works in the English department."

Both students looked up. "Try the office," suggested the one with a shaggy haircut.

"Where is it?"

"First floor, northeast hallway."

"Thanks." John hurled himself down the stairs rather than wait for the elevator, thankful for his twenty-three-year-old legs but cursing because he hadn't remembered where Kim's office was.

Her desk was in a small, cramped waiting area with musty carpet and cheap paneling that had been present for generations of students.

John scanned the area. He didn't recall Kim's desk exactly, but she had at least a few personal effects. This desk had only a stapler and tape dispenser tucked neatly next to a typewriter.

Maybe he'd gone to the wrong office.

No, this had to be it. He recognized the Native American painting on the south wall.

He reached for the top desk drawer, but stopped when he spotted a copy-paper box pushed beneath the desk. Why was it hidden? He pulled it out and took off the lid. Kim's personal effects filled the bottom.

Why were they under the desk? Did she quit? Was she fired? Was she already dead?

Old memories flooded his mind. He set the box on top of the desk and rifled through it. He thought he'd forgotten, but Kim had never really left him.

A snapshot of their spring break outing to Silver Dollar City. Not his first choice as a destination, but they'd had a great time with all their friends.

He picked up the cassette case for Whitney Houston's *Bodyguard* soundtrack, his Christmas present to her the year before. The weight of the cool plastic indicated the cassette wasn't in the case.

"May I help you?"

John jumped. The cassette case popped out of his hands, bounced on the desk, and clattered to the floor. He looked up and faced a fit man about his own age in a tweed jacket, with a denim shirt tucked too tightly into a pair of blue jeans. John paused. Okay, not close to his age anymore. "I'm looking for Kim Addison."

"I'm sorry. She quit yesterday." The man ran his hands through his dark hair.

Quit? Kim never told him she'd quit. "What was your name?"

The man flashed him a smug smile. "Professor Hazelton."

Kim told him once that Hazelton was one of the profs in the suite of offices where she worked. He flinched. He'd heard that name one other time. "Why did she quit?"

The professor's eyes bored into John for several seconds, and then he smirked. "You should ask her about it."

"I will." John backed away as Hazelton sauntered out the door.

As the owner of a coffee shop, John welcomed and served all types, even those he didn't care for. Professor Hazelton fit into that category. *Smarmy* would be a good word for the man.

He pushed those thoughts away. He had to find Kim. He hurried out the door but waited until he rounded the corner before sprinting to his car. He gunned the accelerator and pulled out onto Elm. Where should he go now? Where could Kim be?

He cruised down Lindsay, south of the cathedral of football, Memorial Stadium. Could he really keep Kim from disappearing from the face of the earth in this surreal repetition? Her body had never been found. Her parents had spent years searching for her, and probably still held out hope she was alive, but he'd given up within days. The possibilities of what happened to her constantly tormented his soul. Kidnapping? Rape? Murder?

He could go days without thinking of her. Then something, anything, would trigger a burst of memories that crushed him. A spirited song, a softly spoken word, the scent of roses, a smile. The memory of his first true love would rip open his wounds of loss and regret.

Enough. He shook the cobwebs of memory out of his mind.

Since he didn't know where to look for Kim, he turned at Garfield into a neighborhood of homes built long before the era of cookie-cutter suburban subdivisions. Some were beautiful, some decrepit, all unique.

Dennis lived in the best house on the block, a square two-story of the darkest red brick with two white, Ionic columns on the porch that supported a small deck on the second floor. He rented it along with a few other people of suspicious character. Although John and Dennis remained friends two decades later, part of Dennis always bothered him.

Cars littered the driveway and front yard like a puzzle with too many pieces. An old pickup truck filled the carport, a Fiero and a Trans Am parked behind it. John pulled onto the grass next to a Ford Probe.

Heavy-metal music, guaranteed to induce a headache, pounded from the house. A young girl in a Ford Escort pulled in next to John. She waved as if she knew him and ran into the house.

He's almost forgotten that he looked like a college student, not an out-of-place adult. He checked his reflection in the rear-view mirror. Amazing!

