JULIE PARSONS EAGER DEASE

'Heart-stopping suspense.' JEFFERY DEAVER

JULIE PARSONS

EAGER TO PLEASE



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Praise for Julie Parsons' previous novels

Mary, Mary

'A great thriller writing talent.' DAILY MIRROR

'Parsons is a writer to watch.' Frances Fyfield, DAILY EXPRESS

'A psychological crime thriller which makes Patricia Cornwell read like *Thomas the Tank Engine*. Parsons writes beautifully, her style is fluid, the observations acute, the imagery at once real and poetic . . . This is an admirable, beautifully conceived work of a dark, compelling and original new voice.' SUNDAY INDEPENDENT

'Takes the psychological suspense thriller to places it rarely dares to go ... a first novel of astonishing emotional impact.' NEW YORK TIMES

'Narrated with stunning confidence and sophistication ... each scene is beautifully paced and plotted, even minor characters are deftly drawn and psychologically believable ... Her story is full of genuine surprises and fresh plot twists.' PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

The Courtship Gift

'The Courtship Gift superbly reinforces what has become obvious about author Parsons' talent: that she is one of those rare authors who can successfully combine psychological insight, literary style and heart-stopping suspense. Haunting, evocative, compelling.' Jeffery Deaver

'Parsons' book is a skilful, high-quality suspense thriller in the Ruth Rendell mode, a follow-up to her debut, *Mary*, *Mary*, which made the author a bestseller in her native Ireland.' THE TIMES

'It's great to read a well-written thriller set in Dublin's city streets ... this novel is gripping from start to finish. **** WOMAN'S WAY

'This is one of the best psychological thrillers around.'
FAMILY CIRCLE

'The kind of thriller which is difficult to put down and the final scenes stay with you long after you have closed the pages. Parsons is a truly talented writer and this novel has real impact.' IRISH NEWS

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Julie Parsons was born in New Zealand and has lived most of her adult life in Ireland. She has had a varied career – artist's model, typesetter, freelance journalist, radio and television producer – before turning to writing fiction.

She exploded on to the literary scene with her novels Mary, Mary (1998) and The Courtship Gift (1999) – both published to huge critical acclaim around the world.

She lives outside Dublin, by the sea, with her family.

By the same author

MARY, MARY

THE COURTSHIP GIFT

For John, for always and ever

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THE BEGINNING

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SHE REMEMBERED THE way it was the first time she ever saw the prison. It was through the mesh that covered the windows of the van in which they brought her from the Four Courts that day all those years ago. It was winter. It was late afternoon, early evening. Rush hour in Dublin. It was dark. Or it should have been dark. Instead it was very bright everywhere. Shining white lights flooding the tarmacadam when the van stopped at the gate, so she could see out, and see the high cross and the gravestones set into the scraggy grass.

What's that? she asked the prison officer.

The tall well-built woman shrugged and said, Kevin Barry. Monument to him.

Who? She tried to think. Who?

You know, Kevin Barry, the hero of the War of Independence. He was hanged here and a load of others too. Against that wall.

She tried to stand up to get a better look, but the officer tugged at the chain that joined them at the wrist.

Where do you think you're going, eh? Sit down and mind yourself.

A snigger ran around the van. She looked at them all, the other women who'd made the short trip from the court to the prison. She had tried to sit away from them, to keep a distance between their tracksuits and trainers and her best black skirt and jacket, to keep the smoke from the cigarettes that drooped from their mouths and tattooed fingers away from her nostrils and eyes. But there was no distance in the van, no means to separate her and her shame from them.

