The Legacy of Hartlepool Hall
Also by Paul Torday

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The Girl on the Landing
The Hopeless Life of Charlie Summers
More Than You Can Say
The Legacy of Hartlepool Hall

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One

As a rule, Ed Hartlepool never opened letters unless they were invitations. These were opened and placed on the chimneypiece and marked with a tick or a cross to show whether he had found the time to answer them. Sometimes he even remembered to attend the wedding or drinks party he had been asked to: although for the last few years, living in the south of France as a non-dom, invitations had become scarce and his attendance scarcer.

Other post was usually left unopened. No member of his family had ever thought it worth their while to read correspondence from accountants, lawyers or bankers. Letters of this sort had been arriving at Villa Laurier with increasing frequency and remained in a pile on his desk. Every now and then he would open a few at random, glance at the first sentence, and then throw them away unread.

Ed never opened emails either – unless they were jokes. He used his computer to play on-line poker and couldn’t see the point of it otherwise. His correspondents had long since learned it was hopeless trying to reach him in this way.

His father, Simon Aylmer Francis Simmonds, the fourth Marquess of Hartlepool, had died a few years ago. He had given Ed only two pieces of advice. The first was that if the opening sentence of a letter wasn’t interesting, then the rest
of it didn’t deserve attention. The second recommendation was: ‘A gentleman should only need to move his bowels once a day.’

Ed began his day at half past nine with a cup of coffee and a couple of cigarettes on the terrace. As usual, at that time of the morning, he was clothed only in his dressing gown, preferring to swim before he began reading the English newspapers that his housekeeper would soon bring from the village.

Next it was time to obey his father’s advice. He took his morning’s post to the only room at Villa Laurier that in any way resembled home. When he had moved to France on his trustees’ advice he had taken the house on a ten-year lease. Most of the furniture and decoration had been acceptable. However, Ed had not found French ideas on domestic sanitation to his taste and in this one room he had made changes. The best of English glazed ceramic sanitary ware had been imported and fitted; a lustrous mahogany loo seat and lid added. To complete the illusion, Ed had hung his old school and house photographs on the walls. He gazed at the sea of half-forgotten faces at this time every morning without thinking anything much about them. They were there merely as a silent audience while Ed performed his morning functions.

As he sat there, he opened the first letter. It was from Horace, the butler at Hartlepool Hall. Ed couldn’t remember the last time he had received a letter from Horace and the shaky handwriting was at first unfamiliar to him. The letter began with the intriguing sentence:

‘A Lady Alice Birtley has come to stay with us, and I do not recollect that your Lordship left any instructions in respect of her visit.’

Ed had never heard of Alice Birtley. He put the letter to
one side, promising himself he would read the rest of it later. He had certainly not invited a Lady Alice, or anyone else, to stay at Hartlepool Hall. The second letter was from his accountant in London and almost went straight into the waste-paper basket. But this time some instinct made him open it. The first sentence commanded his attention straight away; and the next, and the next.

The letter informed Ed that his five-year exile as a non-dom had come to an end. A settlement had been reached by the trustees of the Hartlepool Estate in the enormous and costly row with Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs that had arisen following the death of Ed’s father. The figure that had been agreed was so large that Ed could not at first grasp it. It didn’t seem as if the amount of money in the letter could have anything to do with him or his affairs. It was simply too large to understand.

Ed’s father had followed a long family tradition of leaving his affairs in a dreadful tangle. The wealth of the Simmonds family had been colossal; it had survived generations of mismanagement. But somehow the taxman’s demands had always been met or else avoided; to improve matters, Ed’s father and his advisors had designed a series of trusts, in turn owned by overseas trusts in Guernsey, in turn owned by other trusts in Lichtenstein. As a result, the fourth Marquess had paid no inheritance tax on his own father’s death; and little or no income tax during his lifetime. The arrangements that had been constructed to help him avoid all this tax were so complex it was probable that no single human being fully understood them.

When Ed’s father died, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs had taken Ed’s trustees to court, and Ed had been advised to
move abroad. Now the matter had been settled and the bills were coming in.

