

# Judy Strick...Living on the Fault Line...Tales from L.A.



## Story № 1

### When Love Congeals

#### BEVERLY HILLS

Sunset Blvd, Beverly Drive, Coldwater Canyon, Wilshire Blvd; street names as famous as the movie stars who used to live and play there. There are less movie stars these days, more exotic tourists, more out-of-towners on more open air tour busses, window shopping on Rodeo Drive, posing in front of the big Beverly Hills sign on Santa Monica Blvd. Hawkers still stand on Sunset Blvd corners, hawking movie star maps to mansions long taken over by developers, real estate magnates, oil tycoons, and dubious bankers. The streets are all wide as boulevards, lawns are impeccable, houses huge; crime is low, nights quiet, people are rich. You're in a garden of Paradise: tall skinny palms, short stout palms, King palms, Queen palms, palms in clusters;

mimosa trees, jacarandas, sycamores, magnolias, citrus trees, bright hibiscus, birds of paradise, cascades of bougainvillea, rose gardens, English gardens, rock gardens, cactus gardens- so much color, so much well-tended space. Even the sky seems bluer in Beverly Hills. And you think- 'How could anyone be unhappy, living in a fantasy like this?'

But of course we all know better.

Now the woman you are about to meet, Annie Monk, lives in a two-story Mediterranean on Bedford Drive, three blocks north of Santa Monica Blvd.- the part of town where the houses are somewhat more on a human scale. Annie is a nice woman, a decent woman, who under ordinary circumstances would not hurt a fly. But everyone has a breaking point.

Hers was a party.

It began thusly...

Annie woke with a start, shortly after midnight, on a cold Thursday. It was the eve of her twenty-fifth anniversary. She sat bolt upright in her bed, awakened by Evan's snores. She realized, then and there, that she could not go through with the Saturday evening extravaganza that was two days away. A hundred people were scheduled to arrive at the Beverly Hills Hotel at twilight, dressed in as much silver as they could figure out how to wear.

A Silver Anniversary- imagine that, a quarter of a damn century. Gone, so quickly. And before you knew it, it would be their golden anniversary. They would be old, and chances would be long over.

She looked at Evan, lying at her side, blanket tossed off, heaving, snoring, naked, clutching the sheet, his flaccid penis exposed like a giant sea slug. She imagined the white sheet, magically rising into the air, drifting over his body, covering his corpse like a shroud- his eyes forever closed.

Annie, at that moment, understood that she would have to kill her husband. She had no choice, really.

The thought had not taken her by surprise.

After at least a decade of denial, one sunny morning five years ago, her sleeping eyes popped open and, just like that, she realized that there was no more love between Evan and her; there was not even like. Now, five years later, in spite of her futile attempts at compromise, restraint, openness, things had not improved, they had only gotten worse. Evan refused see a marriage counselor, he refused to spend more time at home; he refused to treat her with civility.

At first she had wanted to fix things, she had wanted to love him again- and be loved. But that was not to be.

This is what happened the first time the subject of a trial separation came up. It was three years ago, shortly after David, their youngest, had left for

Stanford. So it was just the two of them and they had the house to themselves again.

One Sunday morning, over bagels and espresso, she tried broaching the subject lightly. She did not want a confrontation.

“I’d like to go to Morocco.”

“I hate Morocco. You know I won’t go any place where there’s no asphalt.”

“And I hate asphalt. We’re never going to want the same vacation. I was thinking of going by myself. Maybe we should go off on our own every once in a while, do what we each really want to do, now that the kids are in college and the dogs are both dead. We can lead our own lives now.”

He hadn’t said a word. He had just looked at her in a way that made her acutely uncomfortable. His were teeth clenched, his jaw muscles flexing. His hands curled in fists.

Evan’s eyes were deadly cold. “Who is HE?!”

And then he got up and left, before she had time to vigorously deny that she had been unfaithful.

The door slammed behind him, and he didn’t come back for four days nor would he accept her calls. She had not expected him to walk out.

His abrupt departure had frightened her. She waited anxiously during those four days for the door that didn’t open, the phone that didn’t ring.

When he returned, all he said was, "I'm just going to pretend I didn't hear any of that crap!" And he refused to talk about the incident, or for that matter, where he had been those four days and nights.

