

# TOYER

A NOVEL

**Gardner McKay**



Little, Brown and Company

BOSTON    NEW YORK    LONDON

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First Edition

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*Madeleine*

The real crime is not the crime.  
The real crime is that we turn the page.

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Never order a Margarita in a Chinese restaurant.

**T O Y E R**



## PRELUDE

# LOS ANGELES

**T**he primary color, pearl gray, a whitish blue sky. At night, the purple loom of the city, an all-night dusk.

Here, the wind never blows, it hardly ever rains. Los Angeles does not look well in the rain; its stucco houses change color like a runner's sweatshirt. No building is well-worn, nothing is burnished, there is no rust, there are no weathered houses, no forgotten graveyards.

Los Angeles has no history, no monuments, no statues, no comment. It exists because its water was once stolen from Inyo County to the north.

Its land was stolen from the Chumash Indians by the Spanish, then stolen from the Spanish by the Americans. Now, the Indians are dead, the Spanish have returned, and Los Angeles is waiting for revenge from the ruined county to the north, the county that no longer has water, which is now dead. It is ripe for retribution.

There is Beverly Hills. Everything here is new. Cars fresh as eggs, consortiums built on lunches, recent clothes designed in ancient cities, iridescent paintings nearly dry, wafer-soled shoes that never walk stab German accelerators, bright snappy credit cards, young hair. Nothing said yesterday is remembered today. Only the new is trusted,



admired. It is all famously temporary. Haunted by ghosts of its late celebratti, those who traded up, house to house, some only renting, then died. Roots equal stagnation. Timeworn equals poverty. Realtors equal beau monde. Oranges lie in gutters beside furry tennis balls. There are no poor.

The Sunset Strip. A tribute to democratic free enterprise, seen by a cartoonist. Its billboards sell vanities, set in place above the low buildings to divert the sky, the stained air. Outdoor cafés abound close to sealed cars driven in anger. Strollers are intruders.

Hollywood. The hills are legally green, a green without death. Dusk colors seen in noon gloaming. Palms in still-life, crematorium ash on their fronds. The landscape ages in the manner of a vinyl sofa. The silence is eerie.

There are two seasons, day and night.

Downtown. Packing crates stand around, half-opened; a cluster of shiny buildings that will not be allowed to age.

Los Angeles is not a city, it is a wide town. A town without a history; it does not want one. It is incomplete, possibly hiding. It is made up of dozens of districts, some with their own city hall, each with its own police precinct, its own complacency, its own anger.

It has no memory, no center. It is waiting to become. Anything. Created by water theft. A done deal.

Toyer. He is a masterpiece. A natural response to this neighborhood. He is perfect. The fresh curse. There has never been anything like Toyer, but of course, each time there never is. Each time, the newest cutting-edge-serial-lunatic has the same refreshing aspect; he is unimaginable.

He has it all. He is a reservoir of all those who have preceded him. Of Ted Bundy, because he has the charisma of a would-be congressman. The Nightstalker, as a beautiful Satan. The steadfast Hillside Strangler, with his plodding self-expressionism. The pathetic Son of

*Sam who took orders from a dog's voice. The misguided Zodiac. The expressionless Iceman. Tod.*

*Toyer's domain is Los Angeles. And to the north, the San Fernando Valley, a vast, dry flatland that aspires to be Los Angeles when it grows up. He uses the wide town without opinion, as though he were playing tennis on a court too large, its base lines out of sight. The map of his conquests bewilders the police. Investigators connect colored pins hoping to see pentacles, to discover constellations. He gives them no clue except: he is new and he is unimaginable.*



# THE BEGINNING



## LYDIA SNOW LAVIN

**B**UT THE MOVIE was far longer than Lydia wanted it to be. When she stood up, it had been over for her a long time. An endless anecdote. Would the lovers die badly? No, of course they wouldn't, she no longer cared, she had seen the trailer. Still, she had stayed on for the final terrorist explosion, waiting it out.

*The FBI agent who'd assigned them to work together knew how much they disliked each other, which meant they'd fall in love. But when they did, Lydia could see that the actors still disliked each other. Horrible kisses.*

When the lights came up, dimly raising the theater to its fetid grandeur, she noticed that she was nearly alone. Half-a-dozen couples rose, brushing crumbs. She slipped her movie glasses off, tucked them into her purse. One by one, she had clicked off the moments from the trailer. *Whoever makes the trailer sure doesn't make the movie. Trailers are so much better, it's always a breathless filmlet guided by a spiritual baritone who begins, "In a world where . . ."*

*You can't return a movie. Return a dress, a steak, wine, but never a movie. It's a blind date from Hollywood and your evening's shot. What about an evening of two-minute movies?*

In protest, she dropped her Diet Pepsi cup with a *clack* on the cement floor.

Six rows down, a man looked over at her, a black-haired man wearing a white shirt, sleeves rolled up a bit, two buttons open, he

was with a much shorter girl. He turned away down the aisle and looked back, smiled directly at Lydia, shrugged. About the movie? She intuitively looked down. *He could be in sales, he could be in advertising.* Lydia's set dream: the care and feeding of a rising professional who drives away to work every morning smelling of soap, wearing shined shoes.

