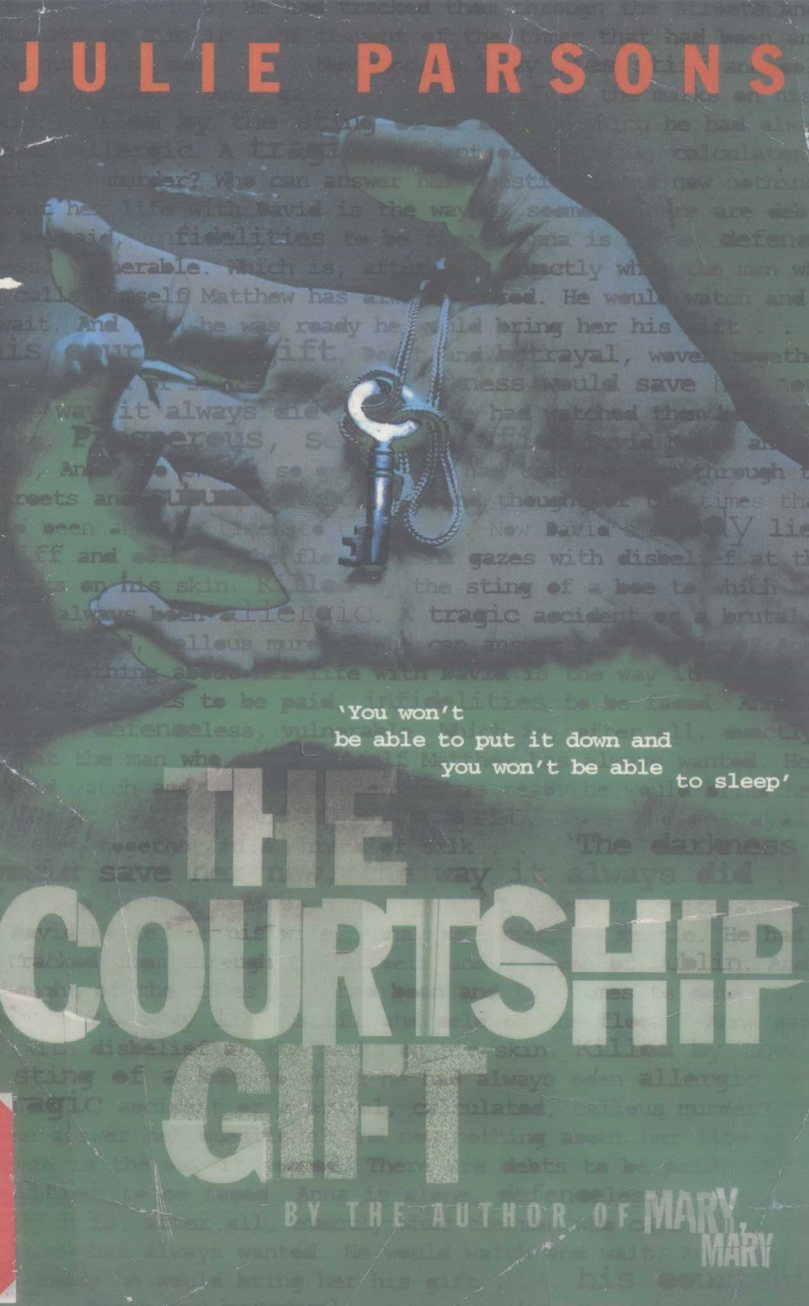


# JULIE PARSONS



## THE COURTSHIP GIFT

'You won't  
be able to put it down and  
you won't be able to sleep'

BY THE AUTHOR OF **MARY, MARY**

JULIE PARSONS

THE  
COURTSHIP  
GIFT

PAN BOOKS



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'*The Courtship Gift* is 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.'

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'Her books are powerful psychological thrillers and tell of a different, dangerous world.'

*Sunday Independent*

'[Julie Parsons] is excellent at creating a guilty thrill for the reader . . . a novelist of some ingenuity.'

*Sunday Tribune*

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

*By the same author*

MARY, MARY

For Harriet  
for the future



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## CHAPTER ONE

MICHAEL HAD WATCHED them both for weeks. The man and his wife. Watched them in the tall red-brick house in the busy street that backed on to the river. Stood in the park on the far bank, saw the shadowy figures as they moved about their business. The man, tall and spare, his hair grey, his face thin and lined. The woman, younger, with long legs and a small waist and round apple-like breasts that he had seen just once, as she stepped from the shower and reached for a towel.

He had watched them at home and at work. Seen him leave his car in the reserved space in the multi-storey car park and walk quickly to the lift, a stack of beige files crammed under his arm, his briefcase banging against his leg. Seen her rushing from the house with a pile of books and a big wicker basket. Strapping them on to the carrier of an old bicycle, humming a tune as she put on her gloves and snuggled a soft woollen hat down on her fair hair. Watched her in the museum where she spent her days, the yellows, reds, blues of the dresses she wore reflected back from the glass and polished mahogany of the rows and rows of display cases.

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Watched him at lunches and dinners. In high-ceilinged rooms, pools of soft light refracting on silver cutlery and sparkling crystal. And the men with whom he ate, self-satisfied, knowing, fingers clicking for service, bread rolls gutted on white tablecloths, red wine stains in interlinking circles. Listened to his laugh, loud, confident, watched for the small signs of insecurity, the face in repose, hollows under the eyes, lines deepening around the mouth.