He bounded up the front steps, found the door cracked open, and stepped inside. The television and stereo in the living room sat silent. The music receded as he moved into the living area. Dennis must have set up speakers in the back yard.

The 1950s-era house had hardwood floors and décor befitting Dennis Vance: a blue love seat and gold sofa, a card table in the small kitchen, and movie posters from *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas* on the wall. Cigarette smoke fouled the air.

A tall guy with a buzz cut filled a cup from a keg in the middle of the living room. A shorter guy with glasses waited his turn.

"Hey, Travis. Hey, Joe." Their names came easily, in spite of the years since he'd last seen them.

"Hey, John," said Travis.

Loud bass kicked in as another song began.

"Dennis has your tickets." Joe jerked his thumb toward the back of the house.

"His room," Travis added.

A young Dennis, with a full head of wavy brown hair, sat on the corner of his bed. He was talking to a girl in blue jeans with dark hair tied into a pony tail. He looked up and nodded to John as the girl continued to talk.

John shook his head. How crazy to see a person he knew so well look so young again.

Dennis's expression emphasized his square jaw and the strong lines of his face. It compressed into a look of concentration, probably just for show. The girl talked in serious, muted tones that John strained to hear. ". . . I might have to leave school. I don't know what I should do."

"Dennis glanced at him and then back to the girl, who twisted around to look at John.

His heart expanded and then popped like a balloon. So far, everything happened as it had the first time he'd lived his life.

Except this.

He wasn't supposed to meet Renee Templin for four years. His wife, who had slept in the guest bedroom for the past week. She wouldn't tell him why. All she said was "Trust me." Now, years before, she talked to Dennis in his bedroom on the day Kim disappeared. Had she and Dennis known each other before he met her?

"I wish I could go with you, dude," Dennis said as he pulled an envelope from a back pocket.

John couldn't answer. He stared at Renee—at her dark brown eyes rimmed with red and the freckles on the bridge of her nose. Had she been crying? He curbed the urge to hug the eighteen-year-old version of his wife. Seeing this incredibly young, innocent, full-life-ahead-of-her version of his wife made him forget the all the problems they faced. The money problems, the fears, the questions all swept away by seeing a Renee who had yet to say yes when he proposed . . . and who had yet to withdraw from him into her own little world of secrets.

Confusion disabled him. Kim and Renee had never interacted in his real life. He met Kim. She died. He grieved. He met Renee. But now, Renee had been dropped into the middle of the worst day of his life. Why?

“Dude, snap out of it.” Dennis stood and waved the tickets in front of John’s eyes. “I’ve got your tickets right here. Willy already paid me, so you’re good.”

John snatched the small brown envelope from Dennis, but his gaze stayed locked on Renee. “You, um . . .” He couldn’t finish.

“Sorry.” Dennis said, “John Michaels, this is Renee Templin.”

She stood and put her right hand on her hip. “Hi.”

“We met—?”

“We’ve never met. I’d remember.”

“Maybe you were drunk,” Dennis said.

“Shut up.” Renee backhanded his arm. “I don’t drink, and I don’t forget a face.”

John knew his wife. She put on a show, but beneath the tough surface lurked a joking, playful spirit. He’d love to spend the rest of the day talking to her, using his knowledge of the woman she would become to mess with her. All in good fun, of course.

If none of this was real—and none of this could be—why not spend time with Renee? Why not do whatever he wanted?

But what about Kim? What if he somehow had a chance to save her?

“I’m sorry,” John said, “I guess you looked familiar. So, how do you know Dennis?”

“We took a class over the summer at OCC.”

Oklahoma Community College. She hadn’t lasted a semester at Oklahoma University. But if she knew Dennis then, why hadn’t she ever told him?

The phone on the nightstand rang. Dennis picked it up and stepped into the corner to talk.

“What are you doing out here?” John stepped closer to Renee.

“I have some friends.”

“Dennis?”

“Sure. He’s a good guy.” She shrugged.

“You don’t know him that well then.”

“He just told me a lot about you.” Her sparkling eyes made him smile. “Dennis thinks you’re the greatest. He talks about you all the time.”

“That’s funny; he’s never mentioned you before.”

