

# FINAL ANALYSIS

CASE # 2037883

THE UNTOLD STORY  
OF THE SUSAN POLK  
MURDER CASE



Author of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *A Deadly Game*

# CATHERINE CRIER

with Cole Thompson

SHERIFF'S LINE DO NOT CROSS

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**THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE  
SUSAN POLK MURDER CASE**

**CATHERINE CRIER**

**with Cole Thompson**

 HarperCollins e-books

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For my family, especially my parents, Ann and Bill.

Our first, best teachers.



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# FOREWORD

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**W**ith all the talk about living in the moment and the power of *now*, how easy it is for some to pretend that complicated, stressful, or traumatic events we live through as children and adolescents have little to do with the way we come to live as adults—that early chapters in our life stories don't really influence the chapters we are writing today, much less those we will pen tomorrow. We are, the most zealous behaviorists would argue, masters of our own destinies, with only bad habits to break, unfettered by unconscious psychological conflicts and dynamics.

Yet the story of every individual I have evaluated in fifteen years as a psychiatrist, several of them while specializing in forensic psychiatry, belies that sort of pure here-and-now reasoning. In every instance, from cases of major depression and panic disorder to those involving seemingly inexplicable and horrifying violence, I have been able to “connect the dots” back to complicated, stressful, traumatic, or catastrophic events in a person's recent or much more distant past.

When I offered my views on Scott Peterson's psychological makeup on *Catherine Crier Live*, for example, I didn't limit my exploration of Peterson's psyche to the events of December 24, 2002, the day he killed his wife Laci and her unborn son Conner. I didn't restrict it to the five years he and Laci had been married. I looked all the way back to the barren psychological landscape of his childhood, a childhood that included severe emotional deprivation that rendered him unable to form genuine human connections or feel real empathy for anyone. Making sense of Scott Peterson's monstrous deeds required unearthing the ways in which he, himself, was psychologically murdered.

It is no different, in the final analysis (to borrow Catherine's apt title), in the case of Susan Polk who murdered her husband Dr. Felix Polk. Because, as Catherine makes so clear and compelling in the pages that follow, the story of that murder has roots not only in the couple's tumultuous marriage and impending divorce, but deep in their pasts as well.

Susan Polk was only fifteen years old when her mother took her to Felix, a psychologist, for treatment, but already she bore the psychological scars of being abandoned by her father and alleged abuse as a child.

Felix Polk had traveled his own rocky psychological terrain. He bore scars, including debilitating anxiety and depression. He had tried to take his own life.

How did Felix Polk—who many describe as a very intelligent and insightful man—miss the way in which his desire to be safe from critical and controlling women led him to romance his vulnerable teenage patient? How could he not see the perfect storm gathering from the day he first met her and imagined her as his lover? Didn't he wonder whether prior trauma, not genuine affection, was the reason she didn't object to his request that she sit on his lap in later sessions? Did he really believe

that, as a slight, average-looking man in his forties, he was the lucky recipient of pure love from a pretty teenager? How could he not see that in having sex with her and marrying her he was violating the most sacred boundary between doctor and patient, that he would be the rightful heir to all the repressed, primitive, churning rage she harbored toward the controlling and abusive men in her life? Was he so narcissistic as to believe he could contain it, rather than be destroyed by it?

And how did Susan Polk, with all her intellect and familiarity with psychological lingo, miss the fact that the murderous intent building inside her was not only meant for Felix, but for her father and her brother and for God knows who else? How did she not realize that the stabbing of her husband was the culmination of her fury at those forces she believed had deprived her of personal freedom? How did she not see it would lead to the ultimate surrender of her liberty—to life in prison? How did she miss the fact that her three sons would be effectively orphaned, left without a father (as she had been abandoned by their mother (as, in many ways, she was).

How did Felix and Susan Polk not see all of this?

The answer is that they were lost in a drama neither really understood nor controlled. It was a drama that, like so many, was built on powerful and painful events and themes from the past, about to seep into and commandeer the present. It was bigger than either of them, a juggernaut.

So it takes Catherine Crier, possessed of fierce intellect and unbridled curiosity about human emotion and behavior, to reconstruct and tell the tale for us, to take us into a murder investigation and find a story not only of violence, but of desperation, passion, and betrayal. How lucky that the work should fall to her. For no viewer of Court TV could hope for a better host, and no reader of true crime could hope for a better guide.