Ed knew as soon as he read the opening sentence of the letter, that his life was about to change. Decisive action had to be taken. The responsibilities that had fallen to him on his father’s death must now be taken up. His inheritance, the large Hartlepool estate and its enormous house, on the borders of Durham and Yorkshire, was finally his and his life of leisure was over. For five years he had done nothing; trod water, in a manner of speaking, whilst other people had written him letters either seeking instruction, or giving him information. He had almost never replied. How could he be expected to understand letters that began with sentences such as: ‘You will recall the judgement in the case of Rex v. Chorley Settled Estates in 1934’?

Ed sighed as he thought of all the trouble that lay ahead of him, then went outside into the heat of a late spring morning in Provence.

The sun was climbing in the sky. Ed walked along the path to the swimming pool, which was about fifteen metres long and made of white marble, surrounded by an area of terracotta tiles. Sun loungers sat along its side, and there was a small pool-house at the far end. Here were lilos and beach balls and other objects that Ed never used. They were provided for the use of the villa’s occasional tenants: sometimes Ed went back to England in the hottest part of the summer and let the villa to friends.

He wound back the pool cover, took off his dressing gown and flung it onto the nearest sun lounger. The blue water sparkled in the spring sun that had just cleared the tops of the surrounding trees. Dew glinted on the freshly mown grass. Ed picked up the skimmer and removed from the surface of
the water a few dead leaves, a couple of drowned wasps and a large spider whose legs were still flailing. He emptied the contents of the net into a corner of the garden, then lowered himself slowly into the water.

At first the temperature seemed cold, but within moments, as he swam the first of twenty lengths, it was refreshing. The water felt like cream against his skin, and it lapped gently against the sides of the pool or gurgled in the overflow pipe. He made a turn, pushing underwater and changed from a medium-fast crawl to breaststroke. After a few more lengths he turned on his back and began a gentle backstroke, half closing his eyes to keep out the water, which was salty, like the sea. Now, as he lay on his back, the sun was a distant golden dot. The endless blue sky arched over him, warming his limbs. He turned again and swam with a steady breaststroke, smelling the fresh air of late spring, the scent of newly cut grass, the tang of salt.

Ed was at his happiest at this hour of the day when life was at its simplest. All he had to do was get from one end of the pool to the other, and count off the lengths as he did so. He swam with the grace and fluency you would expect from a man who had been swimming like this most spring and summer mornings for the last five years.

Fragments of thought went through his mind as he turned and swam and turned and swam.

'I shall miss all this ... there’s nowhere to swim at Hartlepool Hall. The lake is full of blanket-weed and far too cold.'

Then another fragment, of a different kind.

'I wonder if the beech trees are in leaf yet at home?'

He felt as if he was no longer in a swimming pool, but being carried on some mysterious tide, sweeping him on to a
destination of which he remained, for the moment, ignorant.

He finished his swim and climbed out of the pool. The water continued lapping and gurgling after he got out, as if it were calling him back, in a watery language he could not fathom. Perhaps it was asking him to stay a while longer; but as he dried himself with his towel he knew that this morning’s letter, unlike all the others, could not be ignored. He must return to England.

Ed spent a night in London on the way home. Then he took an early train from King’s Cross and arrived at Hartlepool Hall in a taxi, around mid-morning.

Spring comes to the north of England later than it arrives in the south of France. But when it arrives, it comes in the blink of an eye. The young winter wheat had emerged in the fields; every tree in every wood seemed about to burst into leaf. The willows and the birch trees were already out; the horse chestnuts unfurling their waxy green spikes. The hawthorn was white in the hedgerows and wild cherry flowered everywhere in explosions of white and pink.

Approaching Hartlepool Hall from the station, the visitor travels at first through a region of flat water meadows. Slow streams wind their way listlessly towards a distant sea, leaving oxbows to the right and left of them. There are flat expanses of oilseed rape or wheat; or else grass fields trodden into mud by grazing lambs or pigs.