He broke through and got a smile. The dimpled cheeks, the flushed skin. His future wife. How did he want to play this? He could hit on her or—

“Dude, it’s for you.” Dennis held out the phone.

He took it and answered. “Hello.”

“John. I need your help,” Kim’s voice said. “I’m scared.”

Chapter 3

John never got to say goodbye to Kim, never got to tell her how much he loved her. The regret had eaten at his soul every moment since that day. The words not spoken would sneak up on him without notice. The gut-twisting, needle-sharp pain he could never escape knifed him with renewed strength.

Now he held a phone with her on the other end of the line.

“K-Kim, where are you?”

“Is everything all right?” Dennis asked.

John waved him off and turned his back.

“I’m at the Texaco by the Baileys’ house. My car died, and I thought I saw someone in the trees behind the house. So I ran here.”

The Baileys? That rang a bell, but this time his memory failed him. “Where’s the Texaco?”

“It’s on Highway 9 and 108th Street, I think.”

“I’ll be right there.”

“Okay. Hurry.”

“Bye.” He should say more, but how could he possibly tell her over the phone how the thoughts of what happened to her had consumed days and months—no, years—of his life? It tortured him to let her sweet, precious voice go, but he had a chance to see her, maybe to save her.

Rushing out the door, he looked back, but Renee had left the room. That made it easier for him to leave his heart for the moment. “See you later, Dennis.”

“What’s going on?”

“It’s Kim. Car trouble.”

“I can go get her, so you can get going.” Dennis took his keys off the dresser.

“No, I’m fine.”

“Come on, man. Let me go. She is so hot.”

John stared into Dennis’s eyes.

Dennis smiled mischievously. “Hey, relax. I was just joking.”

John grunted, left the small room, and threaded his way through the people hovering near the keg. He kept an eye out for Renee as he hurried to his car.

As John pulled out, Dennis lumbered down the front steps.

John rolled down his window. “What?”

Dennis waved at him. “Nothing. Beer run.”

“One keg isn’t enough?”

“Actually, we have plenty of beer. I’m going to get hard stuff for later tonight, when this place will be really rocking.”

After a few wrong turns, John ended up on Jenkins, took it straight south, and went east on Highway 9. The city of Norman quickly gave way to farmland and open prairies.

When he saw the Texaco ahead, he slowed and turned on his blinker. A pickup blew by him with an angry honk.

He shouldn't pull in, he should just keep going, drive to Shawnee, then to Fort Smith, and off the face of the earth. That could happen just as easily as seeing Kim again. Hearing her voice and talking to Dennis and Renee had made it seem real. But it couldn't be. Things like this didn't happen. Life didn't give second chances.

But what if it did? What if he saved Kim today? Would it change his life? Would he still marry Renee? Would he still have his children?

"I'm not going to play this game." His voice sounded weak as he waited for a delivery truck to pass. He was a forty-five-year-old man with two great kids, a wonderful wife, and a business he loved. None of them perfect, but he would never choose to give them up. Yet here he was, driving to save Kim.

He thought of the movie *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*. If only he could hop in a phone booth and travel back home. Or speed up to eighty-five miles per hour and disappear in a blaze of fire and lightning, like in *Back to the Future*.

He'd taken the last few hours with a grain of salt. Seeing Dennis had amused him; seeing Renee had given him a jolt. But what if he just stopped? Didn't look for Kim? Just did his best to try and get back to the future?

Traffic cleared, and he answered his own question by pulling into the Texaco. He parked to the right of the gas station entrance and took a deep breath. Kim would be here. Could he handle seeing a ghost?

Bang!

He jumped at the sound of someone pounding on his passenger window.

Kim!

She pulled at the door handle. "Open up."

His fingers searched for the power locks, but the car didn't have any. Instead, he reached across the seat and flipped the lock.

Kim swung the door open and plopped into the seat, bringing with her a whiff of flowery perfume.

A burst of sunlight replaced the shadow of her memory. Shoulder-length, honey-blond hair. Freckles dotting her creamy skin. Smooth, flushed cheeks. The beautiful woman he could never forget, yet found too painful to remember, now sat next to him. The impossibility boggled his mind.