*Final Analysis* is Catherine Crier at her best. In these pages, she delivers what I and so many others have come to rely on her for: her trademark legal and psychological insight into the human condition, and how it can turn deadly in an instant.

—KEITH ABLOW, M



# PROLOGUE

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“Mom fuckin’ shot dad with a shotgun!” fifteen-year-old Gabriel Polk shouted into the receiver. His older brother, Adam, was on the other end of the phone line. “Yeah, fucking crazy bitch! We still have an apartment house. We still have an apartment. We get income. We are [inaudible]. We can keep it, I think. Dad left us a pile of [inaudible]. That’s for sure.”

Gabriel had been up all night, speaking with police after finding his seventy-year-old father dead, bathed in blood on the floor of the family’s pool house, about 50 feet from their home in Orinda, California. It was 10:15 AM on October 15, 2002, and the teen had just completed a lengthy interview with detectives from the Contra Costa Sheriff’s Office when he was told that Adam was on the phone.

“Yeah. Fuckin’ crazy bitch! I stumbled in on dad,” he explained. “No, no. She just shot him in the fuckin’ chest. Fucking crazy bitch. I had to call 911 and shit. They have like our whole house under police inspection or something.”

“What the hell is wrong with her? I hope they give her the fucking death penalty...[inaudible].”

The sound of footsteps prompted the boy to end his conversation abruptly.

Peering into the cramped interrogation room, an investigator asked, “Are you still on the phone?”

“No,” Gabriel shot back. He was naked from the waist up. He had been so upset at the sight of his dead father in the pool house that he had left the residence barefoot, wearing only a pair of shorts. His usually bright brown eyes were bloodshot and framed by dark circles.

“Did the trauma guy say what we are going to do?” the officer asked.

“Just bring a sleeping bag,” Gabriel shrugged.

“Yeah, for right now.... We are going to have to get you a sleeping bag and a pillow. And we will resolve this as soon as we can.”

“I would like to know what is going to happen to us financially,” Gabriel said.

“Financially?” the officer repeated. “What do you mean?” It seemed an odd question coming from a boy who’d just discovered his father murdered—particularly when the boy’s own mother was the prime suspect.

Gabriel then brought up an apartment complex the family owned in San Francisco’s East Bay. “I don’t know what is going to happen right now, but I would like to hold onto that because we need a

source of income.”

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Twelve hours earlier, it had been a very different Gabriel that police encountered at the family’s sprawling hillside compound on Miner Road. Then, he was a nervous wreck, out in the street with a phone and a flashlight, afraid that his own mother might come after him.

As the sheriff’s officers arrived at the scene, he was unable to answer many of the officers’ questions. All he knew was that his father, Frank Felix Polk, was dead, and he was certain his mother had killed him.

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**PART I**

**A DEATH ON MINER ROAD**



# UNETHICAL BEGINNINGS

Susan sat quietly in the passenger seat as her mother parked the car in front of the yellow clapboard house on the corner of Ashby Avenue in downtown Berkeley, California. She and her mom were right on time for her first session with Frank Felix Polk, the Alameda County psychologist that school officials had ordered her to see.

For several months in the fall of 1972, Susan Mae Bolling had been playing hooky from Clayton Valley High School in neighboring Contra Costa County. At fifteen, the willowy brunette did not fit the profile of a truant. Recently, she had been called to the principal's office, not to be admonished, but to be congratulated for her score on the standardized IQ test.

The principal was so excited he could barely contain himself. It was almost embarrassing how he gushed over the ninth grader with the “genius” IQ. News that the quiet freshman with the long, curly hair and hazel eyes was the school's top scorer spread quickly through the student body, and Susan soon found herself a celebrity of sorts. Being the center of attention was not something she was comfortable with; she was awkward, reserved, and even a bit withdrawn. Being hailed as “gifted,” however, made her feel powerful. Suddenly, she was recognized as a person with superior qualities, and everyone at school was making a fuss over her. She felt extraordinary, even a bit conceited.

Susan decided she no longer needed to study. Why waste time when she was a genius? Instead of homework, she spent her after-school hours doing what she really enjoyed—reading, looking up words in the dictionary, doing crafts, and watching *Dialing for Dollars*, a fast-paced television game show.

Then she simply stopped going to school.

It was not something she planned. It just sort of happened. It all began the day of her ninth grade math test. She had not studied and could not bear the thought of tarnishing her genius reputation—so she just skipped school that day.

