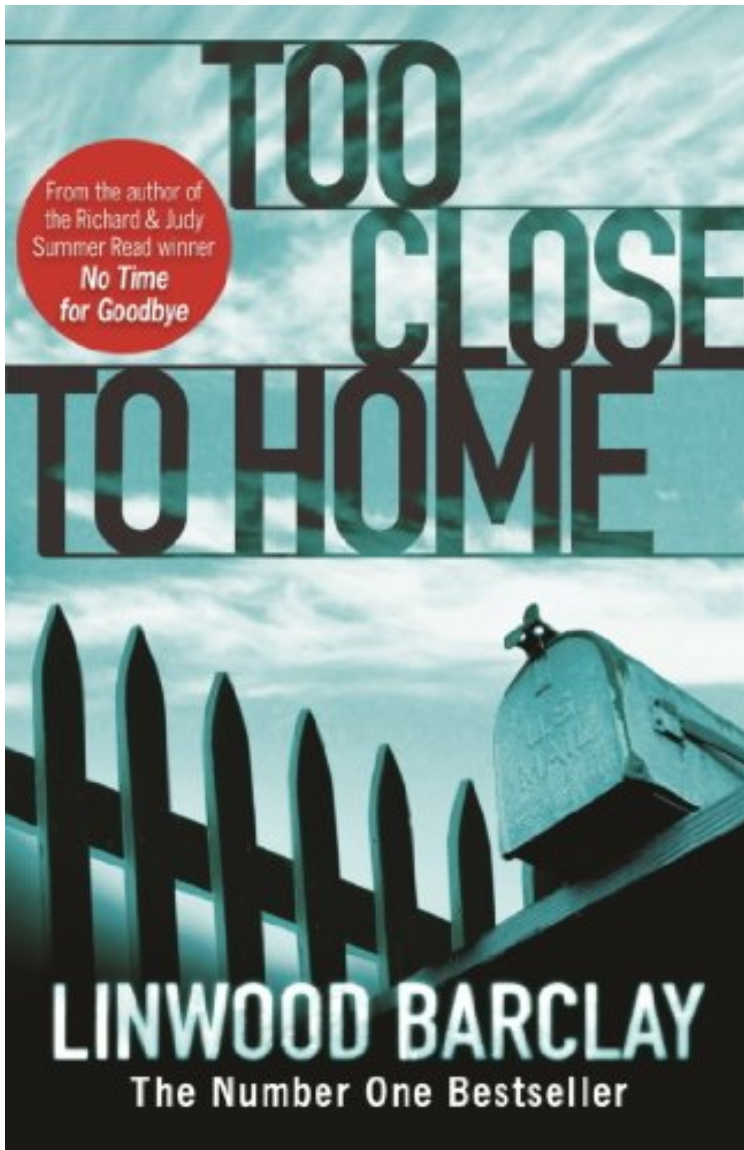


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Too Close to Home (English Edition)



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA superb, lightning-paced thriller from the No. 1 bestselling author of NO TIME FOR GOODBYEWhen the Cutter family's next-door neighbours, the Langleys, are gunned down in their house one hot August night, the Cutters' world is turned upside down. That violent death should have come so close to them is shocking enough in suburban Promise Falls, but at least the Cutters can console themselves with the thought that lightning is unlikely to strike twice in the same place. Unless, of course, the killers went to the wrong house . . . At first the idea seems crazy - but each of the Cutter family has a secret they'd rather keep buried. What was on that old computer teenage Derek and his friend Adam Langley had salvaged? And where is it now? What hold does a local professor and bestselling author have on Ellen

Cutter? And what does Jim Cutter know about Mrs Langley that even her husband didn't? To find out who killed the Langleys and why, everybody's secrets are going to have to come out. But the final secret - the secret that could save them or destroy them - is in the one place nobody would ever think of looking . . .