She had sobbed bitter frightened tears that first time he vanished. When he finally returned she'd tried her damnest to appreciate what she had, which in the end, was a big fat nothing. Things had to change, before she and Evan turned into two old tortoises, living in the same space by habit, having no pleasure, no consciousness of the other's existence- just eating lettuce and shitting green pellets: like her parents, like his parents— a couple of unhappy old farts.

Speaking of... a giant flatulent snore blasted from the sleeping creature by her side. This time if he left her, she'd have the locks replaced before he had time to change his mind.

Things had altered radically between them in this last year.

There was now open hatred.

This is how it began.

Annie had brought up the subject of divorce, gently, carefully. "Why are we bothering to stay together? We don't even like each other anymore."

“We stay together because I can’t afford the messiness of a divorce. Neither can you. And if you persist with this idiocy, I’ll see to it that you’re homeless within five years. We have a pre-nup; if you’ll remember.”

Ahhhh yes; there had been that pre-nup, which she had signed, willing, even adamantly, in spite of multitudinous advice to the contrary. She had wanted to prove her trust in Evan to all the skeptics. He loved her, so she knew he would be fair. Furthermore she had signed the damn thing without reading it because she hated all that legal gobbledegook, and because she was in love, and thus kind of a jerk and it never had occurred to her that their love could die.

The toxic piece of paper went into their safe deposit box along with their marriage certificate, and she forgot about it.

Until...

Last year, twenty-four years after the fact, when she marched into the bank on Wilshire Blvd, into the locked vault, and found therein the envelope that held the key to her life and freedom; the document that she had signed lovingly, trustingly. She read those words leaving her a token thirty-thousand a year for the rest of her life, excluding her from all profits in his corporation, in which all their assets- including the house- were placed. It was outrageous. She had unwittingly signed away her future.

*‘I TRUSTED HIM!’*

That was first time she thought of killing Evan.

Annie was no fool; she knew the system, realized that it would be very difficult, if not impossible to cross her husband. First of all, Evan loved nothing so much as the battle; breaking his opponents, pulling out their hearts.

Second of all, Evan, being a well-known divorce lawyer, was at a huge advantage, being a member in standing of the good-old-boy club; no other divorce lawyer in town would touch her with a ten-foot pole.

She tried though, god knows she tried. She talked to four high-powered lawyers who were not social acquaintances, who never went to the parties she went to with Evan. Not one of them would handle her case- “conflict of interest”, they all claimed. The last lawyer, put his arm around her shoulder as he walked her out of his office, “There’s a new kid, just starting out. He’s hungry for work.” He handed her a slightly soiled business card.

Brian Klugman had a degree from a third rate school, and a shabby office in a ratty building near MacArthur Park. He was tall and lanky and totally unsure of himself. His grammar was poor. And even he was reluctant to take her case.

“Oh man, Evan Monk,” he had said. “I dunno, that’s like messin’ around with a cobra. I’m just starting out... I don’t...”

She had once loved Evan as much as she now hated him. But she had been in love with a fantasy. The young Evan had been a chimera; a creature of her own making. She finally saw the real Evan when she opened that envelope. Ever since then, she had been living a lie, trapped by the fear of

winding up on the streets, becoming one of the disenfranchised; sleeping in her car, under freeway overpasses, dumpster diving...

So it was Evan or her. Period. End of story. She really had no choice.

She never told Evan about the visits to the lawyers. Never told him about finding the pre-nup. A whole damn year of hiding what she knew. What she felt. Who she was.

And now, there he was, flopped over onto his left side, a shimmer of drool trailing down his chin. She used to love watching him when he was asleep; he had been handsome, sexy, lean like a faun. His breathing had been gentle then, small waves rippling to shore. Now he snored like a walrus; this man who lay there with too much hair on his back and chest, and not enough on his legs and head. She had once felt that she would surely die if anything ever happened to him.

Where had the love gone? Ah yes, that universal question, as if love were an immutable rock that had taken up residence in one's life never to budge an inch or change shape, however stormy the waters in which it dwelt.

So Annie lay in bed, on the eve of her anniversary, thinking hard thoughts. In the past year, she had come up with many plans, discarded them all: drug overdose with a suicide note, trip to the mountains- a well-placed push, antifreeze in the morning oatmeal. She had thought of hiring someone to stage a car accident, fake a home invasion murder, but decided that it was



too risky. And anyway, where in the world would she find such an accomplice. She did not run in those kinds of circles.

Finally, in a burst of inspiration, at the midnight hour- so to speak, she came up with a flawless means of disposing of her husband in such a way that nobody could prove a thing.