The lush heat of the parking lot surrounded her ears and neck. Used air. She followed the black-haired man and his much shorter date, a couple no longer speaking, as they passed between atmospheres from theater lobby to night to car.

But her car would not start. Lydia sat, key turned, pumping the gas pedal. It almost started, but it just would not. And the air conditioner would not work without the motor, she wondered why. She saw her black-haired executive get into a small new car *with his midget girlfriend*. Now they were arguing. Of course they would, *they were so mismatched*. Lydia signaled to him, waving. *I'll bet he can start my car*, but only the *dwarf* saw her wave, the rising professional had turned the other way and they drove off.

Lydia tried the starter again. The battery worked, she heard the fierce whine under the hood, determined. The lights came on, the radio played. But the air conditioner would not. *Where the hell is Rick?*

Now she smelled gas. *Great. The thing is flooded.* Whenever you smell gas, according to Rick, it's flooded.

*Rick isn't available.* If he was, she would not need to call him, he would be here with her. She had telephoned him from the lobby, he did not answer. *He's home with his ratty bimbo.* She listened again to his male hunter-gatherer message, *I'm-out-your-call-is-important-to-me-maybe*. She left a message so loud they both could hear it in the bedroom, telling him to go fuck himself.

She looked back at the theater, probably built in the 1940s, a shabby temple created to dignify bad movies. Whatever palatial magic it once held was gone. She stayed in her car ten minutes as Rick had told her to do, waiting for whatever needed to happen to a flooded motor. *Drain, I guess.*

Lydia stared at the hood. The lights on the theater's marquee snapped off. Now in the black, she could see the moon faintly reflected on the hood. Once, when she was six and plump, she stood up in class and answered that she would love to go to the moon but what would she eat there? Even her teacher had laughed. *That comes back to me at the strangest times.*

Lydia got out of the car, looked directly up at the moon, a tough little shard, a wintry moon on a sultry night. *Winter up there, maybe. Strangely clear. Jupiter and Orion and Mars. Everything is in order. Life goes on. Without Rick.*

She knocked on the glass door of the theater, rattling it. The staff had slipped away, only the popcorn machine stood watch, glowing, loaded with puffed kibble for tomorrow's audience.

She sat again in the locked car, holding the wheel with both hands, head down, waiting for something to happen.

A man, maybe twenty-five or so, in a dark jacket and white rubber-soled shoes, was using the pay telephone, lit at the corner of the parking lot, leaning on a bronze car the size of an aircraft carrier. One hip out. Jeans. She watched him. *If he ever gets through talking, I'll call Rick and say I'm sorry.*

When he hung up she waved to him. "Excuse me?" she called out. "Sir?" He got into his car and drove over to her.

Her hood was up. He had raised it effortlessly, blindly pressing the release hook with insolent skill. He stood between their cars, slouched, thinking with his face. *Good skin.* He was about her age and she could not tell in the overhead light exactly what he looked like, whether he was cute or not, but he seemed uncomplicated, a familiar type. Shy. His jacket had a large orange *H* on it. *I don't know anyone who still wears their letter jacket.*

He had not turned off his engine and it churned beside them with the bass grumbling of proud carburetors, storming the night. Gleaming wheels, the hood's polished whorls, both ends jacked up an extra foot off the ground. His car's interior looked tidy and she felt lucky.

A shy, boy-man devoted to cars. Why shouldn't she ask him for help? She had always gotten along well with simple men and here



was a simple man. She wasn't too complicated herself, she thought, why shouldn't she get along? Anyway, he wore a letter jacket and called her transmission a *tranny* and she thought that was cute.

He connected his work-light from his battery and hung it under her hood. She gave him a coat hanger from the back seat of her car and he sculpted it into a long o-o and installed it under her hood. She thanked him before he fixed it, as he was fixing it, and when he had fixed it. She started her car. A classic nice guy. *All you hear are warnings.*

Driving. Even at night, barely seen, the barren main streets of the Valley were without redemption. Above the closed stores on the scathing signs, the merchants' pleadings: *SALE!* A visitor to the San Fernando Valley would sense sweeping fear of bankruptcy. Tension lingered along blocks of dark stores. *Sell. Sell.* There was no restraint. The number .99 figured in all appeals, a nagging tribute to buyers' mindlessness.

In her rearview mirror, Lydia watched his headlights several car lengths behind her. He was driving in the inside lane so his lights would not irritate her. He had offered to follow her home to make sure the wire coat hanger held.

Now the flat, billboard boulevards began to curve, rising gently toward the hills. The Valley changed as she drove, the drastic storefronts became firm New England dwellings, Spanish haciendas. Narrow streets named by Realtors, ending in *dale* and *crest* and *view*. They passed Multiview Drive. Now, occasional streetlights through the area named Warren Oak Crest.

Into the hills, known to be the Santa Monica Mountains, that ran the breadth of the Valley to the south. Mounds made of decomposing granite that rose maybe two hundred and fifty feet. Houses that resembled Lego toys clung to steep miniature lots where no houses belonged and only animals were able walk among abrupt inclines. Some were built in air, standing on stilts. Below, the slopes were covered by growths of sage and sumac, already dried by summer, ready to burn.

He drove behind her at the same measured distance. *Good guys. Where do they come from? Where are they going?* He parked with fierce