Things snowballed from there. At first, she attended classes intermittently, but soon she was falling behind. Being a genius wasn't enough if she didn't attend classes.

Then it happened. She received an “F” on a math test.

Realizing she was in trouble, Susan went to her teacher. He was kind and attentive, immediately offering her extra help. Their impromptu session was helpful, and the teacher told her to come back.

But Susan didn't follow through. All of a sudden, everything seemed too hard.

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The walk to school was too long, especially on the days that the neighborhood bully and his buddies were on the street. At the time, Susan was living with her mother and older brother, David, in a two-bedroom apartment in Concord, an area of the East Bay about forty-five minutes outside San Francisco. She didn't feel safe in their blue-collar neighborhood, where gunshots were not uncommon and there'd been several murders in the hills behind her house. The little girl who lived next door had been struck in the head by a stray bullet and needed surgery to have it removed. Susan had babysat for the child several times and was horrified when her father came by to share the news. It made her nervous to pass the older boy and his friends, and she didn't like the way they looked at her.

Even at school, she didn't feel safe. During her first week at Clayton, a girl jumped her, and then several others joined in, shoving her repeatedly, until a teacher intervened. Susan was convinced the attack was racially motivated, and that the girls at the mostly black and Hispanic high school were jealous that some boys had taken a liking to her. She was trim and attractive in a natural sort of way, with porcelain skin, hazel eyes, and long curly hair the color of dark chocolate. Staying home with her books and visiting the imaginary world of David Copperfield was infinitely preferable to the anxiety of traveling to school and the realization that she was falling behind in class.

It wasn't that Susan didn't want to go to school; she loved to learn.

She just couldn't muster the courage to leave the house anymore. When she did, she felt physically ill, as if she would faint from heart palpitations and shortness of breath. She wanted the feeling to stop.

For more than a month, Susan intercepted letters from the high school attendance office, inquiring about her excessive absences. When her mother finally learned that she had been skipping school, she didn't ask why. Helen Bolling simply followed the recommendation of the school guidance counselor to have her daughter evaluated by Frank "Felix" Polk, a licensed clinical psychologist who specialized in the treatment of adolescents and families.

Susan's stomach was aflutter as she trailed her mother up the steps of Dr. Polk's clapboard house. His office was to the left of a small waiting area; the double doors were ajar, but there was no one inside and no receptionist to greet them. After waiting for some time, Susan and her mother returned to the car. The psychologist was apologetic when Mrs. Bolling phoned to question his absence, and another appointment was scheduled.

On the second visit, Susan was just as uncomfortable, but as it turned out, she was off the hook again. Polk, who went by the name "Felix," seemed more amused than sorry that he'd double-booked for their new time slot and asked Mrs. Bolling to reschedule once more. Susan didn't really have much choice; because of her truancy, the school required that she be evaluated by this doctor.

Her mother didn't even park the car on their third visit to the Berkeley office. She double-parked on Ashby Avenue until she was sure the therapist was available. A million thoughts ran through Susan's mind as she climbed the steps of the yellow house for a third time. What if the psychologist was really handsome, she worried. She would not be able to speak to him. She would be too shy to open u

Dr. Polk requested to speak privately with Mrs. Bolling before meeting with the teen. Susan

waited anxiously in the small reception area as her mother disappeared behind the office's heavy double doors. It was a long fifteen minutes before her mother summoned her to join the conversation.

The sparsely furnished room was dim with only one window located high on the wall, almost to the ceiling. There was a small kitchenette in the rear of the space. Standing awkwardly near one of the dark leather chairs, Susan remained silent as the psychologist and her mother continued their discussion. She felt relieved at the sight of the fortyish and not so handsome doctor. He was not particularly tall, about 5'9", 160 pounds, and his prominent nose, kinky brown hair, and thick lips were not what she had envisioned.

"No problem," she mused to herself. She could never be attracted to such a person.

Her mother finally left the room. Feeling awkward and insecure, Susan glanced around, and then focused on the casually dressed professional. She didn't like the way he was looking at her.

At fifteen, Susan realized that boys were eyeing her differently. They seemed interested in a way she had not experienced. Yet a flirtatious look from one of her male teenage friends was one thing, while a similar look from her new psychologist was quite another. He looked more than twice her age.

Susan stared blankly at the tanned, older man when he asked if she had anything she wanted to discuss. "I don't feel like talking."