This was the plan: Evan had his male vanity about fixing things up- "Mr. Fix-it", as he liked to call himself. It was partly macho posturing, partly cheapness. It just so happened that the light fixture in the dining room had been blinking on and off for a while.

"A loose wire!" he had proclaimed.

She knew all about loose wires; they were his specialty. She knew the routine: the switch had to be off when the live wires were exposed, because if the current were running, he would be electrocuted.

It was as easy as that.

A mere flick of the switch and her life would be hers. And no one would even suspect, much less be able to prove anything, because her fingerprints were expected to be all over the switch-plate. It was her house after all.

She could see it, as she lay there in the dark, her eyes closed- she could see Evan standing on the table, saying to her, "now make sure that switch is off; unless you want to be a middle-aged widow. Hah, ha, ha." She could see him taking off the large glass globe that covered the bulbs, taking out the

screws that held the canopy in place, pulling out the wires- he'd be too involved to notice her quietly reaching for the wall, pushing up the switch...

S-I—I-I-I-I-Z-Z-ZLE... Over in a second.

No one would ever know she had done it; not even Evan. It was a very humane way to die really, far better than any of the natural possibilities, which mostly involved pain and wasting away.

She fell into a deep and satisfying sleep, next to her snoring husband.

Annie made Evan breakfast the next morning, as she had done for the last twenty-five years; more than nine thousand breakfasts. A lot less dinners lately though; half the time he didn't get back for dinner. Sometimes he slept at the office when his workload demanded. But tonight he would be coming home... for a celebration dinner. After all, it was their actual anniversary.

So on that morning, that portentous morning, she cooked his steel-cut oatmeal, sliced his damn banana, and put up his damn French roast coffee to perk. She was in an upbeat mood. She moved around the kitchen with a little smile.

She had made up her mind.

Tonight was the night. Before that goddamn travesty of a party was unleashed.

“Happy anniversary,” she said, as she put the bowl of oatmeal down on the table. She was very cheerful. Had he looked up from the business section of the Wall Street Journal, he would have been surprised. She was usually grumpy in the mornings- wordless.

“Have we heard from the Carsons yet?” he asked her, his nose still in the news... “or the Rachmans?”

He was referring to several invited guests who had not yet RSVP’d. She hated the Carsons. She found them to be very unpleasant people- pretentious, hide-bound reactionaries. Like her husband was becoming in his middle years.

“I guess we’ll just have to cross the Carsons off the list,” she said gaily, bringing him his toasted English muffin- dry, trying to imagine what it would be like to never again have to make his goddamn breakfast. And as far as the Carsons and the Rachmans, it really didn’t matter if they came or not. There would be no anniversary party. It would be canceled because of a death in the family.

She put the plate down in front of him, as efficient as a waitress. He said nothing, not even thank you. She wanted to throw the damn bowl of oatmeal at his fucking head.

He slurped his coffee loudly, then exhaled equally loudly in satisfaction; like a large, cloven-hoofed animal.

What a farce this big bash would be, were it allowed to take place- a small fortune spent to celebrate a sham, a façade; the honoring of a union of mutual loathing.

On the other hand, thank god for the party. It had brought things to a head. If they had not planned this big bloated event, she probably could have gone on with the wretched marriage indefinitely, because the idea of genteel poverty frightened her to death. And in truth she had no saleable skills- a B.A. in Art History, no resume for the past twenty-five years. If she were able to get a decent settlement in a civilized divorce she could go back to school, and learn something useful and worthwhile; she could support herself. But she knew that was not possible if she left him. He would break her like he broke all his opponents; and enjoy doing it.

When Evan left for the office that morning, she chastely kissed his cheek, and said cheerfully, "Be home on time tonight. I'm making a fabulous dinner to celebrate the actual date of the foul deed." And she winked at him and he was surprised at how pleasant she was. "Twenty-five years to the day since that lovely hopeful wedding at the beautiful Beverly Hills Hotel- all those white roses... three-hundred and fifty dollars worth of roses, all of them dead the next day. can you imagine that? Twenty-five years?!"

And she actually hugged him as he left that morning. And he stood there stiffly, and hugged her in return; and then he awkwardly patted her back, like you would pat a dog, or a child.

And then he pulled away from her, and went brusquely out the door.

She nodded and smiled.

