

CLOSED CASKET

Also by Sophie Hannah

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The Point of Rescue
The Other Half Lives
A Room Swept White
Lasting Damage
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The Carrier
The Orphan Choir
The Telling Error
The Monogram Murders
Pictures Or It Didn't Happen
A Game for All the Family
The Narrow Bed

Agatha Christie[®]

Closed Casket

THE NEW HERCULE POIROT MYSTERY

SOPHIE HANNAH



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*For Mathew and James Prichard and family,
with love*

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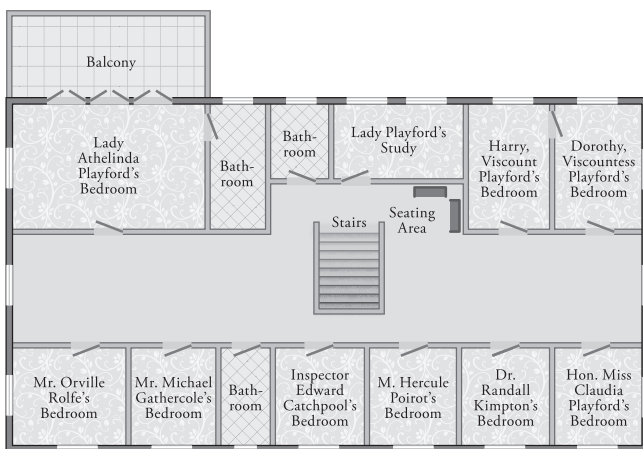
As always, I am grateful for the support of Dan, Phoebe and Guy Jones, my amazing family. Last but not least, thank you to my dog, Brewster, who used one of my characters as a conduit for his suggestion that Lillieoak ought to have a dog. He's so vain, he probably thinks this Poirot's about him. (Indeed, that very line was the working title of *Closed Casket* for many months, only in the second person.)

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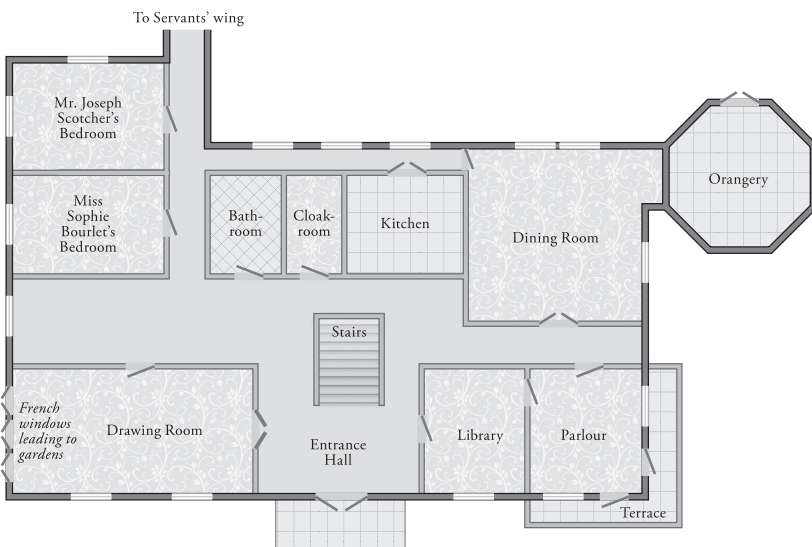
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PART ONE



First Floor



Ground Floor

CHAPTER 1

A New Will

Michael Gathercole stared at the closed door in front of him and tried to persuade himself that now was the moment to knock, as the aged grandfather clock in the hall downstairs stuttered its announcement of the hour.

Gathercole's instructions had been to present himself at four, and four it was. He had stood here—in this same spot on the wide first landing of Lillieoak—many times in the past six years. Only once had he felt less at ease than he did today. On that occasion he had been one of two men waiting, not alone as he was this afternoon. He still remembered every word of his conversation with the other man, when his preference would have been to recall none of it. Applying the self-discipline upon which he relied, he cast it from his mind.

He had been warned that he would find this afternoon's meeting difficult. The warning had formed part of the summons, which was typical of his hostess. 'What I intend to say to you will come as a shock . . . '

Gathercole did not doubt it. The prior notice was no use to him, for it contained no information about what sort of preparation might be in order.

His discomfort grew more pronounced when he consulted his pocket watch and noticed that by hesitating, and with all the taking out of the watch and putting it back in the waistcoat pocket, and pulling it out once more to check, he had made himself late. It was already a minute after four o'clock. He knocked.

