# Do Not Disturb

Tilly Bagshawe

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Extract

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# *Part One*

# *Chapter One*

'Over my dead body! D'you hear me? You'll take Palmers over my dead body, you scheming, greedy little—'

A fit of wheezing stopped Trey Palmer from finishing his sentence. But Honor, his eldest daughter, had already gotten the gist. Alzheimer's may have cruelly eaten away at his mental faculties, and old age ravaged his once enviable physique, but his bitterness was as razor sharp as ever.

'Mr. Palmer, please, don't upset yourself,' said the lawyer. Sam Brannagan had sat through more family disputes than he could remember, many of them in this very room. With its dark oak-paneled walls and reassuringly expensive soft furnishings it was all very old-school Bostonian – an appropriate setting for internecine warfare if ever there was one.

Watching the old man grapple with his oxygen mask while he glared at his hapless daughter, however, Sam didn't think he'd ever seen quite as much open hatred as he'd witnessed today. Looking around the room at the eager, greedy faces turned towards him, he felt intensely depressed.

Honor Palmer, who had convened today's meeting, was the only decent one among them. But even she was not exactly warm and cuddly. With her spiky, boyish hair, aquiline features and tiny, taut athlete's body, the newly minted Harvard Law graduate looked beautiful but forbidding. Everything about her, from her four-inch Louboutins and starkly formal black Prada pantsuit, to her low, authoritative voice and impressive grasp of the complex legal issues being discussed, betrayed a steeliness unusual in one so young. Especially a woman.

As for the rest of them – crowded into his office, huddled around the old man like sharks circling a wounded seal – they made his stomach churn.

There was Tina, Honor's younger sister, looking bored in the corner, glancing pointedly at her Chopard diamond watch. Also beautiful, but in a polar opposite way to her sister: blonde, blowsy and buxom were the three words that most readily sprang to mind. Tina looked like she'd picked up her wardrobe from Hookers-R-Us. Even at an important legal meeting like this, Boston's answer to Paris Hilton had shown up in a frayed denim skirt that barely covered her crotch and a pink man's shirt tied beneath her breasts to reveal a mind-boggling expanse of cleavage. From the look of distaste on her face as she listened to her father's phlegmy spluttering, it was clear she had no sympathy for him; nor did she seem remotely interested in her sister's attempts to save them all from financial ruin.

Even more see-through were the Fosters. Jacob, a distant cousin from Omaha, and his wife, had heard in the press about Trey's Alzheimer's and the threat to his empire and crawled out of the woodwork to see what they could scavenge. Both wore ostentatious crosses and proclaimed themselves loudly to be born-again Christians, but every reference to Trey's frozen bank accounts had them salivating like starving puppies. They'd spent most of today's meeting glowering disapprovingly at Lise, Trey's bimbo wifelette, whom they wrongly considered to be their key rival for the family inheritance.

Lise might give Lil' Kim a run for her money in the slutty dressing stakes, but, unlike the Fosters, she did at least have the advantage of being recognized by her husband. It was clear to Sam that neither Trey nor his daughters had ever set eyes on Cousin Jacob before in their lives.

On reflection, perhaps it was hardly surprising that they'd all shown up today. There was, after all, a lot at stake. The Palmers were one of the wealthiest, most prominent

families in Boston, and had been for three generations. Already rich when he emigrated from England, Trey's great-grandfather had multiplied the family fortune five-fold, becoming one of the first great American hoteliers. His first hotel, the Cranley in Boston's exclusive Newbury Street, made so much money that within a decade he'd opened two more: the King James Hotel in Manhattan, and the now legendary Palmers in East Hampton. By the time Trey's father, Tertius Palmer, came into his inheritance, the family's net worth was conservatively estimated to be over ten million dollars. And that was in the fifties. Heaven only knew what it translated to in today's money.

Like his father and grandfather before him, Tertius had been a naturally shrewd businessman. But whereas they had been expansionists, Tertius was a consolidator. Cashing in on the post-war real-estate boom, he sold the original two hotels for an outrageous profit, which he went on to invest very successfully in the equity markets. Having hired a raft of stockbrokers to manage his portfolio, he was free to focus his own energies exclusively on the one hotel he hadn't sold: Palmers. By the time of his death – the year before Honor was born – Palmers was widely considered to be the most exclusive, most desirable hotel in the world.

