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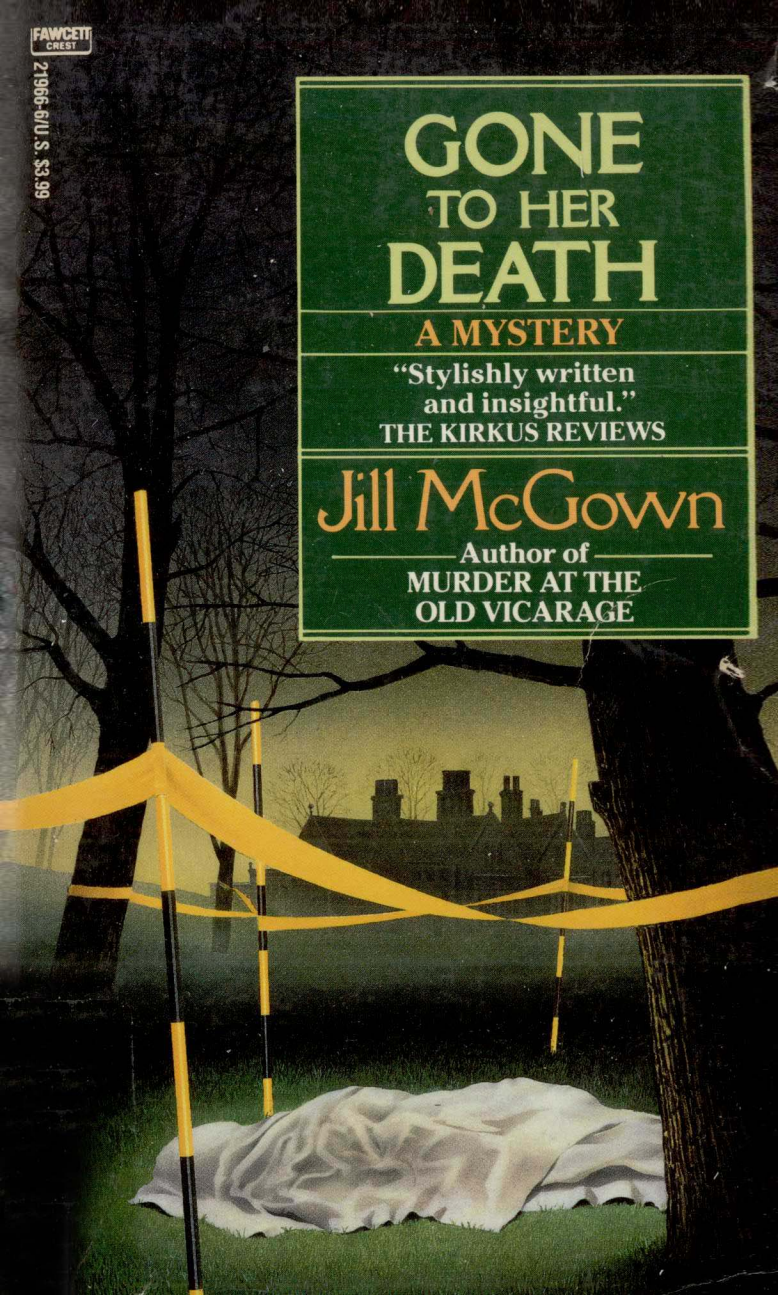
GONE TO HER DEATH

A MYSTERY

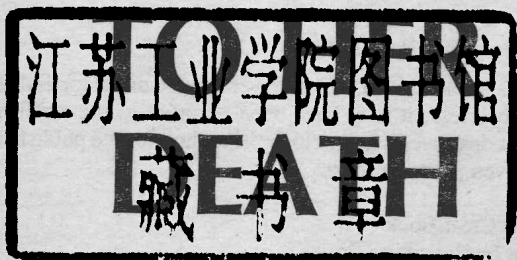
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and insightful."
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Jill McGown

— Author of —
MURDER AT THE
OLD VICARAGE



GONE



Jill McGown

FAWCETT CREST • NEW YORK

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AN EVIL HOUR

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Chapter One

NO ROAD TRAFFIC BEYOND THIS POINT—ALL VEHICLES TO CAR PARK

Philip Newby turned in the direction of the arrow, along a road which ran between two buildings. Behind the larger of the two, he could see the car park, and pulled in, thankful to find a space close to the road. He emerged from the car with difficulty, shivering as he stepped out into the bitter January wind. This winter was never going to end. There were always going to be heaps of snow along the pavements, making them narrower than they were to start with. The frost that lay along every branch of every tree, every television aerial, every telegraph wire, was there for ever, frozen and permanent.

