



Close
Enough
To Kill

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BEVERLY
BARTON

THE NEXT VICTIM

As Jim clipped his phone to his belt, he looked directly at Bernie. She didn't like the concerned expression on his face.

"I spoke to a Ms. Everett at the college. She said that Thomasina phoned about half an hour ago to tell them she'd had a flat tire and would be running late for her Thursday evening class. They're expecting her at any time."

"Let's go." Bernie headed for the door. Jim followed her outside and straight to her Jeep.

"I don't like this," Bernie said. After crossing the railroad tracks, she took a right onto County Road 157. "We're pretty sure that Stephanie Preston had car trouble the night she was abducted, and now Thomasina Hardy has a flat tire. If she's alone . . ."

Jim grunted.

"If we have a serial killer on our hands—"

"If?" Jim growled the word. "You keep saying if."

"I'm saying if because we're not sure of anything. Yes, there are similarities between the gifts Stephanie received and the things Thomasina said this guy sent her, but maybe it's just some terrible coincidence."

"You don't believe that any more than I do."

Thoughts of what that psychopath had done to Stephanie Preston raced through Bernie's mind. What if he already had Thomasina Hardy? What if they were too late to save her?

Books by Beverly Barton

AFTER DARK

EVERY MOVE SHE MAKES

WHAT SHE DOESN'T KNOW

THE FIFTH VICTIM

THE LAST TO DIE

AS GOOD AS DEAD

KILLING HER SOFTLY

CLOSE ENOUGH TO KILL

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Close Enough to Kill

BEVERLY BARTON



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*To my husband, Billy . . .
for the love, patience and TLC
I've always been able to count on
through our many years together*

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Philip M. Davis, Pelham Police Department, Pelham, Alabama

Lt. Shane Fulmer, Chilton County Sheriff’s Department, Clanton, Alabama

Tom Wright, Retired Captain, Anniston Police Department, Anniston, Alabama

Lt. Frank DeButy, Decatur Police Department, Decatur, Alabama

George W. Leak (Retired Alabama State Trooper)

Chapter 1

Please, dear God, let him kill me.

Stephanie Preston lay on the narrow cot, listening to the rapid beat of her heart. Staring up at the ceiling in the small, dark room, she tried to pretend she was somewhere else. At home, with Kyle. Or at work, surrounded by people she knew and trusted. Perhaps at church, where she sang in the choir. Anywhere but here. With anyone but him.

As hard as she tried to mentally remove herself from the reality of this moment, from where she was and what was happening to her, she could not fully escape into her mind.

Try harder. Think about last Christmas. About how surprised you were when Kyle proposed, on bended knee, right there in front of your parents and your sisters.

Just as the image of her smiling parents flashed through her mind, the man on top of her rammed into her again, harder this time. With more fury. And his fingers dug into her hips as he forced her body upward to meet his savage thrust. As he accelerated the harshness and speed of his deep lunges, he voiced his need, as he did every time he raped her.

"Tell me." He growled the words. "Say it. You know what I want to hear."

No, I won't. Not this time. I can't. I can't.

She lay beneath him, silent and unmoving, longing for death, knowing what was going to happen next.

He slowed, then stopped and lifted himself enough to gaze down into her face. She closed her eyes, not wanting to look at him. Not wanting to see the face of terror.

He grabbed her, clutching her chin between his index finger and thumb, pressing painfully into her cheeks. "Open your eyes, bitch. Open your eyes and look at me."

Her eyelids flickered. *Don't obey him. Not this time. Be strong.*

"Why are you being so stubborn?" he asked, a tone of genuine puzzlement in his voice. "You know that I can force you to do whatever I want. Why make it so hard on yourself? You know that, in the end, you'll obey me."

"Please . . ." She opened her eyes and looked at him through a mist of tears.

"Please, what?"

Tears pooled in her eyes despite her determination not to cry. He liked it when she cried. "Just finish it."

"If you want me to finish with you, then tell me what I want to hear. Otherwise, I'll punish you. I'll make it last a long time." Lowering his head to her breast, he opened his mouth and bared his teeth. Before she could respond, he clamped down on her nipple and bit.