Honor and Tina grew up surrounded by reminders of its illustrious history. The hotel itself was like a second home to them. As little girls they could hardly contain themselves with excitement when, every summer, their mother Laura would help them pack their cases and they'd set off for three joyously long months of fun in East Hampton.

But when their mom died – Laura Palmer was killed in a car accident when her daughters were aged ten and eight respectively – everything changed. Trey, unable to admit his grief for fear it might overwhelm him, had cut himself off emotionally from everything that reminded him of his wife and their former life together. This included not only his children, who needed him more than ever, but also

Palmers. The hotel that had been the jewel in the Palmer family crown for half a century rapidly lost its premier status as Trey started spending less and less time there.

Now, some thirteen years later, it had become little more than another dime-a-dozen 'luxury' hotel, perhaps even a little shabbier than most of its rivals. If it hadn't been for the Palmer fortune propping it up, and for its still-legendary name, it would doubtless have closed years ago.

Honor took a deep breath to calm herself and gazed out of the window. She knew that what she was doing was right. Taking control of her dad's assets was the only way to save Palmers and what little was left of her once immense inheritance. But she still couldn't look Trey in the eye. Even after all these years, his dislike and distrust of her still hurt her very deeply.

Ironically, Brannagan's offices were on Newbury Street, almost directly opposite what had once been the Cranley hotel and was now a souped-up shopping mall. It was June, the schools had just got out for summer, and the place was busy. Students in shorts and varsity T-shirts stood around in groups laughing, sipping their frappuccinos in the courtyard cafe out front, while wealthy women hurried past them into the designer stores, no doubt looking for a bargain in the summer sales.

They all seemed to be having so much fun. For a fleeting moment, Honor wished she were down there too, frittering away her trust fund like she didn't have a care in the world. That was how Tina lived her life, after all, along with most of the other vacuous Boston rich kids they'd grown up with. So why not her?

But her stepmother's whining, wheedling voice soon dragged her back to reality.

'It's outrageous, Mr. Brannagan,' Lise was saying, doing her best to look hard done by, which wasn't easy given the twenty-odd carats of diamonds scattered generously

about her person. 'Just because my baby is sick,' she placed a skinny, red-taloned hand on Trey's wizened leg, 'these vultures are trying to move in and take advantage.'

'Oh, please,' said Honor witheringly. Her voice was low and husky, making her seem even more masculine. 'Dad's nobody's "baby". And if anyone's the vulture here, it's you.'

Though officially her stepmother, Lise was actually only a couple of years Honor's senior. A former flight attendant with inflated Angelina Jolie lips and hair extensions that must weigh more than she did, she was the fourth bimbo Trey had married in the last twelve years, in the vain hope that one of them might bear him his longed-for son.

Ever since Honor and Tina's mom died, Trey had been obsessed with fathering a boy to take over Palmers and carry on the family name. Honor, who loved her father deeply and wanted desperately to please him, spent most of her teenage years trying everything she could think of to become the son he wanted. Not content with excelling at both academic work and overtly male sports like baseball and shooting, she started cutting her hair short and wearing boyish clothes in an attempt to make him happy. She even began starving herself: anything to stave off the arrival of puberty and the breasts she dreaded as unwanted, but irrefutable, symbols of her femininity.

But nothing was ever enough for Trey.

Unwilling to accept it was *he* who had the fertility problems, he'd refused to give up hope, foisting a series of ridiculously young stepmothers on his daughters. When each one failed to get pregnant, he simply divorced them in favor of a newer, younger model. But not before he'd been forced to pay out a small fortune in alimony.

After a while, Honor had become immune to these women. Lise was no better or worse than the others. But at twenty-seven, she sure wasn't with an elderly cripple like Trey because she loved him. To pretend she was was laughable.

'Dad's been declared incapable of managing his own affairs,' Honor continued matter of factly. 'That gives Mr. Brannagan, as his trustee, automatic power of attorney. The decision to put me in control of Palmers, and the rest of the family assets, was his and his alone. Right, Sam?'

The lawyer shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Was it just him, or was it getting awfully hot in here?