Reaching back into the car, he took out the walking-stick, and made his way back along the side road. It seemed like a long way to the school itself, which was on the other side of the grounds, its roof visible above the other buildings. Between him and the grey, dignified building was a curving tarmac roadway slippery with slush; it might just as well have been a minefield. But the school had been there for a hundred and fifty years, and he didn't suppose it was going to come to him. He clamped his teeth together as he walked up the slight incline that he once wouldn't have recognised as one.

He walked quickly; too quickly, the doctor had said. Cer-

tainly too quickly for the conditions. But he *walked*, and there had been a long time when it was thought that he might not, because of the back injury. It had healed more quickly than his leg, as it had turned out. It ached, from time to time. He couldn't turn quickly. But he did exercises, and through the pain he could feel it strengthening. With the leg exercises, all he could feel was the pain. His long stint in a wheelchair had, however, made his arms stronger than they'd ever been; an ironic twist.

He made the final assault with a burst of speed that took him up the stone steps at the front of the building in seconds; the best way to deal with steps, he'd found. He winced each time his weight came on to his right foot, as it had to, but the pain afforded him some pleasure; it was proof that his leg was still there, and still functioning.

Heat wrapped round him like a blanket as he went into the building, and he stood for a moment, savouring it. In the large entrance-hall, an old-fashioned finger-post pointed the way to the office, where he joined a queue, a mixture of boys and staff, who looked at him curiously or incuriously, depending on their nature. Staff didn't get preferential treatment, he noticed. First come, first served. He approved of that.

Another finger-post greeted him: CLASSROOMS 1-14, STAFF ROOM, LADIES' REST ROOM, STOREROOM, BOILER ROOM. It pointed in all directions, including up. CLASSROOMS 15-21, that one read. HEADMASTER'S STUDY, PHYSICS LAB, LAVATORIES. He looked at the wide, curved staircase, counting the steps he could see, in case LAVATORIES indicated the only facilities available. Like an old man. An old man with a stick, afraid of a flight of stairs. He'd bought the stick specially; the hospital had said that theirs was very carefully designed to give the best support, and hadn't been too keen on the idea, but if he had to walk with a stick it would be a stick to be proud of. It was a silver-topped walking-stick, slim and elegant. All right, the surgeon had said grudgingly. But keep the other one in case

that one snaps. The balance was all wrong, with that heavy knob; these sticks weren't for *walking* with, they were for show. So Philip was showing it. The other one was with his luggage, in the car.

First day of term; that was the reason for the queue. There were questions to be answered, children to be checked and registered and comforted, staff to be given timetables and instructions and notes about epileptics and Muslims. He joined the end, and shuffled up with the others. He'd been told not to, in a letter. The headmaster would meet him, show him round, it said. But none of the people he had seen had been the headmaster. His memory was a bit faulty, but not that bad. Treadwell had come to see him just before Christmas, to check that everything was all right, and that he could start in the new year.

He had seemed very solicitous. Too solicitous. Philip must tell him, he had said, if there were any obstacles that could perhaps be overcome or made less troublesome. There would be no obstacles, Philip thought darkly. He was thirty-seven, God damn it. He was in the prime of a life that he enjoyed, an uncomplicated life, doing more or less what he pleased. He was . . . he was just temporarily inconvenienced. He wasn't disabled, and he never would be. He just used a walking-stick, that was all.

An all-male queue; but in the office two women came into view as Philip at last achieved the window position, with only a man and a small boy ahead of him. The blonde receptionist was dealing with the queries; she caught his eye, as she would, for Philip was taller than the rest of the queue, and she smiled. Philip smiled back automatically, but he was looking past her to where another woman sat perched on the desk, talking on the phone. She was a little younger than he was, at a guess. Dark eyes, clear skin, dark hair drawn away from her face. Delicately coloured eyelids, and lips that matched the pale, polished nails. A wedding ring encircled one slim finger. No other jewellery. He felt as though he knew her, but he didn't.

"Are you sure you don't mind?" she was saying. "It's just that it's only on that one night. But I did say I'd—" She paused. "Thank you," she said. "I'm really grateful, Diana." She twisted the telephone cord lightly in her fingers as she spoke.

Lifting her hand to his mouth, kissing the long, slim fingers. . . .

"You'll have to hire one," the receptionist was saying to the man. He was about fifty, stockily built, slightly overweight, wearing jeans and a sweatshirt.

