

## TENDER

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TENDER



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*For Holly and Sam*

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# CONTENTS

1974 The Last Person To Swim The Channel, Ever	1
1977: Deep Water	14
1984: A Man In Space	26
1989: Being Nice	36
1995: There's A Hole In Everything	50
1999: The Pretty Horse	61
1999: The Realm of the Possible	75
2000: Hiatus	88
2000: Gladness	99
2001: Houdini	110
2001: War and Fish	123
2002: On The Heart, and Other Muscles	132
2004: The Death of a Friend of a Friend	145
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	154



# 1974 THE LAST PERSON TO SWIM THE CHANNEL, EVER

DAN CAME IN, sat beside the bed like a doctor with a patient, and said, 'I'll be leaving.' The reading lamp was glowing around his stomach, hiding his face in grainy half-darkness. 'I'll be leaving.' Bent towards her, his head at a solicitous angle, his voice apologetic but firm. And that was him gone. Two years in her life, just a cameo role, as it turned out.

Ali heard the door close, lay perfectly still for five seconds, then got out of bed, pulled on jeans and a vest, fetched what she needed from a kitchen drawer, and let herself quietly out of the flat. Down the stairs at a discreet trot and on to the street. A glimpse of his red bomber at the corner. He was turning off Astley Street, towards Grange Road. She followed.

It was quiet, and she had to go cautiously. For a while she walked behind two young men with bulky rucksacks. Their labels boasted they'd been to Hong Kong, Sydney and Amsterdam. She peered round them, just ten steps away from Dan, then was left stalled and exposed as they veered left unexpectedly. Only a doorway saved her when Dan paused and looked back. (Why did he look back? Had he caught a glimpse of her in the wing mirror of a parked car? Or had he sensed her more mysteriously, through some intimate telepathy? Perhaps he'd smelt her; that just out of

## TENDER

bed, toasty, seedy smell, mingling now with an edge of something extra. Anticipation.)

A couple arm-in-arm provided her next cover as she stalked him. She watched Dan's back in the frame of their engrossed faces. He was intermittently hidden when they kissed, lips colliding, recklessly moving forward with eyes only for each other.

He was near his flat now, and she abandoned the sickening couple and approached as he fumbled for his key, her stride swift and certain. She let him fit the key into the lock, she let him turn it, then she was behind him, squashed up against him and using her momentum to hustle him inside. She kicked the door shut with her heel, pressed him against the wall. She had perhaps a second of startle-time in which to act. The kitchen knife was out and ready. A long, thin blade, surgical. She stuck it in him without hesitation. There was resistance from his jacket and his shirt, then an easy, lubricated slide. He made a sound like a cough, then sighed, an exhalation without meaning, like air from a puncture. She held him as he sagged in her arms, suddenly mortal, fragile, and heavy. They sank together to their knees, Ali still holding him, and he slumped, leaning on her. They sat together like that while the life drained out of him, and she whispered, 'All right, you're leaving, don't struggle my love, you're leaving now.'

Stop. Stop this and rewind.

She didn't hold Dan sagging, mortal etcetera, she didn't stab him, didn't push him through the doorway. She did follow him through the streets, but briefly, because she was only wearing a T-shirt and a towel she'd grabbed and wrapped around her middle. Barefoot on the cold pavement, shivering, half-naked, feeling almost the second she stepped outside like an idiot. What did she think she was

## TENDER

doing? She paused on a corner and watched him cross the road, turn and disappear, oblivious. She stood a few seconds, holding the moment, wanting to prolong it, then she went back to her flat, and back to bed. She lay still, staring at the ceiling, and came up with the sequence with the kitchen knife, worked through it first quickly then slowly, toying with each beat, lovingly crafting the short tale of vengeance and passion.

‘Yeah, but I meant it.’ She banged the locker door shut. ‘I could have killed him. Seriously.’

Steph nodded. ‘Good, yeah. Kill him and jump up and down on his grave. But let’s swim first.’

‘Next time I meet anyone, I don’t want to feel anything for him. Seriously. It’s my new plan. First sign of passion, run a mile.’

Her toes curled over the end of the board as she leant forward, towards the moment of falling, looking down thirty feet, overcoming her body’s fear. She was twenty-five. She could feel her blood moving, as if it was lurching away from the edge. Dan had let a decent time elapse after her birthday, two weeks, then he’d ambushed her. Steph was a small, tilted face in the water. *What am I going to do now?* She was leaning out over the drop. *What am I going to do?* She loved the moment when the fall transformed, as it began, into a flawless dive. Space rushed past her, and she pierced the water’s surface with her fingertips and sliced a path for herself deep inside, angling her body so that she rose smoothly and slowly back to the surface, reflecting the arc of her graceful plummet.