'So you're saying it means nothing that cousin Trey made it abundantly clear during his lifetime that he wanted Palmers to pass down the male line?' spluttered the Omaha cousin, sensing his hoped-for pay day slipping through his fingers.

'It's still his lifetime, Mr. Foster,' said Honor scathingly. 'He's not dead yet.'

'I've told you,' the cousin snapped back, 'it's Jacob.'

'Sorry,' said Honor, with heavy sarcasm. 'I'm afraid I was raised never to use first names with people I don't know from Adam.'

'Who's not dead?' Trey looked around him, bewildered. 'And who's Adam?'

Despite everything, it broke Honor's heart to see him so lost and confused. If the doctors were right, he might not remember who she was in a few months' time. Alzheimer's was a bitch of a disease.

'It's nothing for you to worry about, Mr. Palmer,' the lawyer interjected kindly. 'I can assure you that your daughter is acting in your best interests. She's very well qualified to take over the running of the business.'

Trey gave a short, derisory laugh. 'Well qualified? She's a woman, Mr. Brannagan,' he sneered. 'Evidently she's every bit as sly and conniving as the rest of her sex. But that hardly equips her to run the greatest hotel in the world.'

'But a dick and a pair of balls would equip her perfectly, right?' chimed in Tina. 'You're so pathetic.'

It was the first time she'd spoken since the meeting began and everyone turned to look at her. Cousin Jacob's wife

looked like she might be about to spontaneously combust with disapproval at the coarseness of her language.

'Don't get me wrong,' Tina continued, smiling at Brannagan. 'I really don't give a rat's ass what happens to Palmers. But if Honor wants to play the great white hope, I say we should let her. As long as I get my trust fund *and* my allowance, I'm easy.'

'Yes, we all know how easy you are,' said Honor furiously. It was bitchy, but she couldn't help it. Tina's devil-may-care wantonness had always provoked a mixture of revulsion and envy in Honor. She certainly didn't need it in her face today. 'And for your information, I'm not "playing" at anything. I'm only doing this because Dad's so ill.'

'Please,' said Tina, reaching down her bra to rearrange her breasts without a hint of embarrassment. 'That's bullshit and you know it. You've wanted to run Palmers since the day you were born.'

Honor was silent. It was true: she had always wanted Palmers.

But not like this.

From her earliest childhood, Honor Palmer knew she was different.

It wasn't just the envious way her little friends looked at her when the chauffeur would drop her and Tina off at kindergarten in the Bentley T-type. Or the photographers who frightened her by swarming around her mother and father whenever they went out to dinners or charity events. It was more than that. It was an awareness, reached very early, that the Palmer name she bore was not just a privilege but an immense responsibility.

She had never known her grandfather, and yet Tertius Palmer's presence seemed to be everywhere when she was growing up. His portrait hung in the entrance hall of the family's grand Boston townhouse. His books were on the shelves in the library. His heavy mahogany desk still

dominated Honor's father's study. Even the gardens where she and Tina used to play, with their splendid formal maze and the willow walk along the banks of the Charles, had been designed and planted by Tertius.

Nowhere, however, was his spirit more alive than at Palmers. In the early days, before her mother died, Honor would spend every summer at the grand old Hamptons hotel, listening to stories of her grandfather and the wild and wonderful times he'd had there. To her child's eyes, Palmers was a wonderland. When she and Tina played mermaids in the pool, or had tricycle races along the endless polished parquet corridors, it was as if the outside world didn't exist.

The hotel guests, many of whom were elderly and had been coming for years, were remarkably tolerant of Trey's two boisterous little girls. Those who remembered Tertius were happy to pull Honor aside and tell her tall tales about the New Year's Eve party when her grandfather had danced with an Italian princess, or the day he'd landed a biplane on the hotel's croquet lawn.

Honor lapped up the romance of it all like a bear with a pot of honey. She wasn't the most attractive child – with her short hair, wire-rimmed glasses and skinny, matchstick legs, strangers often mistook her for a boy, and a nerdy boy at that. But at Palmers, she always felt like a princess. She was the chosen one, born to inherit and preserve all the excitement and magic that surrounded her. Because for Honor, above all, that's what Palmers *really* meant – magic.