Chapter One

The night they killed our neighbors, the Langleys, we never heard a thing. It was warm and humid that evening, so we'd closed all the windows and had the air conditioner cranked up as high as it would go. Even at that, we couldn't get the temperature in the house much below 76. This was late July, and we'd been suffering through a heat wave the last week, the thermometer hitting mid-90s pretty much every day, except for Wednesday, when it hit 100. Even some rain early in the week had failed to break it. It wasn't getting much below the mid-80s even after the sun went down. Normally, it being a Friday night, I might have stayed up a little later, even have been up when it happened, but I had to work Saturday. That rain had set me back with all the customers I do yard work for. So Ellen and I had packed it in pretty early, nine-thirty or so. Even if we'd been up, we'd probably have been watching TV, so it's pretty unlikely we'd have heard anything. It's not like the Langleys' place is right next door. It's the first house in off the highway along our shared driveway. Once you pass their place, it's still another fifty or sixty yards or so before you get to our house. You can't see our place from the highway. Homes out here on the outskirts of Promise Falls in upstate New York have some space between them. You can see the Langleys' house up the lane, through the trees, but we never heard their parties, and if the racket I make tuning up lawn mowers ever bothered them, they never said anything about it. I was up around six-thirty Saturday morning. Ellen, who didn't have to go into her job up at the college, stirred as I moved into a sitting position on the side of the bed. "Sleep in," I said. "You don't have to get up." I stood up, wandered down to the foot of the bed, saw that the book Ellen had been reading before she'd turned out the light had fallen to the floor. It was just one of a stack of books on her bedside table. You have to do a lot of reading when you organize a college literary festival. "It's okay," she mumbled resignedly, turning her face into the pillow and pulling the covers tighter. "I'll put some coffee on. You're just going to wake me up getting dressed anyway." "Well," I said, "if you're already getting up, some eggs would be nice." Ellen said something into the pillow I couldn't hear, but it didn't sound friendly. I continued, "If I heard you correctly, that it's no trouble, does that mean you could fry up some bacon, too?" She turned her head. "Is there a union for slaves? I want to sign up." I got up and walked to the window, flipped open the blinds to let the early morning sun in. "Oh God, make it go away," Ellen said. "Jesus, Jim, shut those." "Looks like another hot one," I said, leaving the blinds open. "I was kind of hoping it might rain, then I'd have an excuse not to work today." "Would it kill those people if their grass missed getting cut one week?" Ellen asked. "They pay for a weekly service, hon," I said. "I'd rather work a Saturday than have to give them refunds." Ellen had no comeback for that. We weren't quite living hand-to-mouth, but neither were we willing to throw money away. And a lawn service, especially in this part of the country, was definitely a seasonal business. You made your living from spring to fall, unless you diversified by putting a blade on the front of your pickup and clearing driveways in the winter. I'd been hunting for a used blade. The winters around here could be fierce. Couple of years back, over in Oswego, they had snow up to the first-floor roofs. I'd only been running a lawn service for a couple of summers now, and I needed to find ways to make more money. It wasn't exactly my dream job, and it certainly wasn't what I wanted for myself when I was a young guy starting out, but it beat what I'd most recently left behind. Ellen took a breath, let out a long sigh, and threw back the covers. She reached, reflexively, as she did occasionally, for where her pack of smokes used to be on the bedside table, but she'd quit the habit years ago, and there was nothing there. "Breakfast is coming, Your Majesty," she said. She reached down for the book on the floor and said, "I can't believe this was a bestseller. Hard to believe a novel about wheat isn't gripping. There's a reason they set a lot of books in cities, you know. There are people there. Characters." I took a couple of steps toward the bathroom, winced, put my hand on my lower back. "You okay?" Ellen asked. "Yeah, I'm fine. I did something to myself yesterday, I was holding the weed whacker and turned funny or something." "You're an old man in a young man's game, Jim," Ellen said, putting on her slippers and throwing on a housecoat. "Thanks for reminding me," I said. "I don't have to remind you. You've got your aching back for that." She shuffled out of the bedroom as I went into the bathroom to shave. I took a look at myself in the mirror. I had some sunburn on my whiskered face. I'd been trying to remember to use sunscreen, wear a hat with a visor, but the day before, it got so hot I threw the hat in the truck at one point, and must have sweated the sunscreen clean off. I still didn't look too bad for forty-two, and as tired as I felt, I was probably in better shape than two years ago, when I spent most of my day sitting in an air-conditioned Grand Marquis, driving around Promise Falls, opening doors for an asshole, being a glorified gofer without an ounce of self-respect. Since then, I'd lost