And then the van began to move again, through the high metal gates, past the tall stone building that looked like a church, the cluster of portakabins at its side, and towards the metal cage that surrounded the entrance. It was interesting, she thought, remembering back, how quickly she had become used to the metal. It was everywhere. Steel, she supposed. A malleable alloy of iron and carbon was the way her architectural textbooks had described it, capable of being tempered to many different degrees of hardness. Incapable of rust. Beautiful too when used with glass the way her heroes, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright, had employed it. To create palaces of light and space. Ugly now in this place of containment, where it couldn't be pulled apart and used as a weapon of defence or attack. Interesting too how she had adapted to all the hard surfaces. The tiled floors, the bars on the windows, the upright chairs, the wooden doors, three inches thick, decorated with locks and spyholes. Even the pad, as the padded cell was known, wasn't soft. Walls, floors covered with hard rubber. Nothing she could use to damage herself, or anyone else, that first night. After they had taken away her clothes and handed out her prison issue — a clean bra and pants, as if she needed them. A tracksuit, as if she ever wore one. A night-gown and a dressing gown, as if she didn't have her own, at home, lying across the bed, her own bed, that she had hoped she'd sleep in that night.

That she had hoped she'd sleep in that night. That she had been sure she'd come home to. That at the end of the trial the jury would believe her. That she hadn't done what the prosecution said. That she didn't take the 12-gauge shotgun and shoot him, first of all in the right thigh, severing the femoral artery so his blood pumped out on the floor. Then as he screamed and weakened and fell back that she didn't shoot him again, this time in the groin, tearing his genitals apart, so there was a lot more blood, spattering her clothes with small tear-shaped drops. And some of the jury, two, to be precise, believed her and not them. One of the women, older, pale-faced, wept as the foreman stood and delivered his verdict.

How do you find the defendant Rachel Kathleen Beckett? Guilty or not guilty of the murder of Martin Anthony Beckett?

Guilty, your honour, by a majority of ten to two.

And the sentence?

The judge with the ruddy face and flabby jowls leaned forward across the bench.

I have no choice in this case, when the verdict is guilty of murder, there is a mandatory sentence of life. And this I shall impose on you, Rachel Kathleen Beckett.

Life or death? Which began and which ended on

that cold November afternoon twelve years ago? She still could not decide.

Form P30. That was what it was called, the stiff piece of cardboard which was slotted into the outside of her cell door. Everyone had one. It stated registered number, name and religion. It stated when committed and for what sentence. And it gave the particulars of discharge, sentence expiration and earliest possible date of release, with a box beside for the day, the month and the year. The other women, those who weren't lifers, had numbers written in the boxes. But she didn't. Hers were blank. She stood and looked at the piece of cardboard, put up her hand to touch it, then pulled it from its slot and tore it into tiny pieces, shoving them into the pocket of her jeans. Behind her she heard the laughs, the taunts, the insults, and heard the shout of the officer she remembered from the van.

What do you think you're doing? Who do you think you are? As she grabbed her by the arm, pulled her into the office, dragged the pieces of cardboard from her pocket and said, Here, you, Miss high and mighty. Think you're better than everyone else, do you? Think you can do what you like with prison property. Well, now, have another think while you put it all back together again.

Handed her the roll of Sellotape, made her stay there in the stuffy little office, until the jigsaw was complete, then forced her back out on to the landing. The women lined up on either side, jeering and shouting as she walked up the first flight of stairs to her cell. She took the piece of cardboard and put it

back where it had been. And looked down and away as the officer, Macken, that was her name, said loudly so that everyone else could hear, You'd better start using your brains and using your education, Beckett, and finding out how best to please us. You'd better be bloody eager to please me, or else, Beckett, your life sentence is going to last a lot longer than anyone else's. Do you hear me now? Do I make myself plain?

Pushed her into the cell, followed her and said, It's a funny thing about time, isn't it? Right now it's standing still for you. The hands of the clock aren't moving at all. And they won't until you get your attitude straight. Do you hear me now? Do you read me loud and clear?

She was right about that, Macken the bitch, as she was right about most things. It was such a long time, her first night and first day. Her first week, month, year. So long till Christmas, Easter, New Year. So long that she hardly noticed her daughter, Amy's birthday. And the anniversary of Martin's death. When all she wanted to do was stay in her cell, turn her face to the wall and weep. Because she missed him, because she had loved him. Because she had lost him and everything else.

She didn't remember much of any of that year, or the one after that or the one after that. Time passing had no meaning for her now. No meaning at all. The only thing that meant anything was the mood, the atmosphere, the feelings around her. Sometimes they were good. Most times they were bad. What was it all about, she wondered, these waves of tension that washed up and down the landings, dragging the