Only one minute late. She would notice—was there anything she did not notice?—but with any luck she would not remark upon it.

‘Do come in, Michael!’ Lady Athelinda Playford sounded as ebullient as ever. She was seventy years old, with a voice as strong and clear as a polished bell. Gathercole had never encountered her in sober spirits. There was always, with her, a cause for excitement—often such morsels as would alarm a conventional person. Lady Playford had a talent for extracting as much amusement from the inconsequential as from the controversial.

Gathercole had admired her stories of happy children solving mysteries that confounded the local police since he had first discovered them as a lonely ten-year-old in a London orphanage. Six years ago, he had met their creator for the first time and found her as disarming and unpredictable as her books. He had never expected to go far in his chosen profession, but here he was, thanks to Athelinda Playford: still a relatively young man at thirty-six, and a partner in a successful firm of solicitors, Gathercole and

Rolfe. The notion that any profitable enterprise bore his name was still perplexing to Gathercole, even after a number of years.

His loyalty to Lady Playford surpassed all other attachments he had formed in his life, but personal acquaintance with his favourite author had forced him to admit to himself that he preferred shocks and startling about-turns to occur in the safely distant world of fiction, not in reality. Lady Playford, needless to say, did not share his preference.

He started to open the door.

‘Are you going to . . . Ah! There you are! Don’t hover. Sit, sit. We’ll get nowhere if we don’t start.’

Gathercole sat.

‘Hello, Michael.’ She smiled at him, and he had the strange sense he always had—as if her eyes had picked him up, turned him around and put him down again. ‘And now *you* must say, “Hello, Athie.” Go on, say it! After all this time, it ought to be a breeze. Not “Good afternoon, your ladyship”. Not “Good day, Lady Playford”. A plain, friendly “Hello, Athie”. Is that too much to manage? Ha!’ She clapped her hands together. ‘You look quite the hunted fox cub! You can’t understand why you’ve been invited to stay for a week, can you? Or why Mr Rolfe was invited too.’

Would the arrangements that Gathercole had put in place be sufficient to cover the absence of himself and Orville Rolfe? It was unheard of for them both to be away from the office for five consecutive days, but Lady Playford was the firm’s most illustrious client; no request from her could be refused.

‘I dare say you are wondering if there will be other guests, Michael. We shall come to all of that, but I’m still waiting for you to say hello.’

He had no choice. The greeting she demanded from him each time would never fall naturally from his lips. He was a man who liked to follow rules, and if there wasn’t a rule forbidding a person of his background from addressing a dowager viscountess, widow of the fifth Viscount Playford of Clonakilty, as ‘Athie’, then Gathercole fervently believed there ought to be.

It was unfortunate, therefore—he said so to himself often—that Lady Playford, for whom he would do anything, poured scorn on the rules at every turn and derided those who obeyed them as ‘dreary dry sticks’.

‘Hello, Athie.’

‘There we are!’ She spread out her arms in the manner of a woman inviting a man to leap into them, though Gathercole knew that was not her intention. ‘Ordeal survived. You may relax. Not too much! We have important matters to attend to—after we’ve discussed the bundle of the moment.’

It was Lady Playford’s habit to describe the book she was in the middle of writing as ‘the bundle’. Her latest sat on the corner of the desk and she threw a resentful glance in its direction. It looked to Gathercole less like a novel in progress and more like a whirlwind represented in paper: creased pages with curled edges, corners pointing every which way. There was nothing in the least rectangular about it.

Lady Playford hauled herself out of her armchair by the window. She never looked out, Gathercole had noticed. If there was a human being to inspect, Lady Playford did not waste time on nature. Her study offered the most magnificent views: the rose garden and, behind it, a perfectly square lawn, at the centre of which was the angel statue that her husband Guy, the late Viscount Playford, had commissioned as a wedding anniversary gift, to celebrate thirty years of marriage.

Gathercole always looked at the statue and the lawn and the rose bushes when he visited, as well as at the grandfather clock in the hall and the bronze table lamp in the library with the leaded glass snail-shell shade; he made a point of doing so. He approved of the stability they seemed to offer. Things—by which Gathercole meant lifeless objects and not any more general state of affairs—rarely changed at Lillieoak. Lady Playford's constant meticulous scrutiny of every person that crossed her path meant that she paid little attention to anything that could not speak.