A few miles further on, the bones of the land begin to change. The contours begin to undulate gently, a foretaste of the dales further west where the land ramps up towards the crests of the Pennines. Woods and copses become more frequent, and the fields are smaller: green pastures bounded by dry stone walls instead of barbed wire fences. The villages
are no longer straggling rows of dull red brick buildings. Instead the houses are built from a grey limestone and clustered around a green, with a pub and a church. It is a landscape that has not changed as much over the last two centuries as other parts of Britain. Then the road turns a corner and there is the first glimpse, through the trees, of Hartlepool Hall. That is the view that takes the visitor by surprise: the unexpectedness of this palace in the middle of nowhere.

Ed’s ancestor Henry Simmonds, a descendant of miners and forge masters from somewhere on the coast between Middlesbrough and Hartlepool, hired an architect and with him he visited various stately homes: Chatsworth, Castle Howard and Blenheim. In front of one of them – it is not recorded which – he is said to have given his instructions: ‘Build me summat like that.’

The story is no doubt apocryphal, but even the Simmonds family enjoyed repeating it. In those days the family enjoyed immeasurable wealth, enriched by the expansion of the manufacturing industry caused by the Napoleonic Wars. They were hard men who worked with iron and steel. They knew the value of every penny they made, and when they loaned quite a large sum of money at the end of the Crimean War to an almost bankrupt Government, they made it plain that they expected a dukedom to go with the new house they were building.

The Secretary to the Treasury Bench, who was responsible for affairs of patronage, explained that a dukedom was not possible; the other dukes mightn’t like it; but they could make Henry Simmonds a Marquess, if that would do?

After a bit of grumbling it was decided that it would have to do, and Henry Simmonds became the first Marquess of
Hartlepool just as the last sheet of lead was being laid on the roof of Hartlepool Hall.

The taxi drove through the lodge gates and then along the half a mile or so of drive that led to the house itself. Underneath avenues of wellingtonia and cedar, a mass of bluebells surged in drifts of a startling deep blue that seemed to shine with a light all their own in the gloom beneath the trees. The pale yellow of primroses showed here and there in small clusters.

Ed stepped out of the taxi and took a moment to look up at his family home. Indeed it was his home, and his alone. He had no close relations to share it with him: no sisters, no brothers, no wife or children. In front of him the cliff-like face of the building – a great façade of grey stone broken by countless windows – was graced with a central portico. Crowning the front of the house was a white marble dome that looked as if it might have been airlifted from Rome or Florence.

Behind the house was the ten-acre lake, where banks of rhododendrons were beginning to flower along the water’s edge: luxuriant blooms of red and pink and cream whose reflections glanced upwards from the surface of the still water. Beyond the lake were the woods that encircled the house and its gardens and grounds, protecting them from curious eyes. This secret kingdom of limestone and glass, lead and marble, of lake and woodland, now basked in the hazy heat of a cloudless spring day.

Horace the butler was descending the steps while Ed paid off the driver. When he reached the taxi he said, ‘Good morning, M’Lord.’

‘How are you, Horace?’ Without waiting for an answer, Ed bounded up to the front entrance. Horace struggled up
the steps behind him with the luggage. Ed now stood in the
great hall in the shaft of sunlight let in through the oculus, a
circular window in the marble dome far above. The architect
had borrowed this idea from the Pantheon in Rome, inspired
by the family’s treasured white marble statue of Romulus and
Remus. This statue was now installed at one end of the hall
and had originally been purchased by Percy, the father of
Henry Simmonds, while on a grand tour in Italy during the
first half of the nineteenth century.

It was good to be home.

‘Get one of the gardeners to give you a hand taking those
cases upstairs, Horace,’ said Ed. Horace was wheezing as he
set the suitcases down on the floor. Ed had forgotten how
old Horace was. His pink, unlined cheeks belied his age: he
must be eighty, Ed thought. He had served the Simmonds
family since he was in his teens when his duties had consisted
of polishing shoes in the boot room and taking the post down
to the village. He had been his grandfather’s, then his father’s
butler and personal manservant for at least fifty years and
should have retired a decade ago. No one had remembered
to tell him he could go, so he stayed on.