She began a steady breaststroke down the pool, Steph trailing behind her. She was no longer any particular age,

## TENDER

she was no longer hurt or even female, she was just a swimmer, county standard, maybe better. She turned and switched to crawl, feeling that she could swim for ever, completing the second half of the length underwater where she had the impression that she was cleansing herself of something, where she might have shed a tear or two but it was hard to tell because she was in a world of liquid, and her next length was a flamboyant butterfly, feet joined at the ankles, punishing the water, arms thrusting up from the surface as if in triumph.

She settled into a rhythm, alternating breaststroke and crawl, up and down for half an hour. Ali never thought about much when she swam, but the action of swimming seemed to loosen the jigsaw in her brain, because when she stopped she often found that questions had been clarified and answers arrived at. Steph's ungainly stroke eventually brought her up alongside, and they hung in the deep end, kicking idly at the choppy water.

'I'm giving this up,' she said. 'All this effort for no return. It's not what I want.'

'Liar,' said Steph.

Ali couldn't argue. She only had to catch a whiff of chlorine to imagine herself shaving a fraction from a world record as she stretched to touch the end of the pool, moments ahead of some thwarted Australian. She made little detonations in the water with her heels. 'It's not what I want any more. Everything else suffers for this dream that's never going to happen. Too risky. My new strategy with men, and life in general, is avoid getting hurt.'

She hauled herself abruptly out, climbed on to the low board and threw herself off it, half-slipping, catching her foot on the end, and belly-flopping loudly, slapping the water with her stomach. When she limped back to the

## TENDER

changing room and peeled her costume off, she found her skin was raw and red, smarting.

Dan was skinning her. He used a device which, though clearly medical, looked like a sharp, slimmed-down potato peeler. He was careful about it, swabbing each area with alcohol-soaked cotton wool before and after. She lay still, paralysed somehow, while he got on with his work. There was nothing vicious or unkind about it, he was thorough and conscientious, making a shallow cut and teasing the sharp blade into it, then paring long, ragged-edged flaps of skin, one after another.

Ali woke up screaming. Even when she knew she was awake she wept and panted for several minutes, hot and scared.

She turned on a light, lay still, took deep breaths. She'd lost a boyfriend and a lifelong ambition in one day. Was she going to go mad? She felt adrift. She got up, pushed her hair back from her face, and stared at herself in the mirror. Her skin was pale and damp. What path brought her here? She thought how sad she'd have been ten years earlier to see herself now, broken-hearted and sweaty. 'You're a failure,' she told her reflection. Maybe she should swim out to sea, far out, and just sink. Just sink. 'What's happening to you? Are you going mad?'

Her words seemed not to vanish; they hung near her in the silent room.

Three in the morning. Sometimes if she was awake in the small hours she'd read her text books. Sports injuries and their treatments, rehabilitation protocols following various operations, long lists of muscles; all this would soothe her back to sleep. If she ever had children she

## TENDER

thought she might call them Trapezius and Gluteus. She'd mentioned this to Dan recently; unwisely, in retrospect.

She picked up the phone, dialled, and her brother answered on the second ring. She could see his arm emerging from under the duvet, the light probably still on, the book he'd dropped when he fell asleep lying beside him on the pillow.

'Is that Ali?' he said.

'How did you know?'

'Lucky guess. What's up, sweet?'

When they were growing up, Frank was hardly ever there. He'd be off on his bike rides, he'd be playing football, or he'd have gone fishing. He couldn't cast properly, sometimes he'd throw the line in underarm, but he loved to sit on his folding seat gazing at the skin of water, watching it dimple and swell. She was drilling up and down the Olympic-sized pool, concentrated effort from her toes to her fingernails, while he was slumped in that seat, head and shoulders drooping, as if gravity was heavier by the river.

'Bad dreams,' she said. 'Dan left me.'

'Good. Never liked him. Want me to come over?'

'You never liked him?'

'Didn't like to say, you being so crazy about him.'

Over the years Frank had metamorphosed somehow, like a slow-ripening fruit, into a good brother. Ali had a theory that it was to do with him being unhappy, and usually single. These two things made space in his life for her. She'd have liked to return the favour, improve his self-esteem, perhaps with a few exercises, the way she could improve the strength of his hamstrings. Ever since he'd disappeared she'd worried about him, felt he was liable to come to harm.

'So, shall I come over? I'll come.'

'No. Don't worry.'

## TENDER

'You come to me, then, tomorrow.'

'I'm working tomorrow. Don't worry, I just wanted to hear your voice.'

They exchanged a few more words, and she put the phone down.