She cried out in pain. He thrust into her several times. Harder each time.

When he moved his mouth to the other breast, she gasped, then cried out hurriedly, "I love you. I want you more than I've ever wanted anyone. Please, darling, make love to me."

He smiled. God, how she hated his smile.

“That’s a good girl. Since you asked so nicely, I’ll give you what you want.”

She lay there beneath him and endured the rape, hating every moment, despising him and loathing herself for having given in to him yet again.

This can’t go on forever. Sooner or later, he’ll kill me.

I hope it’s soon. I hope it’s very soon.

He stood across the street, on the corner, and watched her get out of her car and walk up the sidewalk to her front porch. She was lovely. He would enjoy sketching her, but before he could begin, he would need to see her up close. When he created the pictures of her, he wanted to get every detail correct. The slant of her eyes. The curve of her nose. The fullness of her lips. Her neck was long and slender; her body nicely rounded, neither skinny nor fat. Just right.

The first thing he would do was call her. Just to say hello. To make contact. He would be able to tell by the sound of her voice if she would be receptive to his overtures. He wouldn’t listen to what she said. Women so often lied—unless you forced them to tell the truth. But he could always tell when a woman was interested just by the way she spoke to him.

“Thomasina, Thomasina. Such a lovely name for a lovely lady.”

The thought of their courtship excited him. He reveled in the days leading up to the moment before a woman became his completely. It was the prelude to the mating dance that intensified the pleasure, those incredibly delicious events that prepared them for the inevitable.

However, he couldn’t begin pursuing Thomasina in earnest until he ended his current relationship. He’d been keeping tabs on her, learning everything he could about

her—but from afar. He wasn't the kind of man who would betray one woman with another. It wasn't his style. It wouldn't be easy ending things with his current lover. She was very much in love with him. He had been wild about her in the beginning, when she had posed a challenge to him, when she had led him on a merry chase. And the first time they'd made love had been good, although not all he had hoped it would be. He was certain that she knew their relationship was coming to an end, that they both needed to be free. And soon.

Perhaps tonight he'd tell her.

She would cry, of course. She cried a great deal. And she would beg him, plead with him, offer to do anything he wanted her to do.

Poor darling. It was simply going to kill her when he told her that their love affair was over.

Sheriff Bernie Granger removed her jacket, hung it on the hall tree in the mud room, then took off her holstered gun and hung the strap over her coat. Every muscle in her body ached. She hadn't slept in nearly thirty-six hours, hadn't eaten in twelve, and needed more than the whore's baths she'd taken in the restroom sink yesterday and today. This had been the third search she'd headed up during the past two weeks, each time following a lead that ended nowhere. Trying to stay optimistic and give hope to a family who had all but given up wasn't easy. But damn it all, she wasn't willing to throw in the towel and admit defeat. During the two and a half years she had been the sheriff of Adams County, Alabama, she'd been lucky. Only one murder had occurred in her county while she was in office, and the killer was now serving a life sentence in Donaldson. She'd had to handle four missing persons' cases. The first had ended within twenty-four hours, when they'd found the elderly Alzheimer's patient who'd walked away from home and got-

ten lost in the woods. The second case had been rough on everyone involved. A missing three-year-old. When they'd found the little boy two days later in a deep ravine, his tiny body bloody and bruised from the fall, she had walked away, found a solitary spot, and cried. In private. Where none of her deputies could see her. She was one of only a handful of women in local law enforcement, so she had to be tough as nails in order to survive. Thankfully, the third missing person's case had turned out to be nothing more than a woman leaving her husband for another man.

And now Bernie was dealing with the fourth missing person's case. Stephanie Preston, a young bride of five months, had been missing for two weeks after last being seen leaving Adams County Junior College, where she attended night classes two evenings a week. Technically, this was an Adams County case, since the woman was last seen in this county and the college campus was not within the city limits of Adams Landing. But the Jackson County Sheriff's Department was also involved since Stephanie lived in Scottsboro, and Sheriff Mays over there was Stephanie's uncle.

"You look like hell," Robyn said when Bernie entered the kitchen.