‘Thank you, M’Lord,’ said Horace. ‘Will your Lordship be
in the usual bedroom?’

‘Yes,’ said Ed.

‘Lady Alice has asked me to say she would like to join you
in the library just before luncheon. She has not yet risen.
Lady Alice prefers to read the newspapers in bed. I am afraid
it slipped my mind for a moment that your Lordship was
coming home today, and I had the papers sent up to her.
Shall I get someone to go to the village and buy some more?’

‘Don’t worry,’ Ed replied. ‘I read all the papers on the
train. But who on earth is Lady Alice?’
‘I wrote to your Lordship about the lady.’

‘Of course you did,’ said Ed. The experience of coming back to Hartlepool Hall and knowing that, for the first time in his life, it was his alone to enjoy, freed from the arthritic grip of his father, had driven all other thoughts from his head.

‘She’s still here, is she?’

‘The lady has not yet said how long she intends to stay,’ replied Horace.

‘Has she not?’ said Ed. ‘We’ll see about that.’

He left Horace standing in the hall and wandered about the ground floor of the house. Nothing had changed: the drawing room was covered in dust sheets, and the shutters were closed, but the dining room and the library had been made ready. The curtains and windows had been opened and there were fresh-cut spring flowers in a vase; a drinks tray had also been set out, so Horace mustn’t really have forgotten about his arrival. The rest of the house was asleep: windows shuttered, curtains drawn to protect the paintings and the furniture from sunlight, dust everywhere, a sleepy quiet broken only by the echo of Ed’s footsteps as he went from room to room.

He unlocked the glass door that led onto the terrace overlooking the lake and stepped outside. After the cool darkness of the house the sunlight made him narrow his eyes for a moment and warmed his face: he could have been in France still. He walked across the terrace to the stone balustrade. Below were more rhododendrons coming into flower and a yard or two beyond them was the shore of the lake. Startled by his arrival a mallard was paddling away, followed by six ducklings so small they could only have hatched in the last day or so. Clouds of midges and sedge darted above the
water and swallows swooped amongst them, feeding on the new life.

For a long time Ed stood there gazing at the view, resting his elbows on the lichen-covered stone of the balustrade and drinking in the extraordinary beauty of the place – last glimpsed on a wet November night some months ago. This was his inheritance; this place was all his now, to do with as he liked. A sound behind him made him turn. It was Horace, standing at the window.

‘Lady Alice is in the library, M’Lord.’

Edward followed Horace back into the house. His eyes had difficulty adjusting to the gloom after the brightness of the sunshine outside. He had not decided on the best approach to take with this interloper: cold irony, or outright abuse? In the centre of the room stood a tall woman, wearing a grey dress. Edward blinked. He realised he was looking at a woman in her late sixties in whose features and figure a faded beauty could still be detected. Lady Alice Birtley was not much younger than his father would have been, had he still lived. She was not yet pulled earthwards by gravity. She held herself erect and she was slim: no, not slim, painfully thin. She had tight silver-grey curls about her head that must once have been blonde ringlets. She had great dark eyes: no, they were not dark, but a watery blue. They looked dark because the sockets were deep and shadowed. Her skin was so transparent that the bones of her face almost seemed to show. It must once have been a beautiful face to look at: even now, it was remarkable.

‘Good morning,’ she said as Ed entered the room. Her voice was clear, with the cut-glass accents of an earlier decade. She held out her hand and Ed took it in a brief grasp. Her skin felt like old paper.
‘Good morning,’ said Ed. ‘I’m Ed Hartlepool.’

‘I know who you are. I recognised you at once, even though we have never met before. You have your father’s looks.’

‘Have I indeed?’ replied Ed.

‘My name is Alice Birtley,’ said the old lady. ‘I don’t suppose your father ever mentioned my name to you?’

‘No. He didn’t.’

He waited for some explanation but none came. Then Horace appeared beside them carrying a silver tray on which there were two glasses of champagne.

‘Horace spoils me,’ said Lady Alice. She raised her glass in Ed’s direction. ‘Happy days.’