And while Annie was having her secret thoughts, Evan was having his own. Evan was feeling trapped. Lucinda was starting to want more, starting to needle him about getting a divorce. There was no way he was going to marry her, any more than he ever considered marrying any of the others.

He was sick of everything, restless, trapped by a mistress who wanted too much; trapped in a marriage that was dull as smog. He screwed around because he needed an outlet; the women were like meditation. They took his mind off the emptiness he was swimming around in. Sex with Annie had been over years ago. It had become like yesterday's scrambled eggs. Lust had turned to comfort, which turned to boredom. He was middle-aged now; soon he'd be more than middle-aged; time was wasting, his youth was shriveling and fading into a small, wizened thing that would probably sooner or later lodge in his prostate and kill him.

And ironically, he couldn't leave Annie, she needed him. She was one of those souls who float through life and never quite alight. Furthermore, he could not afford a divorce, in spite of the pre-nup. No court in the land would hold up such a one-sided arrangement. He couldn't afford to divorce her. He'd have to pay her legal fees, his legal fees, and then split everything 50/50. And

the kids would hate him if he walked out on her; and if there was anything in the world that he still loved mightily and cleanly, it was his kids.

He knew he had to end it with Lucinda before he started to loathe her, which seemed to be his pattern with the girlfriends.

He called Lucinda at 3:30 that afternoon and said, "I have to talk to you."

There was a long silence, and then she spoke. "You're going to break up with me. I can hear it in your voice."

Damn. He was a trial lawyer; he should be able to mask his intentions by now.

Lucinda had started crying on the other end of the line.

"No, no, take it easy, it's nothing like that." He felt his dick warming, throbbing, growing. "Okay, okay. Don't do that. You know I can't stand tears- please. I'll come over tonight... for a little while- on my way home. Just a little while."

Meanwhile, Annie had gone to the market and bought a standing rib roast, horseradish sauce on the side, which Evan would love; his last dinner. She would make him his other favorites: baked potato, creamed spinach. There would be no dessert; she was planning on killing him after the main course.

When she returned home from her shopping trip, she unpacked the grocery bags and put everything away. She would start the rib roast in two hours, so it would be ready in time.

She iced the martini glasses. It would be good for him to have a martini or two or three. The presence of alcohol in his system might explain the carelessness of such a usually cautious man.

She hummed as she put her groceries into the fridge, she listen to the song that was running through her head...

*“When love congeals, it soon reveals, the faint aroma of performing seals, the double-crossing of a pair of heels, I wish I were in love again”.*

Cole Porter- or was it Rogers and Hart, or did it matter who wrote the damn song?

She was planning to serve dinner in the formal dining room that they hardly ever used, not the breakfast nook in the kitchen where they usually ate dinner on the nights he was not working late.

After she had everything put away, she walked into the dining room. *‘The execution chamber’* she thought, blackly smiling to herself.

And there it was, hanging right over the middle of the long English walnut table, a large opalescent-white, inverted glass bell. How prosaic looking, for an instrument of death.

The song was still running through her head- "*When love congeals, it soon reveals...*"

After she had loosened the bulb, the light would flicker in the fixture when he turned it on, and after a few martinis she would say, "Oh dear, there's that loose wire again. I hope it doesn't burn the house down. I'm calling an electrician tomorrow."

And he would say, "Money doesn't grow on trees, in spite of what you may believe. We don't need to blow a fortune on an electrician. I'll fix it myself. Get me the wire-cutters and a screwdriver."

Tonight was the night.

She knew how escaping prisoners felt the evening before they fled the Gulags. Breathless anticipation mixed with fear and excitement. She was going to do it! She would set herself free!

Annie put on a pair of latex gloves she kept around for cleaning the toilets. She kicked off her shoes, and used the chair to climb onto the table. She stood up carefully; all she needed now was to lose her balance and fall. She took a step so she was directly beneath the glass bell floating overhead.

She slowly reached her hand up into the innards of the light fixture. She felt her fingers touch the frail glass of the bulb.

This was it.

Was she capable of murder?



She was filled with a sudden burst of resolution. She closed her eyes and screwed her courage to the sticking point...

and twisted the treacherous light bulb ever so slightly; enough to interfere with the connection, but not to break it completely.

Annie closed her eyes for a minute and took a deep breath, then carefully got down from the table, sprayed the top with Murphy's Oil, and methodically polished the surface bare of any prints her feet might have left. Footprints would be hard to explain away.

