

Written in Blood

Chapter 1

The man heaved himself out of the driver seat of a Mercedes sedan, holding onto the doorframe until his feet were settled on the asphalt. The unbuttoned suit had an expensive cut, but it was snug in the shoulders and the belt disappeared under his belly. Thick, wiry hair cut short was just starting to grey. A salt-and-pepper beard hid his jaw.

Despite the coolness of the fall afternoon, his forehead was damp with perspiration as he lugged a briefcase up the wooden stairs, his breathing too labored for a man in his forties.

Claudia Rose stood at her front door waiting for him, thinking he looked like a heart attack waiting to happen. Then her attention was drawn back to the Mercedes.

A woman stepped out with a wriggling Bichon Frisé clamped under one arm. She wore a plum-colored Akris Punto fitted jacket and short pleated skirt on the kind of figure other women would kill to have.

A phone pressed to her ear with the hand that wasn't holding the dog, she bumped the door shut with a curvy hip and followed her huffing companion to the staircase.

The stylish woman was Claudia's new client, Paige Sorensen.

The man reached the porch and proffered a sweaty handshake, trying to hide the fact that he was winded. "Bert Falkenberg," he said. "I-I'm helping Mrs. Sorensen with this matter."

As she considered how to wipe her hand on her slacks without him noticing, Claudia smiled and let him precede her into the house. She waited on the porch until Paige Sorensen ended her phone call a few

moments later and ran up the stairs.

“You must be Ms. Rose,” Paige said, flashing a smile that had probably charmed the pants off more than one admirer. She cuddled the Bichon Frisé to her cheek. “I hope you don’t mind that I brought Mikki. I take him everywhere, he’s very good.”

When she’d phoned for the appointment, Paige had sounded young and vulnerable. This well-turned out woman made Claudia wonder whether her first impression had been a bit hasty. She reached out and gave the squirming dog a scratch behind the ears and invited her client inside.

Paige Sorensen was a recent widow and the headmistress of the Sorensen Academy, a Bel Air school for girls. She had already explained that her late husband’s will was being challenged and she needed a handwriting expert to authenticate his signature. Her attorney had recommended Claudia Rose.

“His children are accusing me—“

Before she could finish, Paige was interrupted by the sound of a ring tone from her Gucci handbag. She gave Claudia a wry smile and apology as she got the phone out and answered.

Bert Falkenberg sighed and Claudia wondered why Paige didn’t turn the damn thing off. A high-pitched voice carried through the phone, talking fast.

Paige listened for about thirty seconds. “Okay, Annabelle, stop! Tell Brenda to send the other girls to their rooms. You go to my office and stay there till we get back.”

She rang off and turned to Falkenberg. “I told you you should have stayed behind, Bert. *Somebody* needs to be in charge.”

He gave her a look. “It’ll keep.” He turned to Claudia. “Now, here’s the situation with Mr. Sorensen’s will...”

The touch of Paige’s hand on his sleeve halted him mid-sentence. “I’ll handle this.”

A flash of annoyance lit Falkenberg’s eyes, but he leaned back against the sofa cushions without another word.

“My husband passed away a month ago,” Paige began, reiterating what she’d told Claudia over the phone. She gently urged the Bichon’s haunches into a seated position on her lap. The little dog fidgeted for a

moment before he laid his head on a miniature forepaw and closed his eyes.

“He—” Paige began, then faltered. “He had a stroke—a series of strokes. He left nearly everything to me. His kids accused me of forging his signature on the will.” Her eyes filled with tears and her pouty mouth trembled. “It’s just crazy. I would never do something like that!”

“Insane,” Falkenberg echoed. “Utterly absurd.”

Claudia gave them her best sympathetic professional face, adjusting her impression of Paige a little more. If the husband’s children were old enough to accuse her of forgery, he must have been significantly older than Paige.

“I’m very sorry for your loss, Mrs. Sorensen,” Claudia said. “It’s unfortunate, but this sort of thing is common in families.” An important question: “Who is your lawyer?”

“Stuart Parsons in Beverly Hills. He said you’re the best handwriting expert around.”

The compliment pleased Claudia, though she didn’t let on that her reason for liking Parsons was because he knew how to protect his expert witness from the sometimes vicious attacks that opposing counsel liked to launch.

She said, “Why don’t you show me what you’ve brought. Did you find examples of your husband’s genuine signature for me to compare to the questioned one?”

Paige turned to Falkenberg. “You’ve got the files, Bert?” Returning her gaze to Claudia, she said, “I’m a nice person and they’re calling me a liar. I need you to prove it’s his signature. There’s too much at stake—my reputation.”

Millions of dollars, too, Claudia thought. Paige had let that slip when she’d made the appointment. She glanced at Bert Falkenberg, taking note of his broad hands as he snapped open the briefcase and laid it on the coffee table between them. Workman’s hands with poorly manicured fingernails that seemed more fitted for outdoor work. An affront to the Italian silk suit and tie. *He hasn’t always worn Armani*, she thought.