Who was this person in Ed’s house? Who was this woman, acting as if she had lived there all her life, drinking his best champagne?
When Annabel Gazebee heard that Ed Hartlepool might be coming back to live at Hartlepool Hall she went and told her father. Although she was in her early thirties, she still lived at home looking after old Marcus Gazebee. Her mother had died long ago. It was Annabel’s policy, learned from bitter experience, that it was best to tell her father everything, and as soon as she heard it. In such a case the worst that could happen was that he would accuse her of repeating idle gossip, or of wasting his time with trivia. But if she failed to tell him any item of news, however slight, the consequences could be unfortunate. He had been known to accuse her of leading a secret life; of plotting against him; of not paying him the respect that was due to him. She dreaded his tone when he reproached her. Either icy and withering, or querulous and complaining: both were equally hard to face.

On this occasion he was in one of his better moods. All he said, when Annabel told him the news, was: ‘Well, I daresay he has only come back in order to sell up. That young man has no interest in anything at all. Except spending money, of course.’

‘Poor Ed,’ said Annabel. Colonel Gazebee laughed. Age had brought a shrill note to his voice and the sound was more like the cry of a seagull than anything human.
‘He will be poor, very soon. And poorer still if that builder you’re seeing gets his hands on the house. Simon Hartlepool must be spinning in his grave.’

The ‘builder’ was what Colonel Gazebee chose to call Geoff Tarset, the man whom Annabel had been going out with for three months. Men of any sort were scarce in her life these days, and the opportunities to meet them scarcer still. Geoff was one of the few – indeed the only one in recent times – to have survived the chilly sarcasm with which her father greeted most of her visitors. But Geoff had, unfortunately for Annabel, said in her father’s hearing that he wouldn’t mind making an offer for Hartlepool Hall if it ever came on the market. There were rumours all the time that such a thing might happen.

Annabel was pleased at first when she heard Ed might be coming home. A lifetime – five or six years – ago, the two of them had been close friends. She, and Ed, and Catherine Plender, Eck Chetwode-Talbot, Mike Fearnley, and four or five others had been in and out of each other’s houses. They had been her ‘set’. Annabel had thought in those days that this tight group of friends were the only people worth knowing. Their parties were the best parties. They went racing together, or shooting on Ed’s family grouse moor. They sat in one another’s dining rooms and drank and talked into the small hours. There had never been anything between Annabel and Ed although, when his girlfriend Catherine Plender married someone else and was then killed in a car crash, Ed was for a time so vulnerable and lost that Annabel thought she might have stepped into Catherine’s shoes. But it didn’t happen, and then Ed went abroad and they saw each other for only a few days a year on his rare visits home.

Now she awaited Ed’s return with a curious mixture of
anticipation and embarrassment. The anticipation was in the thought that once Ed came back, everything would be as it once had been. Hartlepool Hall would be opened up and the parties would start again: dinner parties at the house; lunches in the family box at York Races. Ed had always paid for everything, or nearly everything, as he had inherited the careless generosity of his family. Mrs Donaldson, the cookhousekeeper at Hartlepool Hall, would serve up delicious feasts or provide picnic hampers full of absurd old-fashioned delicacies, to be washed down by the best wines from the cellars of Hartlepool Hall. The house would become the centre of the world once more: all cares and worries were left at its door, and inside was nothing but pleasure.

The embarrassment that Annabel felt was to do with Geoff Tarset. Her father had brought her up to believe that she should mix only with people who had what he called ‘background’. Quite what he meant, Annabel was never sure. She had, in the past, brought home young men whose upbringing seemed impeccable, even when measured against her father’s exacting standards. However, few of them returned after their first visit to Lambshiel House: the prize was never quite worth the grilling they received from the old colonel. The look of deep dissatisfaction that appeared on his face when, under cross-examination, they revealed the name of the school they had gone to or the regiment they had served in or the City bank they worked at, would have weakened the resolve of much tougher specimens. Annabel herself was not bad-looking but she was no beauty. She was a tall, thin girl with features that might have been handsome if they had been more animated. She had good dark brown hair that fell to her shoulders and large brown eyes. But this was never quite enough for the young men who came; and once they had
visited the house it was obvious to them that, if there was money in the family, it was well hidden.