"Oh my goodness, what a day." She blew out a long breath.

John looked out his window at the old pickup parked next to him. His heart ricocheted around his chest, and his hands felt clammy.

"Thanks for coming." She cleared her throat. "My car broke down back at the Baileys'. When I tried to leave, I didn't make it ten feet before the engine shuddered, and smoke poured out the radiator."

The Baileys? She said that name on the phone. Why did he feel like it should it mean something to him?

"I'm glad I caught you. I was going to ask Dennis to come and help me. Why haven't you left for the game yet?"

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He swallowed hard and tried again. "I was just leaving when you called."

"Let's hurry so you can go. I don't want you to miss out on anything."

Her words pierced his heart. So unselfish, so kind. He held back the urge to hold her and never let go. He put the Grand Am in reverse. "Tell me where to go. I have no idea."

At her direction, he turned south onto an unnamed road. The crumbling asphalt quickly turned into gravel and crunched beneath the tires. "How far did you walk? Couldn't you have called from the house?"

"Slow down or you'll miss it. There it is." She pointed to a ranch-style house on the left, surrounded by trees. "No one was home, even though I'm supposed to meet them today. I don't know if they forgot or were running late or what."

"Why were you supposed to meet them?"

She laughed. A short, joyful sound. "I'm going to work for them."

"Doing what?"

"Seriously?"

"Yes. I forgot." John tried not to look at her. Instead, he focused on the worn tire tracks in the dirt driveway. The grass strip down the middle reminded him of the concrete strip down the middle of those car rides at amusement parks. Did the police know Kim had gone out here the day she died?

"A nanny, silly."

The driveway curved to the right before opening up into a large yard adorned with giant oaks. He followed the circular drive and parked behind Kim's Civic. They climbed out of the car, and Kim popped the hood.

John did what any man should and looked under the hood. He didn't see anything.

"What do you think?" Kim sidled next to him.

An electric current buzzed through his body. He reached out for her hand, and she took it. "I don't know." Always the car expert.

"This has happened before," Kim said. "I think the radiator needs water."

"Okay. I can do that." He looked at the sprawling house. "Is there an outside faucet?"

"I started looking for one, but then I heard something and thought I saw someone moving in the forest."

John's gaze drifted across the recently mowed yard. Beyond were thick trees and bushes, with no close neighbors. Did someone still lurk in the woods? Should he find a tire iron to protect them? "So you ran to the gas station?"

"Yep."

"And called Dennis."

Her eyebrows arched. "I thought you were gone. I would have called you."

Why did he say that? He didn't care about Dennis. Kim was alive and by his side. He gave her a swift hug and a peck on the cheek.

"Maybe we should call the police."

"And say that someone was in the woods a half an hour ago? Doesn't sound very compelling."

"Let's hurry and get that water. You need to get going to Dallas, and Leslee and I are going to go see *Far and Away*." She dragged him across the yard to the corner of the house.

"What are we going to use to hold the water?"

"I saw a bucket in the back."

Toys littered the backyard. Big wheels, bikes, a swing set, a sand box. Whiffleballs and bats, footballs, Nerf toys. Everything a kid would need. John slowed as they passed the air conditioning unit. "There it is." He pointed to the faucet hidden behind the charcoal grill. "Where's the bucket?"

"Over there." Kim waved a hand toward the swing set at the edge of the property near the tree line.

"You say you saw someone in the trees?"

"I don't know." She shrugged and smiled sheepishly. "Maybe I didn't."

John jogged through the maze of toys, stepped over a bat, and almost tripped over a tricycle. He grabbed a yellow sand bucket that sat upside-down just past the swing and held it up. "This one has a hole in it."

It hit him just as he saw another bucket at the edge of the tree line. The Baileys. He finally remembered where he had heard that name. He inspected the new bucket for holes, found none, and turned back to the house. "Hey Kim, who told you about the Baileys needing a nanny?"

"I, um . . ." Kim let out a piercing scream. "John, look out!"

He saw a flash of movement before blinding pain shattered his thoughts to blackness.