Tina saw things differently, even back then. Two years younger than her sister, Cristina Maud Palmer was as blonde, blue-eyed and chubby cheeked as a Botticelli cherub, with a line in cuteness that would have put Shirley Temple out of business had she been born a generation earlier. Adults universally pronounced her 'adorable'. And she was, if pink hair ribbons, a frilly dress and an ability to

sing 'How much is that doggie in the window?' were all you looked for in a child. But underneath the butter-wouldn't-melt exterior, a frighteningly detached, self-centered little person was forming.

Having learned early how to bend adults to her will, Tina pursued her own pleasure with all the ruthless determination of a general before battle. 'Pleasure' for Tina meant, very simply, the accumulation of things: toys, clothes, money, a puppy. Whatever the flavor of the month was, Tina Palmer would twirl and simper and cajole until it was hers.

Like Honor, she understood from an early age that her family was rich and important. But as far as Tina was concerned, that simply meant that she would grow up to have even more stuff, and live in even more luxury than she did now. Palmers was nothing more or less than another sign of that wealth. She had never understood Honor's sentimental obsession with the place and its history. As a child she longed for people to stop banging on about her boring, old, dead grandfather and bring her another ice-cream. Preferably with hot fudge sauce and a cherry on top.

Despite their differences, Honor and Tina had tolerated each other well enough in those early years. It was their mother's accident that changed things between them.

Honor still remembered the awful day as though it were yesterday. She'd been up in her room in Boston, playing an imagination game with her dolls, and had jumped out of her skin when Rita, the nanny, burst in. She was supposed to have grown out of the dolls and passed them on to Tina. But all Tina ever wanted to do was dress them up, and Honor felt sorry for them, discarded in her sister's toy box, never getting to go on any fun adventures any more. Her first thought was that Rita was mad she'd taken them back. She remembered feeling almost relieved to be told it was only her father wanting to see her downstairs.

Needless to say the relief was shortlived. The first thing

she saw when she walked into Trey's study was Tina sobbing hysterically on the couch. Honor remembered being shocked, because these clearly weren't her sister's usual crocodile tears. Something was very wrong.

Trey was making no move to comfort her. He just stood there, as gray and still as a granite statue in the middle of the room. 'Honor, there's been an accident.'

That was all he said at first. He wasn't crying. In all the weeks and months and years that followed, in fact, Honor never once saw him cry for the wife she knew he'd loved more than anything. But still, he seemed to be having difficulty getting his words out.

'Mommy's dead. She's not coming back.'

Clearly her father was not a subscriber to the 'break it to them gently' school of parenting. As an adult, Honor often wondered how many thousands of dollars in therapy that moment alone would have cost her, had she grown up to be the navel-gazing type. Thankfully, she hadn't. Because as awful as her mother's death was, far, far worse was to come.

Tammy. That was the name of their first stepmother. And what a fucking nightmare she was. Unlike the later models, she came from a respected Boston family, but her upbringing didn't seem to have prevented her from growing up into a class-A bitch. It was a year almost to the day since their mom's death and Trey had brought Tammy home like a trophy, beaming with a pride and happiness that Honor couldn't fathom.

'Honor, Tina, this is Tammy,' he said, kissing the strange woman on the lips. Honor, who was eleven at the time, thought she looked like a taller Snow White, with short black hair and porcelain-pale skin. But she wasn't kind and smiley like Mommy.

'She's going to be living with us from now on,' Trey continued. 'And we hope that pretty soon she's going to give you girls a little brother.'

*We*? Who was this *we*? Honor didn't hope for any such thing.

It was the first time she'd heard her father expressing a desire for a son. Over the next decade, that desire was to bloom into a full-grown obsession.

'Why?' Tina had asked, twirling her ringlets skeptically in the corner.

'Your daddy needs a boy so he can take over Palmers one day, honey,' simpered Tammy. 'And take care of you girls, too. That's what brothers do.'

'Daddy doesn't need a *boy*!' yelled Honor, pulling herself up to her full four foot nine, her jaw jutting in defiance. '*I'm* going to take over Palmers when *I* grow up. What do you know about it, anyway?'

'Honor.' Her father's voice was stern. 'Don't you dare speak to Tammy like that. Apologize at once.'

Honor had apologized. Not because she was remotely sorry. But because she couldn't bear for her father to be angry with her.