Falkenberg removed several file folders from his briefcase and fanned them out on the coffee table. He eased his large frame back against the cushions and let his eyes roam the room. His gaze traveled to the framed family photos on the fireplace mantel, fixing on a snapshot of Claudia standing in the arms of a tall man. The man was leaning down so

they were cheek-to-cheek, a rare grin replacing his usual cop's deadpan expression. Falkenberg stared a long time at that photograph but his face gave nothing away and Claudia was left wondering what he was thinking.

Paige repositioned the little dog on her lap so she could reach the folders Falkenberg had placed on the table. As she leaned forward, a thick rope of hair the color of wild clover honey fell over her shoulder. "These are some checks and other papers that he—that Torg—my husband—" One fat tear welled up in each outrageously blue eye and spilled onto her cheeks. Sniffing, she dug in her purse with a trembling hand and brought out a lacy handkerchief to dab the tears. "It was a complete shock when I found out he'd left everything to me."

Falkenberg shifted his bulk, fidgety. Claudia glanced over at him, sensing that the abrupt movement was intended to extinguish some internal reaction to Paige's words. She murmured something vague and spread open the folder Paige handed to her, leafing through the documents she found inside.

Every signature on the checks, trust deeds and business contracts had been executed in a bold, firm hand. Extra large capital letters; elaborate, written with a flourish.

Flipping one of the checks over, Claudia ran her fingertips across the back, noting that Torg Sorensen had exerted pressure on the pen strong enough to emboss the paper. To a handwriting analyst, it all added up to one thing: an inflated ego and an aggressive need for power. Torg had been the type of man you couldn't push around. Paige's husband could not have been easy to live with.

Returning the items to their folder, Claudia replaced it on the table with a sharp reminder to herself to stay out of Sorensen's personality.

A major area of her handwriting analysis practice consisted of personality assessment and forensic behavioral profiling. But in cases like this one, her job would be to verify the authorship of a document.

Sometimes it was tempting to blur the lines. Sitting in her living room, no one could prevent Claudia from privately visualizing the man who had penned that showy signature. But in the courtroom her two specialties had to be kept separate.

If she accepted this case her task would be to compare the true, known signatures of Torg Sorensen with the one on his will, and offer an opinion as to its authenticity. Period.

Inside the next file she found three checks, a grant deed, and a

power of attorney. The signatures on these documents bore little resemblance to the first group. The letter forms had deteriorated to little more than a shaky line, and the writing stroke exposed the tremor of an unsteady hand.

Claudia picked out a grant deed and studied the signature. The name, *Torg Sorensen*, rose at an extreme angle above the printed signature line, the final letters fading into a feeble trail of ink. The weakened state of this signature seemed even more than the others to beg the question of why someone in such obvious poor physical, and possibly mental, condition was signing legal documents.

“Is there any question about his competency to sign?” Claudia asked.

“None,” Falkenberg put in before Paige could respond. “I’ll testify that he was completely lucid when he signed it. There was no mental impairment. The children wouldn’t have a leg to stand on if they tried to use that argument.”

“So, you’re certain that all the documents in this folder were signed *after* the stroke?”

“Yes,” Paige confirmed, still looking as if she might break into tears. “He *insisted* on signing those papers himself.”

The third and final folder remained on the table between them. This was the crux of the case, the reason why Paige had sought the help of a handwriting expert: the key document containing the signature contested by her stepchildren.

This folder contained a certified copy of Torg Sorensen’s will. A probate court stamp on the first page indicated that the original was on file in the County of Los Angeles Superior Court.

Claudia viewed the shaky scrawl with a practiced eye. Decline in writing quality was to be expected after a major assault on the brain like a stroke. It could also make proving authenticity tougher. Before she would form an opinion about the signature she would take measurements and view the documents through her stereo microscope. Already, her mind had begun taking inventory of the writing style, the alignment, the master patterns.

“How old was Mr. Sorensen when he died?” she asked.

“Uh, he was uh...seventy-three.”

Claudia did a quick mental calculation. That meant Torg Sorensen was at least twice Paige’s age.

As if reading her mind, color flooded her client’s face. “I know people think I’m just some bimbo who married an old man for his money, but it’s not true! And I didn’t forge his signature, either! I *loved* him.”

Sensing his mistress’ distress, Mikki the dog jumped up with a sharp yip. He pressed his front paws against her breast, licking her chin and doing a little cha-cha on her lap.

Bert Falkenberg frowned and cleared his throat, antsy again.

He doesn’t know what to do with her.

“I know it’s got to be upsetting to be accused,” Claudia said gently. “If I take this on, I’m going to need a list of his medications.”

Paige frowned. “Why would you need that?”

“Some drugs affect handwriting, so I have to know what he was taking. I’ll also want to see his medical records, so I’ll know exactly what his physical condition was at the time he signed the will.”

“He had a stroke, he—”

“Did he sign on his own, or was someone guiding his hand? Was he lying down or sitting up? Was he wearing corrective lenses? What kind of writing surface did he use? What time did he take his meds?” Claudia met Paige’s bemused expression with a smile. “It’s important for me to know these things, especially in a case like this, where there’s such a major change in the handwriting. I’ll give you a list of questions that I’ll need answers to.”