Knew him. Waited for him. Waited for her. Until the house was quiet, then slipped in through the back door. Careless, unlocked. Stood in the rooms filled with heavy furniture. Gilt mirrors, mahogany sideboards. A grand piano in the bay window of the sitting room. Paintings, faded, dusty. Figures in eighteenth-century dress. Walked upstairs quietly, slowly. Opened each of the doors in turn. Found the large bed, neatly made. Books on a table. A basket filled with discarded clothing. Bent to run his hands through silk and linen and lace. And lay down, his head on the pillow where hers had been, his arms folded over his chest, fingers trailing on the cotton coverlet, his legs crossed at the ankle.

And thought of the times that had been, and the times to come.

## CHAPTER TWO

IT COULDN'T HAVE been an accident. She just didn't believe it. Accidents don't happen like that. But the Guards had told her, off the record, of course, after the post-mortem, that there would have to be an inquest but the preliminary findings seemed clear. David had died of anaphylactic shock. From a bee-sting.

'You did know, didn't you, that he was allergic? And he knew, too, didn't he?'

And she had said yes, of course. And remembered how he had laughed about it, said that it was great, that it meant he never had to do any gardening. Said that he couldn't eat honey either, hated the taste, the cloying stickiness, hated the thought of the bee sucking the nectar from the flower into its honey stomach, then regurgitating a drop, holding it between its jaws, opening and closing its mouth until the water in it evaporated, and it became concentrated sugar.

'Ugh, disgusting.'

Refused to accept the importance of bees in pollination, all the useful attributes they possessed.

'The cruelty of the hive. Don't you agree? The way the bees are selected. Controlled by the queen, and the

way the new queen stings, kills all her rivals. It's like some kind of fascist state. Don't you agree?'

One of the first conversations they ever had. Years ago, fifteen at least, maybe more. When she was a teenager, and he was one of her aunt Isobel's favourite visitors. One bright summer day when the garden hummed. Alive with movement. Wings beating, mouth parts opening and closing. The whole cycle of birth, death, destruction, renewal taking place. Invisible to their human eyes. Unheard by their human ears.

And she had thought to impress him. Told him that she was going to be an entomologist when she left school.

'A scientist, eh?' He had sat back in the wooden deck chair, taking a swallow from the tall glass at his elbow, the tone in his voice mocking. 'Rather you than me.'

And she had stood up, annoyed, and turned on her heel, glad all the same that she was wearing her bathing suit, the stretchy material tight, riding up just enough to show a firm half-moon of pale skin.

All those years ago. Different people now. Transformed by their experiences. Old and weary David looked as he lay on his side, his arms and legs curled up, as if to protect himself. His grey hair stood up stiffly from his forehead. He had pulled off his shirt, and it lay beside him in a crumpled heap. The muscles of his chest and back were flaccid and withered, his skin very white apart from the angry red patches all over his upper body. His eyes were wide open, their bright blueness dulled, as if a fine gauze curtain had been drawn across them.

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But still the chemistry of his body unchanged by age. Still the deadly reaction to the venom that the bee had pumped into him. She touched his cheek with her hand. His skin was cold and hard. It reminded her suddenly of an indiarubber ball, small and bouncy, that she had had when she was a child. She remembered hitting it with a tennis racket, high up into the sky, almost as high as the roof of Isobel's house. Standing, gazing upwards, trying to see where it would land. Spinning around, her eyes blinded by the glare from the sun. Sickened suddenly by the movement. As she was sickened now by the feel of David's face, the look in his eyes and the rank smell that filled the small room.

## CHAPTER THREE

OF COURSE IT was intended that she should find the body. That was the way with a courtship gift. Michael had read about it in one of those children's encyclopaedias that his granny kept for him, for when he came over to visit in the summer, during the holidays, from London and school. It was called *The Wonder Book of Why and What*, with a picture of a boy with very short hair and a white shirt and a model aeroplane on the cover. Granny had a stack of them in the bookcase behind the black-and-white telly. His mother's name was written inside, in big looping letters, but the books didn't look as if anyone had ever read them. The pages were stiff and clean, although they smelt like everything else in his gran's house. Of damp, and fried food, and the disinfectant she used in the outside toilet.

The bit about the courtship gift was in one of the illustrated sections. Insects, all shapes and sizes. What they ate, how they built their nests, how they mated. He was interested in that. He knew about mating, insects, animals, people. It was how his mother earned her living, most nights, although she didn't have any



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more babies. He was supposed to be asleep, in the cold little room at the back. And she was in the front room, where it was always warm, and the light came from the pink lamp on the table. She usually waited until she thought he was asleep before she went out. And usually he was asleep, but there were always the noises that dragged him back. The front door banging. Heavy steps on the narrow stairs. Men's voices, laughing. Then a wedge of light from the landing that fell across his face, as she tiptoed into his room, rummaging in the bottom of the wardrobe for the box where she kept her money. Holding it up, so its scratched tin glinted, as she turned the little key, and put away the folded notes carefully, then put it back beneath a pile of old blankets.

Once he got out of bed and crept to her door and listened. Once he pushed his toe against the chipped cream paint and the door opened. A man was standing in front of the fire, no clothes on, and his thing sticking out. Red and hard. He put his hand up to his mouth to stop the giggles, the man looked so funny. And then he saw his mother. She had no clothes on either.

It was mating. That was what it was. Like the dogs in the alley, and the cats in the corrugated iron shed in the back yard, the insects in the book.

And that was where the courtship gift came from. He'd read about it, how the male had to give the female a present, so she would choose him instead of any of the others. He might give her a piece of a flower petal or a seed wrapped up in a parcel of silk, or it might be the body of another insect, a fly, perhaps,