"Hire one?" the man repeated, in a London accent which, if it ever had been polished up, had returned to its native roughness. "Do you know how much the bloody things cost to hire?"

His lips touching her eyes, her cheekbones. . . .

"Fucking dinner-jacket," the man said, walking down the corridor.

There were embarrassed giggles from the boys, but neither of the ladies seemed shocked, or even surprised.

"You'll have to excuse Sam," the dark one said, her hand over the mouthpiece as she addressed him over the head of the small boy in front. "He's a law unto himself." She turned back to the phone. "Just apologising for Sam," she explained to the caller. "He's trying to shock people, as usual."

"They'll all be taller than me," the boy now at the head of the queue complained, and Philip could see that this would indeed be the case, whatever the child was talking about.

Like the previous customer, the child left disgruntled, but refrained from swearing, at least in anyone's hearing.

His mouth seeking hers. . . .

"Can I help you?"

Unwillingly, Philip's eyes turned to the young receptionist. "Newby," he said. "I believe you're expecting me."

"Mrs. Knight," the girl said, over her shoulder, "Mr. Newby's here, but Mr. Treadwell isn't in his office."

She was Andrew Knight's widow.

"Oh—thank you, Kitty," she said, and hurriedly finished

her call. She stood up and went out of sight for a moment, then came out of a corridor door. She was taller than he'd thought. Longer legs.

"I'm Caroline," she said. "Mr. Treadwell must have got held up—you know how it is on the first day. Everything that can go wrong does." She smiled.

"Philip." He shook the hand she extended, and frowned slightly. Her greeting had reminded him of something. It was always happening—things people said, did—sometimes just the tone of voice or a gesture, and he would be groping around in the void of his memory-gap. Bits were coming back, slowly. Nothing came back this time.

She smiled. "I heard a lot about you from Andrew," she said.

He had probably heard a lot about her. But he couldn't remember anything about that day. Or the days that followed it.

"I expect you'd like to go straight to the flat," she said.

The staff block turned out to be the smaller of the two buildings by the car park. That side of the grounds could be reached through a sort of alleyway that he hadn't noticed. It made the walk shorter, but he embarked with dread on the cobblestoned surface, and tried to look as though he was strolling, rather than picking his way. It was a difficult effect to achieve in the biting wind that whistled through the alley.

"Is your stuff in your car?" she asked, with a glance down the side road towards the car park. "We'll collar a child to bring it in."

They were at what had once upon a time been a single house, which had been split into two flats. Caroline opened the door, and let him in to the ground-floor rooms; large, cold, sparsely furnished, but adequate.

"You'll be sharing," she warned him. "Did someone tell you?"

He nodded.

"Well," she said. "At least you're here at last."

Philip should have started at the school almost eighteen

months before. He had come for the interview, had been offered and had accepted the job. He was to have started that September. Andrew Knight had been running him back to London when the accident had happened. He had known Andrew since their school days; they would surely have done a lot of catching-up, but he couldn't remember. He couldn't even remember whether or not he had met Caroline; from what she had said, he assumed that he hadn't.

Smiling, mouths meeting, the tip of his tongue moving over perfect teeth. . . .

She shivered. "Sam should have put the fire on," she said, going over to the gas fire, and kneeling in front of it. She looked up. "That's who you're sharing with," she said, her voice slightly apologetic. "Do you have matches?"

The driver of an oncoming car had seen fit to overtake the vehicle in front, on a road too narrow for such a manoeuvre, and hadn't survived the experience; neither had Andrew Knight. Philip had, but he had no recollection of it.

Trying not to lean too heavily on the stick, he knelt beside her. Kneeling was one of the few physical feats he could achieve without too much difficulty. He produced matches, and the jets lit with a quiet little explosion.

"This is terrible," she said, holding her hands out to the warmth. "We can't even offer you hot food today, I'm afraid—some crisis in the kitchen. But there's a pub just down the road that does lunches."

"It's better than last time," he said.

"It must have been dreadful for you," she said. "All that time in hospital."

"I survived." There *was* something familiar about her, he thought, and he coloured slightly, not wanting to admit any non-visible defects. "This is the first time we've met, isn't it?" he asked.

"Not quite," she said. "I came to see you in hospital."

"Things from before and after the accident are sometimes a bit hazy," he said.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "I didn't expect you to remember me. You were in a bad way."

Her lips parting to admit his questing tongue. . . .