In her study, the room she and Gathercole were in now, there were two books upside down in the large bookcase that stood against one wall: *Shrimp Seddon and the Pearl Necklace* and *Shrimp Seddon and the Christmas Stocking*. They had been upside down since Gathercole's first visit. Six years later, to see them righted would be disconcerting. No other author's books were permitted to reside upon those shelves, only Athelinda Playford's. Their spines brought some much-needed brightness into the wood-panelled room—strips of red, blue, green, purple, orange;

colours designed to appeal to children—though even they were no match for Lady Playford’s lustrous cloud of silver hair.

She positioned herself directly in front of Gathercole. ‘I want to talk to you about my will, Michael, and to ask a favour of you. But first: how much do you imagine a child—an ordinary child—might know about surgical procedures to reshape a nose?’

‘A . . . a nose?’ Gathercole wished he could hear about the will first and the favour second. Both sounded important, and were perhaps related. Lady Playford’s testamentary arrangements had been in place for some time. All was as it should be. Could it be that she wanted to change something?

‘Don’t be exasperating, Michael. It’s a perfectly simple question. After a bad motorcar accident, or to correct a deformity. Surgery to change the shape of the nose. Would a child know about such a thing? Would he know its name?’

‘I don’t know, I’m afraid.’

‘Do *you* know its name?’

‘Surgery, I should call it, whether it’s for the nose or any other part of the body.’

‘I suppose you might know the name without knowing you know it. That happens sometimes.’ Lady Playford frowned. ‘Hmph. Let me ask you another question: you arrive at the offices of a firm that employs ten men and two women. You overhear a few of the men talking about one of the women. They refer to her as “Rhino”.’

‘Hardly gallant of them.’

‘Their manners are not your concern. A few moments

later, the two ladies return from lunch. One of them is fine-boned, slender and mild in her temperament, but she has a rather peculiar face. No one knows what's wrong with it, but it somehow doesn't look quite right. The other is a mountain of a woman—twice my size at least.' Lady Playford was of average height, and plump, with downward slopes for shoulders that gave her a rather funnel-like appearance. 'What is more, she has a fierce look on her face. Now, which of the two women I've described would you guess to be Rhino?'

'The large, fierce one,' Gathercole replied at once.

'Excellent! You're wrong. In my story, Rhino turns out to be the slim girl with the strange facial features—because, you see, she's had her nose surgically reconstructed after an accident, in a procedure that goes by the name of *rhinoplasty*!'

'Ah. That I did not know,' said Gathercole.

'But I fear children won't know the name, and that's who I'm writing for. If *you* haven't heard of rhinoplasty . . . ' Lady Playford sighed. 'I'm in two minds. I was so excited when I first thought of it, but then I started to worry. Is it a little too scientific to have the crux of the story revolving around a medical procedure? No one really thinks about surgeries unless they have to, after all—unless they're about to go into hospital themselves. Children don't think about such things, do they?'

'I like the idea,' said Gathercole. 'You might emphasize that the slender lady has not merely a strange face but a strange *nose*, to send your readers in the right direction. You could say early on in the story that she has a new

nose, thanks to expert surgery, and you could have Shrimp somehow find out the name of the operation and let the reader see her surprise when she finds out.'

Shrimp Seddon was Lady Playford's ten-year-old fictional heroine, the leader of a gang of child detectives.

'So the reader sees the surprise but not, at first, the discovery. Yes! And perhaps Shrimp could say to Podge, "You'll never guess what it's called," and then be interrupted, and I can put in a chapter there about something else—maybe the police stupidly arresting the wrong person but even wronger than usual, maybe even Shrimp's father or mother—so that anyone reading can go away and consult a doctor or an encyclopaedia if they wish. But I won't leave it *too* long before Shrimp reveals all. Yes. Michael, I knew I could rely on you. That's settled, then. Now, about my will . . . '

She returned to her chair by the window and arranged herself in it. 'I want you to make a new one for me.'

Gathercole was surprised. According to the terms of Lady Playford's existing will, her substantial estate was to be divided equally, upon her death, between her two surviving children: her daughter Claudia and her son Harry, the sixth Viscount Playford of Clonakilty. There had been a third child, Nicholas, but he had died young.

'I want to leave everything to my secretary, Joseph Scotcher,' announced the clear-as-a-bell voice.

Gathercole sat forward in his chair. It was pointless to try to push the unwelcome words away. He had heard them, and could not pretend otherwise.