That night, she'd tried to talk to Tina about it. 'We have to do something to get rid of her,' she whispered, once the sound of their nanny's footsteps had finally died away.

'Like what?' Tina had her Winnie the Pooh flashlight on under the covers and was brushing her hair, admiring its shiny blondeness in the mirror with quiet satisfaction. Though only nine, she was already taller than Honor and much more physically developed, with tiny, nascent breasts of which she was inordinately proud. 'It's not up to us.'

'For goodness' sake,' hissed Honor, exasperated. 'Don't you understand how serious this is? She's horrible. She's a witch. And if she does have a baby boy, Daddy won't want us anymore.'

'I don't think he wants us now,' shrugged Tina, not missing a beat.

'Of course he wants us!' said Honor hotly. Although deep down she knew that the tears were pricking her eyes

because her sister was right. Since their mom's death, Trey had been distant to the point of abuse. 'It's Tammy that's the problem. You know she's going to try and act like she's our mom. *And* I bet she'll try to take Palmers away. Her and her new baby.'

Sighing, Tina reluctantly switched off the flashlight and slipped the mirror under her bed. 'I wish you'd stop going on about Palmers. It's only a stupid hotel.'

Honor was so flabbergasted by this, she was temporarily speechless.

'And if she does try to act like our mom, we'll just ignore her. It's really not a big deal. Anyway, I'm tired. Let's go to sleep.'

Seething with frustration, Honor pulled her bedspread up to her shoulders and turned her head to the wall. There was no point pushing it any further. Clearly Tina had no understanding whatsoever of the dangers they were facing. As usual it would be up to her, Honor, to do something.

If a son was what their father wanted – and clearly it was – then that was what she'd have to become.

'Miss Palmer?'

Honor looked up with a start at the sound of Sam Brannagan's voice. For a moment she'd forgotten where she was.

'Shall we continue?'

'Yes, yes of course,' she said, smoothing the crease in her black pants as she got to her feet. This was no time for melancholy reflection. She needed to be in control.

'The fact is that while I appreciate all of you coming, there's really nothing left to discuss. The trustees have appointed me to manage Dad's affairs, including Palmers, and that's what I'm going to do. I had hoped,' she looked plaintively at Trey, 'to make you understand why I'm doing this, Daddy. Believe me, if there were any other way—'

'I'll change my will!' Trey shouted, the effort plunging

him back into another bout of coughing. Jacob Foster made a great show of passing him his oxygen mask, but the old man pushed him angrily away. 'You're a viper, Honor. A snake in my house!'

'Mrs. Palmer.' Seeing Honor struggling to suppress her emotions, the lawyer addressed himself calmly to Lise. 'For your husband's sake, I think you'd better take him home now. And that goes for the rest of you, too. All interested parties will be receiving copies of the documentation in due course. But this meeting is over.'

Slipping on her oversized Gucci sunglasses, Tina was the first to head for the door, without so much as a backward glance at Trey. 'Honor, call me,' she said brusquely. 'I wanna know when that money will hit my account.'

'This isn't over, you know,' said Jacob furiously, yanking his dumpy wife up out of her seat. 'Not by a long way. You'll be hearing from us again, Mr. Brannagan.'

Honor said nothing as they filed out of the room, but her heart was pounding. Harvard may have taught her how to deal with confrontation and take control of a hostile meeting, but it hadn't taught her not to feel sick to the stomach each time, especially when your adversary was your own father, whose mind had been taken over by dark, inexplicable shadows that made him distrust everything and everyone around him. He couldn't even trust his own senses any more, the poor bastard.

Lise was the last to go, leading the doddering Trey by the hand. Honor winced to see him so frail. She could only pray that, behind closed doors, his child-wife treated him with more kindness and compassion than she'd shown today. Somehow, she doubted it.

'I'll make you proud, Dad,' she heard herself calling after him, ashamed to hear her voice breaking with emotion. Why did she still need his approval so badly? 'I'll make Palmers great again. You'll see.'

Turning to look at her as the elevator doors opened,

Trey shook his head bitterly. He knew his periods of lucidity were getting rarer and rarer. But to be outwitted by his own daughter was more than his pride could bear.

'I hope God forgives you for this, Honor,' he muttered darkly. 'Because I never will.'

And stepping into the elevator with the rest of his so-called family, he was gone.