He'd disappeared when he was nine and she was seven. Just abruptly gone missing with no warning, no big row with the parents, nothing. His bed was unslept in, his money box empty and some clothes had gone. After the second night, they began to think he was dead. Posters went up in town, the pond was dragged, and strangely-clad police divers lowered themselves gingerly into the canal. Their mother got an unfocused look in her eyes, and her words came out clipped and harsh, as if it was an effort to let them escape.

Ali shook her head, as if trying to shake the memory loose. At least she was no longer obsessing about Dan. She lay down again, closed her eyes. Slept.

Monday morning, sports injury clinic. Cold muscles used to climbing stairs and getting off sofas had been given sudden, vicious workouts by overweight men who thought they were still schoolboy-fit. Mostly she dispensed advice—sit with the limb up, put ice on it, lift your leg and pull your toes back towards your stomach, warm-up gently next time.

Today, she was less patient than usual. She had a Sunday morning footballer with a thigh strain, lying on his stomach, bending his right leg at the knee. 'My name's Bill,' he said. She resisted the urge to reply *So?* He was her age, Dan's age, the skin of his legs a pasty white beneath copious hair. She yanked his foot down further towards his

## TENDER

thigh and he yelped in pain. He turned over and she expected recriminations, but he was laughing. 'Enjoy your work, do you?' She put him on the wobble-board, made him stand on his bad leg, adjusting his balance. 'I get the feeling you're in a bad mood,' he smiled. Then the weighted boot. He patiently lifted and lowered it, testing the strength of the weakened muscle. 'It's horrible isn't it, having to work when you're feeling shitty?'

Men tried to chat her up all the time. They made jokes about bondage, and dominant women. They asked did she get turned on, with all this bare male flesh around? They suggested drinks, dinner, an assignation in the changing room. Before Dan she'd twice gone for a drink, and it hadn't come to anything.

She squeezed Bill's thigh as he lifted the weight, thumbs probing down the length of his hamstring. She'd missed her chance as a swimmer. At her last race, three teenagers had clustered in the changing room, chatting and laughing, and she'd watched their animated faces, the way they leaned in towards each other, and felt her irrelevance. She couldn't match their self-belief. She remembered herself at their age, floating on her back after fifty hard lengths, dreaming of the podium, the interviews, knowing that the next level of accomplishment would always be attainable, with just a little more practise, another surge of effort.

Her words were directed towards his knee. 'No more football for a fortnight. Put frozen peas on it every evening.'

'I don't want to be personal, but are you all right?'

She brought herself back, gave him a lips-only smile. 'Peachy.'

He looked at her for a moment, then they both looked at her hands.

## TENDER

'I'm having a party next Friday. If you felt like it, it would be great to see you there.'

What was his name? Bill. She met his eyes again. Brown, long lashes. He was smiling back at her now, but without much confidence. No smarm at least, no obvious guile. She was going to say 'No', one short syllable to keep this man out of her life. But saying 'Yes' would be braver, would be a sign that she wasn't going to subside into a period of weird dreams, stalking and late night panic attacks. She could take Steph. She could change her mind. She was in charge of her destiny.

'Sure,' she said.

Her hands lay still on his thigh. They both looked at them again, and she saw that he had an erection. *Great, she thought. He plays football, his conversation is limp and nervous, and he gets a stiffy when a woman touches him. He's a teenage boy, and I'm going to his party.*

A small package was waiting for her at home. She edged a fingernail under the tightly wrapped sellotape and tugged at it, then got her teeth to it, nibbling at it like corn on the cob. Was it from Dan? What would he be sending her? Maybe a gift. She paused, checked the smudged postcode, considered the size and weight of the parcel. Maybe a red box, containing leaves of tissue paper within which lay . . . surely not a ring? If it was a ring, she'd send it back to him. He'd have to try harder than that, if he expected forgiveness. Arsehole. She went to the fridge, searching for alcohol. Nothing. She only wished she was rich when she opened her fridge. She wanted expensive white wine, good cheese, ham as thin as the notional tissue paper. She had gin in a cupboard, but no tonic, so she splashed some on three ice cubes and returned to the half-opened package.

## TENDER

The torn envelope leaked stuffing on to her lap.

*Arsehole* was good. Maybe she'd left mourning behind and moved definitively on to anger.

She swigged gin and pulled a cassette out of the envelope. No message, no card, no red box, no tissue paper thin as parma ham, no ring. She put the tape in her machine and turned it on.

*'Dan's a shit and you're worth better.'* Frank's voice. *'Dan's a shit and you're worth better. Dan's a shit and you're worth better.'* It continued in the same way. After a while she fast-forwarded it. *'Dan's a shit and you're worth better.'* It went on for forty-five minutes. She found a patch in the middle where he began to sing it, but mostly it was just intoned, slow and steady like a mantra, over and over.