Then she met Geoff. It was in a hospitality tent sponsored by Malcolm Skinner’s firm of land agents at the Great Yorkshire Show in Harrogate. Skinner & Partners were the agents for Hartlepool Hall. Annabel went because she received so few invitations to go anywhere that even the modest temptation of a free glass of sparkling wine and the chance to get away from home was enough to persuade her to make the sixty-mile round trip. Geoff was there because, as he told her, he was ‘quite a big client of Malcolm’s’.

Quite how or why he picked on Annabel to talk to she wasn’t quite sure. She knew she would never have started the conversation. But Geoff cornered her and then made sure her glass was kept topped up, almost as if it were his party and not Malcolm Skinner’s. There was something compelling about Geoff Tarset, even at that first meeting: his gaze had a hypnotic quality and he was a fluent talker, with an attractive lack of self-awareness. He seemed capable of doing or saying anything he wanted to. There was also an air of dangerous glamour about him: not just the evidence of wealth supplied by the Rolex Oyster he wore and the thick gold chain around his other wrist, but the impression he gave with his sharp blue eyes and very white teeth and the glimpse of his tanned and hairy chest where the top buttons were undone, that he was some kind of exotic animal who lived by different rules to those that governed Annabel’s life.

He managed to get her phone number and she was not surprised when he rang a day later and asked her out to dinner. She hesitated only for a moment. She knew what her father would say if he ever met Geoff; she also knew that the boredom of sitting opposite her father in their austere drawing
room night after night was beginning to drive her mad. Geoff took her out to dinner. It was a very good dinner, and she was collected from her house in a chauffeur-driven Rolls.

Indeed Geoff turned out to be good company. He made her laugh; he had a dry wit, and he was a good mimic. He told funny stories about himself, and he treated Annabel with something akin to deference. He was proud of the fact his parents had been poor.

‘Where I was brought up,’ he told her, ‘the rich kids were the ones with bikes. The rest of us walked to school.’ He liked to talk about the two-up, two-down terraced house he had been born in, because when he later showed her the large and modern single-storey dwelling he had designed and built for himself, the contrast was all the more marked. He explained that he had left school at sixteen and joined a firm of estate agents as a scout, and then as a negotiator. From there he had risen, as he told her in all modesty, to become ‘one of the larger property developers in this part of the world’.

He didn’t make the slightest attempt to kiss her, or even touch her hand on that first date. Annabel was sent home in Geoff’s Rolls-Royce full, content and chaste. The next four or five dates followed a similar pattern: except that now he picked her up and drove her home himself in his other car – a red Ferrari. She knew with absolute certainty that sooner or later he was going to ask her to go to bed with him. The longer he didn’t try to kiss or even touch her, the easier she felt it would be to say yes.

By this time Annabel had dropped out of the lives of the old Hartlepool Hall crowd. She didn’t think their paths would cross often any more: one had died, one had gone to live abroad, one had married and pulled up the drawbridge, others
had gone south to live in London. She needed someone in her life and it turned out to be Geoff. If she had not been so lonely, and so fed up with her father, she might not have chosen someone so different to her, whose friends were not her friends, whose way of life seemed so foreign to her. Geoff’s friends were other property developers; or else professional footballers, bankers or lawyers. The people in his circle were noisy, confident, rich and sometimes predatory. But Geoff drew her into his world; and when he had drawn her in, he became her lover.

The initial thought that went through Annabel’s mind when she lay in bed with him for the first time was: ‘His back is even hairier than his chest.’

Then he began his love-making and she forgot all about the hirsute qualities of her new lover. In a while she even wished that he was rather less energetic. Afterwards, he went to the bar, located in the large living space next to his bedroom, and mixed them both a powerful cocktail. Annabel was dying for a cup of tea, but she accepted the drink with every appearance of surprise and gratitude.

‘Get this down you, darling,’ said Geoff. ‘You need to keep your strength up if we’re going to have a night of passion.’