When she switched on the light; the bulb flickered compliantly at her touch.

Next, she walked into the kitchen and put Evan's roast in a pyrex dish, turned on the oven, stuffed slivered garlic into the rind of fat. She salted and peppered it vigorously, then checked her watch. So far her timing was perfect. The roast would be done at seven, just when Evan would be walking through the door, ready for an iced martini.

She put dinner in the oven, set the timer, made the martinis in the silver shaker they had gotten twenty-five years ago as a wedding gift; she made them extra strong, then put the shaker in the freezer, poured herself a glass of wine and waited for Evan. She felt very calm, tranquil. She put a Cole Porter CD on and listened to ironic songs of love, and she waited for her husband to return home for his last dinner on earth.

The call came in at 5:30. The house was starting to smell lovely, of rib roast and garlic.

“Annie, I’m sorry. A new case came in this afternoon. I’m up to my ass in paperwork. I’m going to stay in the office tonight and work until I fall asleep. So don’t wait up.”

When she stood, her knees were weak.

She had lost her window of opportunity- like Cinderella at the ball; her glass getaway coach had turned back into a pumpkin.

Never again would she have the courage to pull the switch.

She would stay with him forever.

Annie Monk walked slowly over to the oven, put on oven mitts, carefully slid the pyrex dish with the steaming damn rib roast out of the oven. She hurled the whole damn thing against the wall. Then she took the baked potatoes out of the oven, and threw them too. Fortunately she had not yet started cooking the creamed spinach, which would have made a horrendous mess.

For a moment she thought of blowing out the pilot light and sticking her head in the still warm oven; anything to avoid that goddamn party. But in the end she was no Sylvia Plath. She couldn’t do that to her kids. Anyway, it was his head she wanted to stick in the oven, not her own.

When he got home, the next evening, he walked into this: a mess of broken glass, congealed gravy, a dead hunk of meat... a smear of a smashed baked potato on the wall- it had all been left where it had landed the night before.

“What the hell happened,” he said, astonished.

She shrugged. “Clean it up yourself; it’s your damn mess.”

The big anniversary bash was held at the Rodeo Ballroom in the Beverly Hills hotel, where Evan and Annie had been married so long ago. Practically everybody they knew was there; a hundred close friends, half of whom were Evan’s business associates and clients. The kids had flown in from college, Lisa from New York, David from Boston. There was a mozzarella bar, wild salmon en-croute for dinner, a three-tiered cake and a champagne fountain. Evan was wearing an Armani Tuxedo, and Annie was in a simple, some might even say somber, long black sheath. She had decided at the last minute to wear black, instead of the silver lace dress that had been bought for the occasion.

A small combo had been hired for the evening and they played love songs all through dinner. After the cake was cut, and the floor was cleared for dancing, the combo broke into “The Anniversary Waltz”, and everybody called for the happy couple to dance the first dance.

“Evan... Annie... Evan... Annie”. It was a chant.

So there was really no choice.

Evan and Annie walked to the dance floor, Evan holding Annie's hand and everybody clapped and cheered as he put his arm around her waist and started twirling her around the floor.

They were a very handsome couple.

And the room was hushed as the guests all stood and watched, soft with nostalgia, as Evan and Annie Monk waltzed together like newlyweds, gazing in each other's eyes.

*"Oh, how we danced, on the night we were wed*

*We vowed our true love, though a word wasn't said..."*

"What a wonderful couple," the guests said to each other. "How inspiring- all those years together and still in love...how did they make it last... so hard to find that kind of love these days..."

And the kids were delighted, and the relatives and friends; and nobody, in their wildest flight of imagination, would dream that the happy couple couldn't stand each other.

Annie and Evan went to sleep that night, each in their own separate bedrooms; Evan had taken up residence the night before in the empty guest room downstairs.

They both thought it would be better that way.

As Annie lay in her bed, drifting into slumber, these were her thoughts in the moments before sleep enveloped her... *'Perhaps I'll take a lover; The gardener is very attractive and we are not without flirtations... perhaps I'll take a trip to somewhere exotic; Machu Pichu or the South Pole, Belize... or perhaps classes, perhaps an advanced degree... I could get a masters; work at a museum; I would like that... or perhaps I'll start abusing drugs... perhaps the gardener will be able to tell me where to find them... he's very attractive, Jose...*

*Perhaps I'll get a large dog...'*

She slept better that night than she thought she would.

THE END