"That's okay," the psychologist soothed. "I'll talk for you."

Felix Polk spoke in a slow, deliberate tone. His gravelly voice had a faint accent, almost like a lisp, that was more pronounced when he said certain words.

Susan sat, watching his movements and listening to him speak. There was something about this man that caught her interest. He seemed to know how to pay attention to a young person. Slowly, she began to feel at ease in his presence.

"What do you like to do at home?" he asked.

"I like to read," Susan told him.

Her response seemed to intrigue the psychologist. Dr. Polk appeared genuinely impressed that Susan was currently reading Dostoevsky, Chekhov, and Tolstoy, and his interest appeared sincere. She felt flattered when this successful, professional man who was much older, and certainly wiser than she, gave her compliments. Suddenly, Susan felt important and smart. Dr. Polk was twenty-five years her senior, yet she felt the two had made a connection.

Their subsequent sessions were better. Talking about books was easy for Susan. Reading had always been a passion, a way to escape the drudgery of life, and the pain of her absent father, her working mother, and her frustrated, rageful older brother.

Just like her truancy, Susan kept her sessions with Dr. Polk a secret. The therapist had instructed her not to disclose their discussions, and she agreed. She liked the idea of knowing things that nobody else knew—not even her mother.

Already, Dr. Polk had told Susan that she was a lot like him. She was shy, withdrawn, and self-conscious. She wasn't crazy, just quiet.

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It was her mother who was "crazy" and a "bitch," he announced.

Polk's assessment had huge appeal to Susan. She had been protective of her mother and had defended her vehemently to her father. Her parents had divorced when she was five years old. But at fifteen, she began blaming her mother, Helen, for the way her life was going.

Susan was angry that they didn't have more money and that she didn't have better clothes. Their tiny apartment was furnished with items her mother purchased at Good Will, while her closet was full of old clothes and other items from a secondhand boutique. Susan wanted to live in a nicer house and go to a better school with people who were smarter, people who were more like her. Faulting her mother for her unhappiness, as Dr. Polk suggested, was a good tactic, and Susan latched on to the idea. Her new therapist would often speak aloud what she was thinking, as if he could read her mind.

Susan's resentment of her mother ran deeper than that of a typical teenager toward a parent. Her feelings were heightened by her mother's lack of understanding and her constant excuses for her brother's erratic behavior. Helen Avanzato Bolling was a no-nonsense type. The fiery, tiny-boned woman stood barely five feet tall. On her own since she was fourteen, she was extremely street savvy. She had supported herself for several years before marrying Theodore Dickson Bolling Jr., an undergraduate student at San Francisco State University in downtown San Francisco.

In February of 1956, not long after the couple married, Helen gave birth to a son, David. The following year, on November 25, 1957, Susan was born. At first, life was agreeable, and Helen stayed at home to raise the two children. But everything changed shortly after Susan's father announced a desire to attend law school. When they married, Susan's mother made herself a promise not to interfere with her husband's aspirations. Faced with this decision, Helen didn't stand in his way.

The choice was a costly one. Theodore Bolling was hardly ever home. His day job, followed by his studies at Southwestern University in downtown Los Angeles, ate up all of his time. His absence was difficult for Susan, who adored her father and his rare but sweet attention.

To soothe her children, Helen Bolling made promises. "Someday daddy will be out of school, and things will be different," she assured them. "Then you'll have a real daddy."

But that time never came. As Helen soon learned, her husband had begun an affair that progressed rapidly. Upon completing his studies, Theodore Bolling asked for a divorce. On August 2, 1962, he was admitted to the State Bar of California, and his final departure came shortly thereafter.

Helen was devastated, but little Susan was inconsolable.

The divorce destroyed Susan and, according to her mother, the child "was left with an empty hole she could never seem to fill." After the split, Helen quickly rented out the small house she'd won in the divorce settlement, relocating her children to a cheaper apartment in East Oakland. It was the first of several moves, each of which forced Susan and David to disconnect from their peers and start over.

Instead, Susan turned to books. "They are my friends," she told her mother. When Susan did

finally fall in with a group of girls in junior high school, Helen Bolling let it be known that she did not approve of one of the teens. Her criticism sparked additional friction between mother and daughter.

Like Susan, David had also been labeled as “gifted.” Yet he, too, had stopped attending school. When he wasn’t locked away in his room reading science magazines or building homemade rockets in the basement, he was taunting Susan, threatening her and pushing her around.