He grinned and drank down half of his own. Annabel thought: ‘Oh God, are we going to have to do this all over again?’

Not that it had been unpleasant: far from it. But it was all rather tiring. She was saved by Geoff’s mobile phone. He began striding up and down the room, quite naked, the mobile clutched to his ear, saying things like: ‘Try Clydesdale Bank – they might give us a better rate on the senior debt.’

It was not very romantic. After a few more minutes of this
Annabel started to dress, and when Geoff looked across at her and raised one eyebrow, still in the middle of a conversation, she said: ‘I must go – Daddy will be wondering where I’ve got to.’

He didn’t try to stop her.

All the same Annabel grew fond of Geoff. When he finally met her father, an occasion Annabel had been dreading and had put off for as long as possible, his robust indifference to her father’s sarcasm impressed her. No other man she had brought home had dealt with the old man quite so efficiently. She really began to wonder whether Geoff mightn’t, after all, be the knight who would rescue her from her imprisonment. He was an improbable knight, with his Ferrari and his Rolls-Royce, and his BlackBerry winking its red light at him, but he might just do the job.

‘Why do you stick around if he treats you like that?’ was Geoff’s question after his first visit to Lambshiel House. He spoke out of curiosity. ‘Why don’t you tell him to stuff it?’

‘I can’t,’ said Annabel. ‘Someone has to look after him.’

‘Put him in a care home.’

‘I haven’t got the money.’

‘What about your old man? He must have something tucked away.’

So Annabel told him about The Inheritance. The inheritance was Marcus Gazebee’s nest egg: a sum of money, which was at various times described by her father as either ‘a very substantial sum which I have at my disposal thanks to my careful management’ or else ‘a derisory amount of money considering I have given half my life in Her Majesty’s Service.’ He never gave any further details. What was certain, whether her father’s savings were large or small, was that they had not been frittered away by any extravagance on his part. Life
at Lambshiel House was conducted with an impressive sense of frugality. The central heating system was never used, except in the depths of winter; nor was the house overflowing with milk or honey. At their infrequent lunch parties, wine glasses were not often brought out and never overfilled; the amount of food on offer to guests seemed to suggest that they must have eaten elsewhere first. The only luxury Colonel Gazebee allowed himself was his daily glass of port, of which a few dozen bottles remained in the otherwise almost empty cellar.

Annabel put up with all this because she felt she had no choice. One day her father would die and she would inherit whatever was left to inherit. She would sell the house and move somewhere smaller and warmer. Before Geoff came along, and while Ed was still in the south of France, she used to dream about her father dying, of some condition that was not too unpleasant, but quite conclusive. Then she would sell up and buy a little house somewhere in Provence herself. And then one day she would accidentally on purpose bump into Ed and he would say: ‘What on earth are you doing here?’ and she would say, ‘I live here now,’ and then . . . and then . . . and then what?

But now Geoff was in her life and asking her to come and live with him and already speculating, on her behalf, about how much Lambshiel House might fetch on the open market. Her father, however, still clung to life like a tough old root. The house was not for sale, the Inheritance was still salted away in whichever building society or bank her father had left it, and Annabel would not – could not – dared not leave him.

She also wasn’t quite certain about Geoff.
When Ed decided to come back to Hartlepool Hall, news of his return travelled ahead of him. It was Geoff, of all people, who told Annabel about it, one evening when she was with him in his house.

‘I hear your old mate Lord Hartlepool is coming back home.’

Annabel was sitting in Geoff’s drawing room, trying not to be distracted by the football match on the enormous TV. She was embroidering a tapestry cushion with the words: ‘You Don’t Have To Be Mad To Live Here, But It Helps’: a motto which had taken Geoff’s fancy. She looked up in great surprise.

‘No, really? Who told you that?’

As she spoke she found herself feeling upset that it was Geoff giving her the news, rather than the other way around.

‘Malcolm Skinner.’

‘What do you mean, coming back home? For a weekend, or longer?’

Geoff paused for a second, as if weighing up how much information he was prepared to part with.