thirty pounds, I was gaining back upper-body strength I'd lost over the last decade, and I'd never slept better in my entire life. Coming home every night dead tired had a lot to do with that. Getting up in the morning, though, that could be a challenge. Like today. By the time I came downstairs to the kitchen, the smell of bacon was wafting through the house and Ellen was pouring two cups of coffee. The Saturday edition of the Promise Falls Standard was on the kitchen table, rubber band already removed, so I could see the main headline. "Your old friend's at it again," Ellen said, cracking some eggs into a bowl. The headline read, "Mayor Rants at Single Moms' Home." And a drop headline, "Vows next time to 'bring cookies, not toss them.'" "Oh Jesus," I said. "The guy never stops." I picked up the paper, read the first few paragraphs. Promise Falls's mayor, Randall Finley, had burst in unannounced Thursday night at a city-funded home where unwed moms can find support as they adjust to lives with newborns but no husbands. It was something the previous mayor fought for and got, and which Finley had always seen as a waste of taxpayer money. Although to be fair, Finley viewed almost everything as a waste of taxpayer money, except for his car and driver. And that was pretty much a necessity, given his talent for drinking to excess, and a DUI conviction a few years back. Finley, the story suggested, had been touring around the city, dropping into a couple of bars after a city council meeting, and while passing the home ordered his driver I was guessing that would be Lance Garrick, but the story didn't actually say to stop. Finley walked up to the door and kept banging on it until the home supervisor, Gillian Metcalfe, opened up. She attempted to keep him out but the mayor forced his way in and started shouting, "Maybe if you girls had exercised a little restraint, you wouldn't be in the mess you are now!" And then, according to reports from the young women living at the home, he threw up in the front hall. "Even for Finley," I said to Ellen, "that's pretty impressive." "You're feeling nostalgic," Ellen said. "You think he'd take you back?" I was too tired to fire something back at her. I took a sip of my coffee and read further into the story. When reports began to circulate Friday morning about the mayor's behavior, he at first denied everything. It wasn't clear whether he was lying, or simply didn't remember. But by the afternoon, when presented with all the evidence against him, including the vomit-splattered front hall carpet runner that Gillian Metcalfe had taken down to city hall and left on the front steps, the mayor decided to revise his statement. "I deeply regret," he said in a written release, not eager to face any media representatives in person, "my behavior last night at the Swanson House." It was named in honor of Helen Swanson, a late city councillor who had championed feminist causes. "I had had a particularly stressful session of council and may have had more refreshments afterwards than was prudent. I remain a strong supporter of Swanson House and offer my sincerest apologies. Next time I would hope to bring cookies rather than toss them." "Pure Randy," I said. "Close with a joke. At least he didn't stick with trying to pretend it didn't happen. Must have been too many witnesses." Ellen had three plates out, put three bacon strips and two fried eggs and a couple slices of toast on two of them, and brought them over to the kitchen table. I sat down and shoved some bacon into my mouth. It was salty and greasy and wonderfully delicious. "Mmmm," I said. "This is why you keep me, isn't it?" she said. "For the breakfasts." "Dinners are good, too," I said. She reached over the paper, pulled out the lifestyles section. I took a sip of coffee, forkful of egg, bite of bacon, bite of toast. I had a good system going. "You going to have to do a full day?" Ellen asked. "I think we can be done a little after noon. The rain delayed everybody a day, but by the end of yesterday we were starting to catch up." We usually did seven to eight properties between eight in the morning and five in the afternoon and squeezed in the odd landscaping job when one came along. Ellen made more than I did with her job at the college, but we wouldn't have gotten by without my business. "Why?" I asked. "You got something in mind?" Ellen shrugged. "I saw you the other day, looking at your paintings." There were a number of canvases, in various stages of completion, leaned up against the wall in the shed, gathering dust. When I didn't say anything, she added, "I wondered if you were thinking of getting back into it." I shook my head. "Ancient history," I said. "I was just deciding whether to throw them into the truck and take them to the dump." Ellen frowned. "Stop it," she said. I used the last of my toast to mop up some egg yolk, popped it into my mouth, and dabbed at the corners of my mouth with a napkin. "Thanks, hon," I said, kissing the top of her head as I got up. "What are you going to do today?" "Read," she said tiredly. "It's not like I have to read every writer who comes to the festival, but I at least need to know a bit about their work. You run into them at the cocktail parties, you have to be able to bluff your way through. Writers, honestly, a lot of them are really nice, but God they're needy. They need constant validation." "No sign of my associate yet?" I asked as I took my plate to the sink. "I think you'll have to wake him," Ellen said. "I thought the smell of bacon would do it. Tell him I saved him some and can do a couple eggs fast." I went upstairs and stopped outside the door to my son's room. I rapped lightly on the closed door, then opened it