He must have seen the car coming, he supposed; he must have closed his eyes and waited for the impact, but he could remember nothing. He couldn't even remember arriving at the school, or anything about the interview, except tiny, fragmentary, frustrating snatches. The last thing he really remembered was getting on the train to come here.

"It seems amnesia's not uncommon," he said. "Something to do with the pain. Your memory blanks it out."

"I wish mine could," she said.

"It was good of the school to keep the job open all this time," he said.

Unbuttoning her top button, slipping a hand inside her blouse. . . .

"The least they could do," she said.

"It wasn't the school's fault."

Cupping her warm, silk-encased breast in the palm of his hand. . . .

"Perhaps not," she said, handing him back the matches, and standing up. "Well—I expect you'd like to rest before you start looking round." And she left, closing the door behind her.

Philip closed his eyes, hearing the quiet roar of the gas fire. He leaned on the stick, and slowly, painfully, got to his feet, standing motionless for a moment. Then his hand gripped the wooden shaft of his stick, and he raised it above his head, bringing it down on the table with all the strength he possessed. Pain shot through his body as the stick shuddered in his hand, and he let it go, watching it roll along the floor.

Now he would have to pick the damn thing up again.

Barry Treadwell watched Diana Hamlyn from the window as she crossed the courtyard, towards the playing-field, on her way to the junior dormitory. He sighed, sliding open his

desk drawer, and feeling at the back for the bottle. He drank from it twice before replacing the cork, and putting it back. The phone rang as he did so; he answered it to Kitty, the receptionist.

"Mr. Treadwell—Mrs. Knight said to tell you that she's looking after Mr. Newby."

Damn. He'd forgotten all about him. "Good," he said. "Thank you, Kitty."

"And. . . ."

He knew he didn't want her to go on.

". . . there's been another theft," she said. "A ring."

Treadwell took the receiver from his ear, and sat with it in his hand for a moment; when he put it back, she was still on the other end of the line. "Where from?" he asked wearily.

"The ladies' loo," said Kitty. "Miss Castle says she took it off to wash her hands, and remembered about it as soon as she got back to the staff room. She went back, but it had gone."

"Is she sure?" he implored. Treadwell was fifty-six, but on the first day of term he always felt twenty years older. Now this.

"She's quite sure. She's here. Do you want her to come up?"

No, he didn't want her to come up. A boys' school shouldn't *have* ladies' loos, was his first reactionary thought. Then it wouldn't have ladies taking their rings off in them. So no one could steal them. He had been at the school for two and a half years. The previous head had agreed with the governors' odd notions when it came to staff; employing women was just one of them. If he had had anything to do with it, he would have fought the idea, just as he was fighting the suggestion that they admit girls. But he had already lost that, and the first of the female pupils would be starting next year whether he liked it or not.

The first woman had been Caroline Knight, who had come four years ago as some sort of package deal with her husband, Andrew. Two vacancies had been advertised, the newly married Knights had applied, and the idea had appealed, ap-

parently. It would not have appealed to Treadwell, but it had been an established fact when he arrived, and it seemed to have worked, for as long as it had lasted.

His heart felt heavy as he thought of Andrew Knight; deputy head, a good teacher, a good man. For poor Andrew had been wiped out in a car crash less than a year after Treadwell started, and Treadwell didn't want to think about that.

Anyway, Caroline had been the first, and save for the months immediately following Andrew's death she was level-headed and logical and even quite good company. But she had opened the door for the others, and now one of the damn women was saying her ring had been stolen.

"Send her up," he said.

He listened to her story, and had to admit that unless (as he tended to suspect) the woman had no brain at all, then she had taken her ring off in the ladies', walked along ten feet of corridor into the staff room, remembered, walked back, and it had gone. Yes, she said coyly when he asked her, there had been someone else in there, but she didn't want to accuse anyone.

But Treadwell knew, without her assistance, who it must have been. Perhaps if he called in the police it might bring her to her senses; he needn't voice his suspicions.

"We'll have to get the police this time," he said to her and, sighing, he picked up the phone.

"Oh," she said. "It wasn't my engagement ring." She waved her left hand at him to indicate its continuing presence on her finger. "I mean, it isn't valuable or anything."

No, he hadn't supposed it would be. The things that went missing never were.

He asked for the chief superintendent, and saw Miss Castle raise her eyebrows just a little. Why shouldn't he? The man was a friend of his. He wanted to be sure it was all handled properly, he thought, running a hand through springy grey hair. Nothing irritated the middle classes so much as having their sons suspected of theft.

He just wished it was one of their sons he suspected.