What act of vandalism was Lady Playford about to insist upon? She could not be in earnest. This was a trick; it had to be. Yes, Gathercole saw what she was about: get the frivolous part out of the way first—Rhino, rhinoplasty, all very clever and amusing—and then introduce the big caper as if it were a serious proposition.

‘I am in my right mind and entirely serious, Michael. I’d like you to do as I ask. Before dinner tonight, please. Why don’t you make a start now?’

‘Lady Playford . . . ’

‘Athie,’ she corrected him.

‘If this is something else from your rhino story that you’re trying out on me—’

‘Sincerely, it is not, Michael. I have never lied to you. I am not lying now. I need you to draw me up a new will. Joseph Scotcher is to inherit everything.’

‘But what about your children?’

‘Claudia is about to marry a greater fortune than mine, in the shape of Randall Kimpton. She will be perfectly all right. And Harry has a good head on his shoulders and a dependable if enervating wife. Poor Joseph needs what I have to give more than Claudia or Harry.’

‘I must appeal to you to think very carefully before—’

‘Michael, please don’t make a cake of yourself.’ Lady Playford cut him off. ‘Do you imagine the idea first occurred to me as you knocked at the door a few minutes ago? Or is it more likely that I have been ruminating on this for weeks or months? The careful thought you urge upon me has taken place, I assure you. Now: are

you going to witness my new will or must I call for Mr Rolfe?’

So that was why Orville Rolfe had also been invited to Lillieoak: in case he, Gathercole, refused to do her bidding.

‘There’s another change I’d like to make to my will at the same time: the favour I mentioned, if you recall. To this part, you may say no if you wish, but I do hope you won’t. At present, Claudia and Harry are named as my literary executors. That arrangement no longer suits me. I should be honoured if *you*, Michael, would agree to take on the role.’

‘To . . . to be your literary executor?’ He could scarcely credit it. For nearly a minute, he felt too overwhelmed to speak. Oh, but it was all *wrong*. What would Lady Playford’s children have to say about it? He couldn’t accept.

‘Do Harry and Claudia know your intentions?’ he asked eventually.

‘No. They will at dinner tonight. Joseph too. At present the only people who know are you and me.’

‘Has there been a conflict within the family of which I am unaware?’

‘Not at all!’ Lady Playford smiled. ‘Harry, Claudia and I are the best of friends—until dinner tonight, at least.’

‘I . . . but . . . you have known Joseph Scotcher a mere six years. You met him the day you met me.’

‘There is no need to tell me what I already know, Michael.’

‘Whereas your children . . . Additionally, my understanding was that Joseph Scotcher . . . ’

‘*Speak*, dear man.’

‘Is Scotcher not seriously ill?’ Silently, Gathercole added: *Do you no longer believe he will die before you?*

Athelinda Playford was not young but she was full of vitality. It was hard to believe that anyone who relished life as she did might be deprived of it.

‘Indeed, Joseph is very sick,’ she said. ‘He grows weaker by the day. Hence this unusual decision on my part. I have never said so before, but I trust you’re aware that I adore Joseph? I love him like a son—as if he were my own flesh and blood.’

Gathercole felt a sudden tightness in his chest. Yes, he’d been aware. The difference between knowing a thing and having it confirmed was vast. It led to thoughts that were beneath him, which he fought to banish.

‘Joseph tells me his doctors have said he has only weeks, now, to live.’

‘But . . . then I’m afraid I’m quite baffled,’ said Gathercole. ‘You wish to make a new will in favour of a man you know won’t be around to make use of his inheritance.’

‘Nothing is ever known for certain in this world, Michael.’

‘And if Scotcher should succumb to his illness within weeks, as you expect him to—what then?’

‘Why, in that eventuality we revert to the original plan—Harry and Claudia get half each.’

‘I must ask you something,’ said Gathercole, in whom a painful anxiety had started to grow. ‘Forgive the impertinence. Do you have any reason to believe that you too will die imminently?’

‘Me?’ Lady Playford laughed. ‘I’m strong as an ox. I expect to chug on for years.’

‘Then Scotcher will inherit nothing on your demise, being long dead himself, and the new will you are asking me to arrange will achieve nothing but to create discord between you and your children.’

‘On the contrary: my new will might cause *something wonderful* to happen.’ She said this with relish.

Gathercole sighed. ‘I’m afraid to say I’m still baffled.’

‘Of course you are,’ said Athelinda Playford. ‘I knew you would be.’