about a foot, enough to see that he was under the covers, turned away from the door. "Hey, Derek, wakey wakey, man," I said. "I'm awake," Derek said. Chapter Two Derek kept facing the wall. "I don't think I can go today," he said. "I think I'm sick." I opened the door wide and stepped into his room. It looked as it always did, as though a bomb had gone off. Heaps of clothes on the floor, half a dozen different pairs of sneakers, none matched up, scattered hither and yon, countless empty software and game boxes, a desk along one wall with not one but three computer monitors, two keypads, half a dozen different computer towers underneath, wires connected and disconnected all over the place. He was going to set the house on fire one day. "What's wrong?" I said. Derek was legendary for feigning illness to get out of school, but he was less likely to pull that kind of stunt working for his father. "I just feel off," he said. Ellen passed by the door, heard a snippet of conversation, came in. "What's up?" "Says he's sick," I said. She moved past me, sat on the edge of Derek's bed, and tried to get her hand on his forehead, but he turned away so she couldn't get near him. "Come on," she said. "Let me see if you've got a fever." "I don't have a fever," he said, his face still hidden. "Can't I just feel out of it one day? And besides, it's fucking Saturday." "And you got last Monday and half of Tuesday off because of rain," I reminded him. "Win some, lose some. We should be done by noon. We've just got the Simpsons, the Westlake place, and what's-her-name, the one with the cat that looks like a furry pig, who gave you the computer." Here's the thing about Derek. He's a good kid, and I love him more than I can say, but sometimes he can be a royal pain in the ass. Finding creative ways to get out of his obligations is one of his talents. He hates school, and he hasn't always made the best choices. A few that immediately come to mind: a couple of years back, he and his pal Adam were setting off firecrackers in the dry grass behind the house. It hadn't rained in a month and one spark could have started a fire that would have burned our place down. I nearly wrung his neck. There was the time he went joyriding with a fifteen-year-old buddy who took out his father's MG without permission and without a driver's license and wrapped it around a tree. Thank God no one was hurt, except for the MG, of course. And there was the time he and another friend decided to explore the rooftop of the high school, scaling gutters like they were goddamn ninjas or something. Maybe, if all they'd done was hang out there, no one would have noticed, but they'd chosen to do sprints across the roof, then leapt off the edge and over an eight-foot gap to another wing of the school. It was a wonder they hadn't killed themselves. From the Hardcover edition. *Revue de presse* A gripping web of deception and intrigue (Fanny Blake WOMAN HOME) compelling... the author doesn't flinch as he portrays grisly and gruesome deeds in suburbia (SUNDAY HERALD)