David fell in with a bad crowd while the family was living in Concord. Susan’s mother tried to intervene and, at one point, even sublet their apartment and moved her children to a better area in downtown Oakland to get him away from the rough neighborhood. To Susan it appeared that her mother was pacifying her brother despite his bad behavior, while punishing her for trying to escape her persecution. With her mother at work much of the day, Susan was an unprotected target for David’s rage.

Susan tried to tell her mother what was going on, but her cries for help seemed to go unnoticed; after all, it was the Dr. Spock era when hands-off parenting was encouraged. Nevertheless this method was backfiring. What Susan really needed was strong parental supervision and intervention, but Helen Bolling was not capable of such discipline. With Susan’s dad now raising his new family in Sacramento, the kids had no other role model, and his presence in their lives was inconsistent and fleeting.

As the torment with her brother escalated, Susan could no longer bear the burden that home life placed on her. With nowhere else to turn, she ran away from home. Her mother was furious and reported Susan as a “runaway.” She allowed authorities to place the twelve-year-old in juvenile hall to teach her a lesson. More than two years later, Susan still hadn’t forgiven her mother.

On her fourth therapy session with Dr. Polk, the therapist asked Susan if she’d be willing to try something new and radical.

“Would you consent to be hypnotized?” he asked. “I think you have various memories of trauma in your past. Do you want to dig those up?”

Cool, Susan thought. The idea of being hypnotized sounded intriguing.

Even if she wanted to say no, she didn’t feel she could. Dr. Polk was a psychologist. He knew what was best for her, and besides she had read that it really wasn’t possible to put someone under hypnosis. Regardless, she would do whatever he asked.

Susan watched eagerly as Dr. Polk strode to the small kitchen in the rear of the office and poured something into a teacup.

“This will relax you,” he said in a nurturing voice, handing Susan the steaming liquid.

The scent was hauntingly familiar. Yet as she drew her first sip, she didn’t recognize the taste. Feeling very mature, Susan relaxed into the big leather chair. Sipping from the cup, she felt a warm sensation and began to feel sleepy.

Dr. Polk’s gravelly voice sounded like a dull hum. He instructed her to count backward from ten

She methodically followed along. “Ten...nine...eight...seven...six...”

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“Susan!” the psychologist’s raspy voice startled her awake. It felt as if only seconds had passed since she’d sipped from her teacup. Yet the office clock had advanced forty-five minutes. Glancing over at the coffee table, Susan observed that her teacup was empty, and her mouth had a funny taste.

Uneasiness swept over her as she struggled to recall what had taken place. The last thing she remembered was counting backward. Now it was time to leave.

“What happened? What did we talk about?” she asked, feeling a sudden pang of mistrust. “How come I can’t remember anything?”

Dr. Polk appeared nervous and avoided her gaze. Rising from his chair, he escorted her to the door.

He would see her again in two days.

Susan still does not know what occurred during the hypnotic session. She later claimed that, from that day forward, she felt afraid whenever Felix Polk was around.

**N**ot long after Susan began her therapy, she was arrested for shoplifting some clothing from a local store. The probation officer assigned to her case took an instant liking to her but also recognized the signs of an adolescent at risk: Delicate and frail, the girl appeared in need of mothering.

It was clear that the teen was troubled but punishment was not the answer. What Susan needed was mental health counseling, and her probation officer told the judge as much. This girl was too fragile for the juvenile detention center, the officer argued, not to mention the fact that there were some pretty tough kids in there. But her opposition did nothing to change his mind, and the judge sentenced Susan to one month in the Martinez lock-down facility, a place filled with delinquents, mostly teenage runaways.

During her time there, Felix Polk went to visit Susan, and his visit upset her. Seeing him reminded her of their hypnosis sessions. It was unsettling that she could not recall many of the details and she believed there were things going on that were highly irregular.

She had been sent to Dr. Polk for an evaluation. He was supposed to help her anxiety, the panic she was feeling every morning before leaving for school; but now, she was locked away with a bunch of degenerate runaways. All her life, she tried to be a good girl. She primped to look pretty and remembered her manners, yet here she was in a place for delinquent youths.

How had her life become so unmanageable?