She glanced at her younger sister and grinned. "I feel like hell."

She and Robyn were as different as night and day. Robyn was tall, model-thin, and possessed a mane of curly black hair. At twenty-eight, she was still single and liked it that way. She had left college without graduating and had flitted from one job to another, one boyfriend to another, for the past eight years. She had finally come home to Adams Landing a year ago and, with some financial help from their parents, opened up a small fitness center that was, surprisingly, doing quite well.

Bernie, on the other hand, was tall, large boned, and sturdily built. She wore her plain brown hair in an easy-to-care-

for ponytail most of the time, or she occasionally pulled it into a neat bun. She'd gotten married straight out of high school to her childhood sweetheart and they'd gone off to college together. After four years of marriage, two miscarriages for Bernie, and at least three affairs for Ryan, they had parted ways. Bernie had come home to Adams Landing, gotten a job as a deputy, and then almost three years ago was elected sheriff when her dad retired from the job, which he'd held for nearly thirty years.

Robyn lived at home with their mom and dad, but occasionally she'd spend a few days at Bernie's. This time, when she'd shown up on the doorstep, suitcase in hand, she'd told Bernie that she had to find a place of her own and soon. Being an old-fashioned, church-going Southern lady, Brenda Granger didn't approve of Robyn sleeping around, and when she'd caught Robyn's latest lover sneaking out of the house at five in the morning, Brenda had exploded in motherly outrage.

"Mom has called me every couple of hours to check on you," Robyn said. "She's worried about you."

"That's old news. Mom's always worried about me and about you. We're both single and childless."

Robyn grinned. "Yeah, you'd think the only reason she had us was so we could give her grandchildren."

Bernie trekked across the kitchen, opened a cupboard, and removed a bag of preground coffee. "Have you and Mom talked about things? Have you settled your differences?" Bernie removed the glass pot from the coffeemaker, walked over to the sink, and filled it with cool water.

"You know how it is with Mom—she doesn't talk with you, just to you. And no, we have not settled our differences and we probably never will. Good God, she was living in the fifties when she was a kid, not in the twenty-first century. Do you know what she said to me about having sex outside marriage?"

Bernie clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “Hmm . . . let me guess. Could it have been the old tried and true adage about a man not buying a cow if the milk is free?”

Robyn chuckled. “You’d think she’d at least come up with some new material, wouldn’t you?”

Bernie emptied the water into the coffeemaker, turned it on, and removed a cup from the cupboard. “Want some?”

“Huh?”

“Coffee. It’s decaf. Want some?”

“No, thanks. I’m heading out any minute now. Paul Landon is taking me to Huntsville for dinner.”

Paul Landon? Lord help us! Robyn could do a lot better than Paul. Good looks was about all the guy had going for him. That and a rich daddy. The man had been married and divorced twice, was rumored to have a drinking problem, and the general consensus was that he wasn’t worth shooting.

But she supposed it wouldn’t hurt for Robyn to date the guy, as long as she didn’t get serious about him, and that wasn’t likely to happen. After all, it wasn’t as if Adams County was running over with eligible bachelors. Bernie’s last date had been four months ago with Steve Banyan, a widower with three kids, a receding hairline, and the beginnings of a beer belly. They’d had a total of four dates over a period of a month. She liked the guy well enough, but they had little in common. He was a pharmacist, fifteen years Bernie’s senior, and considering how much he talked about his deceased wife, Carol Anne, was probably still in love with her.

“Look, if you two wind up spending the night here, then either the two of you be very, very quiet or just go rent a motel room,” Bernie said. “I’m dead on my feet and I’ve got to have a decent night’s sleep.”

“This is our first date,” Robyn said. “It’s highly unlikely I’ll let him get in my pants so soon. Despite what Mom thinks, I do have my standards.”

Bernie's lips curved into a weak grin. God, she was tired. All she wanted was a cup of coffee and a sandwich, followed by a long, hot bath. Then about ten hours of sleep. She'd be lucky if she got six. She'd have to be at the office early tomorrow morning, ready to meet her new employee. Bill Palmer retired several months ago, after a heart attack and bypass surgery, leaving her without a chief deputy, someone qualified to head up the criminal investigative division. Originally, she'd thought about promoting from within the ranks, but that would have been a difficult call since she had two equally qualified deputies in that division, each with approximately the same seniority. She'd gone to her dad for advice, as she often did, and he had suggested looking outside the local force.