Paige looked as if she were exhausted. Her hand moved rhythmically over the little dog’s fur, but her eyes were glued to the paper in Claudia’s hand. “At first, he couldn’t use his right hand at all. Then he started working with a physical therapist, and after they released him from the hospital we hired a private therapist. When was that, Bert?”

“Two-and-a-half weeks after he had the first stroke.”

“He was pretty impatient and difficult to deal with.” Paige’s lips twisted in a cheerless smile and her next words confirmed what Claudia

had seen in Torg Sorensen's handwriting. "The truth is, he was *always* difficult, he..." She seemed to catch herself. "About a week after he came home from the hospital, he had me call his secretary over to the house. They were locked up in his room together all afternoon. That must be when he changed his will. It was a couple days later the second stroke hit him and he went into a coma. He never came out of it."

Claudia noted that the will had been witnessed but not notarized, which she thought was surprising, given the size of the Sorensen estate. A mobile notary could have been called in. Why had that not been done?

Two witness signatures appeared under the name of Torg Sorensen, testator. Bert Falkenberg was one of them. He'd written a small, illegible signature that slanted to the left. His handwriting told Claudia that he would not be forthcoming unless there was something in it for him. Left-slanted writers were particularly hard to get to know. The illegibility added another layer of emotional distance and said that he guarded his emotions well.

The second witness signature was larger, more conventional. The name *Roberta Miller* was penned in the Palmer model common to older women who'd had religious school training, and was typical of many who worked in administrative jobs.

"Is Roberta Miller the secretary?" Claudia asked.

Paige said that she was. The question was more out of curiosity than a need to know. Paige's attorney would undoubtedly question the witnesses, but unless they were accused of forging the signature on the will, Claudia wouldn't need to interview them herself.

The rude bleat of a cell phone interrupted again. This time it was Falkenberg who dug his out his mobile phone and checked the screen.

"Dammit. Annabelle." He hauled himself off the sofa, excused himself, and headed for the front door as he flipped open the phone.

Claudia watched him go, curious about who Annabelle might be and why she had called so many times.

Paige cleared her throat before offering some explanation. "She's new at the Sorensen Academy," she said. "She's having a hard time settling in."

“Oh, is it a residential school?”

“A few of the girls live on site. Annabelle’s one of them. The trouble is, the other girls are constantly picking on her because she’s...different from them. She doesn’t even *try* to fit in.”

“Different, how?”

Paige looked uncomfortable, looking like she was sorry she had opened that line of conversation. She leaned forward. “This is confidential, right?”

Getting Claudia’s assurance, she continued. “Annabelle tried to kill herself a couple of months ago. She came to us right out of the hospital. That’s why we can’t ignore her phone calls. She’s still pretty fragile.”

The front door opened and Bert returned. “I’ll talk to her when we get back,” he said, lowering himself onto the sofa beside Paige.

“She’s taken a liking to Bert,” Paige said. “He’s become kind of a father figure for some of the girls.”

Claudia felt a stirring of interest about Annabelle, who had been so unhappy that she had attempted suicide, yet she felt comfortable calling this bear of a man for—what? Support? He did have that big, cuddly look. Maybe she saw him as a teddy bear. A young girl might be drawn to that kind of man.

An image of her own father, loving, but ineffectual in the face of her mother’s vitriol, came into her head. She firmly pushed the image away.

“Do you work at the school, Mr. Falkenberg?”

He nodded. “I help Mrs. Sorensen with the business end of running the Sorensen Academy. The administration of a private school is quite different from a public one.”

“I’m sure it must be.” Returning her attention to the case, Claudia indicated the file folders on the table. “I have to be frank, Mrs. Sorensen. Because of the physiological effects of the stroke on your husband’s handwriting, this is a difficult case. I’ll do my examination and let you know whether I think I can help.”

Paige visibly sagged with disappointment. “But Bert *saw* him sign it, didn’t you, Bert?”

“Yes, yes, that’s right, I did.”

Paige’s body strained toward Claudia, something like desperation showing in her eyes. “You *have* to testify that his signature is genuine—that’s what I’m paying for!”

“What you’re paying for is my objective opinion, and that’s all I can promise you.” Stacking the folders together in a neat pile, Claudia slid them back across the coffee table with an apologetic shrug. “I’m not your lawyer, Mrs. Sorensen, I’m an advocate of the court, and that means I deal with the truth, *whatever* it may be.”

“But I’m *telling* you the truth—he signed the will.”

For a moment, no one spoke. The sudden roar of a leaf blower outside shattered the silence, startling them. The sound rose and fell under the window, amplifying the tension in the room as the gardener walked the noisy machine up the pathway. The return to quiet when he switched it off was as jarring as the racket it made.

Bert Falkenberg abruptly snatched the file folders from the table and tossed them into his briefcase, giving Claudia an icy glance. “If you can’t handle this case, maybe you’ll refer us to someone who can.”