The only thing she could do now was run away again. She wanted to be free of Felix, her mother and everything else in her teenage life. One afternoon, she escaped from the juvenile facility. It wasn’t hard; a number of kids had done it. Susan simply hitched a ride with someone in the parking lot. She went to a friend’s apartment in Trestle Glenn, a nice Oakland neighborhood.

It was fun staying with her girlfriend who was engaged to a navy man. The two never made her feel like a third wheel when she joined them on their dates. To the contrary, she felt part of a unit, something she had never experienced. The apartment was peaceful, and Susan felt “normal” for the first time. She had companionship, someone to share meals with, to talk to. It was the happiest she had been in a long time.

After a month on her own, Susan decided to return home and placed a call to her mother. Helen Bolling was now living in a small house she purchased for twelve thousand dollars in a community south of Concord. With its large homesteads and centuries-old eucalyptus trees dotting the rolling green hillsides, the unincorporated city of Orinda was a definite step up for the family. At the time, Orinda was still a farming town with orchards covering much of the landscape and no main shopping district. The home Helen had purchased was in the “low-rent” section of town, across the tracks from the fancier, more expensive homes nestled in the hills.

Helen was surprised to hear from her daughter. Uncertain how to proceed with Susan’s desire to return home, Helen immediately called Dr. Polk to find out if her daughter could come back without being rearrested.

There were indications that Helen was aware Dr. Polk was employing some unusual techniques during the sessions with her teenage daughter. Susan had confided that she’d sat on Dr. Polk’s lap during one appointment. The approach sounded a bit unorthodox, but it was the early 1970s in Berkeley, California. Things were pretty fast and loose. For Helen, the doctor’s behavior could well be part of a new trend in adolescent therapy. In the back of her mind, she may have sensed that something was going on between Dr. Polk and her daughter, but for whatever reason she did nothing about it.

Dr. Polk said he would take care of everything.

As promised, Felix Polk wrote a letter to the court explaining why Susan Bolling had run away and received permission for her to come home. In exchange, the court mandated that Susan return to her therapy with Dr. Polk and attend a continuation school to complete her ninth grade studies.

Ironically, the psychologist whom Susan had been sent to see for a simple evaluation had somehow become the person responsible for her freedom.

Felix Polk, it seemed, was going to be a powerful force in Susan’s life.



# MORTAL COMBAT

On the night of October 13, 2002, floodlights broke the darkness and illuminated chunks of the brick walkway that led to the guesthouse of the Polk's rambling Orinda residence. Set high in the hills on a steep slope, the house had several levels—with two bedrooms, including the master suite, on the top floor. Another bedroom and a laundry area were one floor below. The main living area and a home office were situated on the first floor.

It was sometime after 10 PM when forty-four-year-old Susan Bolling Polk climbed the flagstone steps to the guesthouse, built adjacent to a free-form swimming pool. Flashlight in hand, she entered the small redwood cottage through the living room door. Inside, her husband of twenty-one years sat reclined in an oversized leather chair. It was a brisk night, yet Felix was clad only in a pair of black briefs, seemingly engrossed in a novel, *The Company*, about the CIA.

At seventy, the doctor was still in decent shape; he was tanned and toned from the long jogs that were part of his regular routine. Tired and worn from his nearly 800-mile roundtrip drive to Los Angeles that day, remarkably he was still awake when Susan came to speak to him that night. Aside from the redwood paneling, the rectangular living room of the pool house looked somewhat like Felix's old Berkeley office on Ashby Avenue, with a couple of leather chairs and a busy tapestry rug of reds and blues. The couple had done little to update the sprawling property since purchasing it for nearly \$2 million eighteen months earlier. In an attempt to realize Felix's dream of living in the now wealthy suburb of Orinda, the family had overextended themselves financially and the monetary pressure was adding to the already stressful home life.

Within minutes of Susan's entry into the cottage, the couple was arguing—a common occurrence ever since Susan announced four years earlier that she wanted to leave the marriage.

“You'd better think of the consequences,” Felix had warned her in an annoyed voice at the time. “You'll never get the kids! You're not fit!”

Her husband's angry retort hit a nerve with Susan. His words were like an assault. Felix had always been a kind of Svengali to Susan, and she believed everything he told her. She thought that he had the power to commit her if he wanted to, and for Susan, there was nothing scarier than being put in a mental institution. She had already been committed once to the Kaiser mental facility when she was fifteen—and she'd never go back again.

Susan had spent much of her life trying to keep her anxiety and panic under control. She had

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