‘What I hear – and it’s only a rumour – is that the Hartlepool Estate has gone bust. Lord Hartlepool is coming back to try to sort things out, but the word is he hasn’t a hope. The banks are going to pull the plug on the whole thing.’

‘No, really?’ said Annabel again. ‘How dreadful. Did Malcolm tell you that?’

She did not know Malcolm Skinner well, but she did not like him. She was quite prepared to believe he was treacherous. Geoff was very vague.

‘It’s just gossip. But I’ve heard the same story from people
who are not often wrong. It’s a big property, Hartlepool Hall. I wonder what will happen to it?’

‘Ed would never sell up,’ said Annabel decisively. ‘It’s been in his family far too long. In fact, they built it. He wouldn’t dream of selling.’

‘He might not,’ said Geoff, ‘but it’s what his bankers are dreaming that matters. They’re probably dreaming about getting their money out. Several million pounds of it, from what I hear.’

‘Poor Ed,’ said Annabel. She did not like the thought that Hartlepool Hall, once the centre of her existence and the scene of the happiest years of her life, might in any way be under threat. She did not like it either that she was hearing this news from Geoff. And because she did not like it, she chose not to believe it.

‘I expect he’ll find the money somewhere. The Simmondses have always been frightfully rich.’

‘Maybe,’ said Geoff. It was that evening, when he dropped her off at home, that she told her father the news.

Two days later Geoff rang her and told her that Ed was back.

‘How do you know?’ asked Annabel.

‘Malcolm Skinner told me. He arrived this morning.’

‘Has Malcolm seen him yet?’

‘No. He’s going to break the bad news to him this afternoon.’

‘Oh, Geoff,’ said Annabel, irritated by this, ‘the Simmonds family has always had its ups and downs. They are far too rich to get into real trouble. I must ring Ed and see how he is.’

‘That’s why I was calling,’ said Geoff. ‘Do you think you could invite him to lunch?’
‘You mean at Lambshiel House?’ asked Annabel.
‘Where else? And do you think you could manage to ask me at the same time?’
Annabel was surprised. ‘I thought you hated coming here.’
‘I’d go anywhere to be with you, darling,’ said Geoff in his breeziest tone of voice.
‘Do you mean it?’ asked Annabel.
‘I want to meet Ed Hartlepool. I want you to introduce me.’
‘Why? I wouldn’t have thought he was your type.’
Now Geoff sounded irritated.
‘What do you mean, not my type? You mean I might not be his type?’
‘Of course not, darling,’ said Annabel. But that was just what she bad meant. ‘Why on earth do you want to meet him?’
‘I want to meet him,’ said Geoff solemnly, ‘to discuss an idea that might be to our mutual advantage.’
Annabel thought it a rather vulgar remark, but she couldn’t afford to say so, so she simply asked Geoff which date he had in mind.
‘Any day next week,’ he suggested. ‘He’ll need to catch up with events. I gather he never reads letters or, if he does, he never replies to them. Malcolm Skinner will have to tell him just how bad things are. Then he might be in the mood to talk to someone like me.’
Someone like Geoff: someone who did deals, someone who – Annabel had learned – bought and sold whole housing developments across the North East. Someone who made money, in amounts Annabel could not begin to imagine. She heard Geoff on the phone or listened to him at dinner with his friends. He talked about ‘half a bar’ when he meant
five hundred thousand pounds; his projects cost millions to develop. In restaurants, bankers, lawyers and other rich men would cross the room to exchange a word with him, would acknowledge Annabel because she was with Geoff, and would then pat Geoff on the back, or squeeze his arm in one of those gestures with which alpha males acknowledge each other’s rank and status.

What would Ed think of Geoff, wondered Annabel? Whatever it was, he would keep his thoughts to himself. Ed had always been a master of the cool, blank look that, without giving offence or being in the least ill-mannered, made others around him check that their ties were knotted or their trousers zipped. Ed never thought ill of other people; the trick was to get him to think of other people at all.

Annabel knew she would have to find a way of explaining the whole Geoff situation to Ed before he and Geoff met. Maybe she would have to go to Hartlepool Hall first, and tell Ed how her life was these days.