The canteen was virtually empty, much to Sam's delight. There were many things about teaching art in a small, fifth-rate private school that he didn't like; eating with blazered youths was just one of them.

"Salads?" he said incredulously. "What do you mean, there's only salads?"

"The electricity went off to the cookers," the girl explained patiently. "It's only just been fixed, because we couldn't get an electrician any sooner."

"You can't call salad *food*, woman! How do you expect me to exist on—?"

"Hello, Sam. Still complaining?"

Sam turned to see one of the few things he did like about the place.

She rubbed her cold hands together. "Oh, it's cold out there," she said, shivering.

"Good afternoon, Caroline," he said. "Don't expect any rib-sticking stew to take the cold out of your bones, whatever you do. We're being fed like sodding rabbits today."

"I know," she said. "So would you if you ever read any notices."

"This place has got more signs and notices than a bloody—" He broke off, being unable to think than what. "Besides, I'm an artist—I don't have to be able to read."

They picked up their salads, and went to a table beside one of the old-fashioned radiators. Sam sat down and looked reflectively at Caroline. "I take it that was Philip Newby at the office this morning?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

"Are you all right?"

She frowned. "Why shouldn't I be?" she asked.

"Well—it's a reminder, and all that."

Her eyes grew hard. "I hadn't forgotten," she said.

"No, well," said Sam, "you know what I mean. Anyway—what's he like?"

"He's all right, I suppose."

"Oh, come on! I've got to live with the guy—I want to know what he's like. For all I know he's queer."

"I don't think you need worry on that score."

"Oh—what's up? Did he make a pass at you?"

"Of course not!"

"Well—what didn't you like about him?"

"Nothing," she said, decidedly on the defensive. "He's all right, that's all. He didn't say much."

"There's something about him you didn't like," Sam persisted.

"Oh, for God's sake! I exchanged about three sentences with the man. He'd had a long drive, his leg was probably hurting him, you were the first member of staff that he clapped eyes on, and then he found out he was sharing a flat with you! No wonder he seemed a bit odd."

"He has to be odd," Sam said, "Or he wouldn't be eligible to work here." He looked up as some more members of staff wandered in. "Look at them," he said. "Flotsam and jetsam—we take what other schools throw out. How this place has staggered on for a hundred and fifty years is beyond me."

She looked up. "I wasn't thrown out by another school," she said.

No. But she had come as one of an inseparable pair; Sam knew for a fact that they had tried several schools before this one. Positively unnatural, in Sam's view, being so wrapped up in one another. Especially at their age. And she was an odd one herself. Blew hot and cold.

Maybe she fancied this Newby; he'd heard it took some people like that. Though it was hard to imagine Caroline fancying anyone. He'd taken her out once or twice since she had begun to get over Andrew's death, and the relationship had moved from entirely platonic through sub-teenage to long discussions about how she didn't feel ready. Sam didn't really mind. He liked her company, and if it developed beyond that—fine. But in between the outings and the discussions he

seemed to be the last person on earth that she wanted to spend time with. Perhaps he embarrassed her. He hoped he did. At any rate, she had never given the least hint that she was remotely interested in him other than as an occasionally necessary social accessory.

"How long was he in hospital?" he asked.

A little frown creased her forehead. "Who?" she asked.

"Newby." She knew damn well who.

"He was in and out for about a year, I believe. He's had dozens of operations." She gave a short sigh. "He's been at some sort of recuperation place for six months."

"It was hard luck," Sam said.

"Hard luck? Is that all you think it was?"

Sam shrugged. "What else? Some nutter comes out of a line of cars, Andrew gets killed, Newby gets crippled—bad luck. Fate, if you'd rather."

She just looked at him, not speaking, not arguing.

"Well," he said, "what would you call it?"

She sighed. "Forget it," she said.

"What's he doing for lunch?" Sam asked.

"I don't know. I told him he could get something hot at the pub."

Sam frowned. "Does he know where it is?" he asked.

"I don't know!"

"You mean you just left him to fend for himself?"

"Can we drop the subject of Philip Newby?"

Oh, well. Presumably his presence had upset her. But someone had better see that the man got fed.

"Are you going to this party tonight?" Caroline asked.

"If you are," he said. "Does cocktails with the Hamlyns turn you on?"

"Not really," she said. "But I suppose it would be a bit off not to celebrate his promotion."

"Robert Hamlyn—deputy head," said Sam, in tones of wonderment. "Who would credit it?"

"Robert's all right," said Caroline, determined to disagree with him about everything, obviously.