"You never know when a highly qualified person might be looking for a change," R.B. Granger had said. In her opinion, Robert Bernard Granger was the best darn law enforcement officer who'd ever lived. "I've still got contacts in Alabama, Tennessee and Georgia. Why don't I make a few phone calls and see what I come up with? In the meantime, you do the same. Check around. Could be you can bring somebody in from Huntsville or even Chattanooga. One of those big-city guys might want to move to a place where the pace is a little slower."

"Or a gal."

"Huh?"

"A guy or a gal, Dad. Or have you forgotten that the sheriff of Adams County is female?" she'd asked, only halfway joking. Since her little brother, Bobby, had drowned in the river on a Boy Scout picnic when he was twelve, Bernie had been the closest thing her dad had to a son. She'd been the one who had played high school basketball, soccer, and softball. And she'd played sports more for her dad's sake than because she loved the games herself. She was the one who

sat around and watched football games on TV with him, went fishing with him, and even went hunting with him once each year.

Bob Granger had put his arm around Bernie's shoulders and said, "You know how proud I am of you, don't you? You're carrying on a family tradition. You're the third generation of Granger to be Sheriff of Adams County."

A car horn honked, bringing Bernie out of her thoughts and back to the present moment, here in her kitchen.

"That'll be Paul," Robyn said.

"Quite the gentleman, isn't he, honking for you instead of coming to the front door."

Robyn groaned. "Now you sound like Mom." She rushed over, gave Bernie a quick kiss on the cheek and flew out of the kitchen, calling loudly as she left, "I love you, sis. Don't wait up for me."

Bernie heard her sister giggling just before she slammed the front door. The moment Bernie was alone, she sighed, leaned her head back and stretched her aching muscles. Just as she eyed the coffeepot, intending to pour herself a cup before she prepared a sandwich, the telephone rang. Her heart leaped into her throat. She had left several of her deputies, along with Adams Landing police officers and several volunteers from Jackson County, still scouring Craggy Point, the area where an eyewitness swore he saw a woman fitting Stephanie's description arguing with a burly black man at the roadside park.

"Sheriff Granger." Her hand clutched the phone with white-knuckled pressure; then she glanced down at the caller ID and groaned.

"Good, you're home," Brenda Granger said. "Have you eaten supper? Taken a bath? Do you need me to come over and fix you something to eat? Or I could bring some leftovers. Dad and I had pot roast for supper and—"

"I'm fine, Mom. I was just fixing to make a sandwich."

"A sandwich? What kind?"

"Peanut butter and jelly." Bernie said the first thing that popped into her head.

"You don't eat right," Brenda said. "That's the reason you can't ever get rid of those ten extra pounds around your hips."

"Mom, I'm really tired. Could we discuss my eating habits and my weight problems another time?"

"Of course." Brenda paused for half a minute. "I'd like for you and Robyn to come to dinner on Sunday."

"All right. I'll be there, if I can. And I'll mention it to Robyn when—"

"Isn't she there?"

Thinking fast on her feet and telling a white lie to avoid further explanations, Bernie said, "She's in the shower. I'll tell her when she gets out, and I'm sure she'll be able to make it for Sunday dinner."

"Good. I've invited the new preacher. He's not married. And I've also invited Helen and her son Raymond. Raymond's divorce is final, you know. Helen and I agree that it's high time he started dating again."

"Good night, Mom. See you Sunday."

"Yes, dear, good night."

Bernie hung up the phone. When she told Robyn that their mother expected them for Sunday dinner, and that she was providing each of them with a potential husband, Robyn would throw a hissy fit. But in the end, she, like Bernie, would go to dinner and endure yet another matchmaking scheme concocted by a desperate grandmother wannabe.

Jim Norton unlocked the front door of his rental duplex on Washington Street. While driving through town, he'd noticed that a great many of the streets in Adams Landing were