She'd said she wanted to hear his voice, so he'd sent her his voice. This was like him. He didn't find it odd to sit in front of his tape recorder for three quarters of an hour droning the same seven words, he didn't wonder if perhaps she might find it unhelpful, he just had an impulse and acted on it. She dropped the tape in the bin.

The nine year old Frank finally turned up in Weston-super-Mare. He'd had an impulse to go to the seaside. His pocket money paid for an early morning train, and off he went. He'd only bought a single, and he didn't have the money to get home, so at the end of the day he slept on the beach. He told her if you use sand as a pillow it feels like insects crawling on your cheek. He didn't phone home because he thought his parents would be angry about having to pay his train fare. He told her he was planning to make the money for his return trip; he was going to get a job on the pier, or leading the donkeys. A man on a tractor cleaning the beach found him, and gave him a ride to the police station.

## TENDER

Frank was an asshole too. How many did she need in her life?

Bill's party turned out to be eight people in a one bedroom flat. Ali had nearly not come. She'd chosen what to wear—short, turquoise shift dress—she'd put a face on and had a gin complete with tonic, and then she'd checked what was on TV, thinking about an evening in. He might be mad or evil, on his own, just waiting for her. He might be really boring. She thought about moving on again. Mourning, followed by anger, followed by . . . what? Followed by diving back into the big world, by taking a few strong, confident strokes in unaccustomed waters. She looked in the mirror to check that she didn't look heartbroken and sweaty. 'Dan's a shit and I'm worth better.' She left quickly, before the dangling words could spook her.

Bill was renting half a house in an unpromising terrace. She could see from his face that he'd thought she wouldn't turn up. He had a brown and orange beanbag and film posters on the wall. *Mean Streets*. *The Godfather*.

She put her smile on. 'Here I am.'

With her back to the room, she took two quick shots of tequila, just to get rolling. The music was all right, there was plenty to drink, but the people all knew each other, and there weren't enough of them. Perhaps this was the wrong first step, or the wrong direction altogether. What was she doing, giving up her passions? Surely that couldn't be right?

'You drink that stuff like it's medicine.'

She nearly jumped. She turned, and there he was.

'You screw your face up, like this.' He made a face like a walnut.

'This isn't a party,' she said, 'it's a gathering.'

## TENDER

'Some people couldn't come.'

She nodded. *Don't nod*, she said to herself. *Speak*. 'What do you do?'

'I'm a writer. I'm working on a calling-card script.'

Ali nodded again, like she knew what he was talking about.

'I need another,' she said.

After that she spent some time talking to Bill's friend the teacher, Bill's friend the student, Bill's friend the unemployed actor. She forgot their names the second she heard them. She told one of them all about Dan, how she'd had this fantasy about stabbing him, not lots of times, just once, because frenzied stabbing would suggest she was out of control and the point of the fantasy was that she was in control. The teacher / student / actor who she was talking to seemed to think that this made sense.

Later. 'The thing is,' she was back with Bill, taking him on as if he'd already disagreed with her, 'you can't know people. You think you can, but you can't. It's like we've been cursed, one of those spiteful Greek God things—you can love each other, you can have sex, you can trust each other and have children together, but you can't ever know each other. Not really, not deeply.'

The music was low, people were sprawled on the floor passing a joint, but Ali and Bill were standing in a corner. She suspected she was haranguing him, but he didn't seem to mind.

'Maybe by the time you're in love and you've had children and all that,' he said, 'maybe you just do know each other by then.'

'I don't know, I doubt it.'

'I don't know either, I've never had children.'

She laughed. 'Stupid. But have you been in love?'

## TENDER

He looked at her, all big-eyed and serious. She thought *Uh oh.*

'I think maybe I'm working on it,' he said.

She began to feel sober. She thought *Here we go. Think of something to say, something polite, ease you both out of this.*

'I'm thinking of swimming the Channel.'

He looked surprised.

'And I'd like to be the last person ever to do it, because it's not enough any more just to swim it, I want it to be impossible for some reason for anyone to do it after me.'

It was a long sentence, a lot of words. She wasn't sure how clear she'd been. His head was looming over her now like the moon. She wondered if she could control her sweat glands.

'I'm adrift,' she said.

His hand touched her cheek. 'Anyway, I think you can know people.' He was almost whispering.

She had to speak quickly if she was going to. She thought, *Maybe it's better when your heart doesn't hiccup and your brain doesn't blank. Maybe it's better.* She didn't speak. His face was aiming at hers. She put her arms round him, and as he lowered his lips on to her lips, she had the slow and not unpleasant sensation of a sea mist creeping over her and around her, enveloping. She couldn't imagine him flaying her. She couldn't imagine wanting to murder him. She tried, but she couldn't.

## 1977: DEEP WATER

HE EVEN FOUGHT like a dancer. Kicked the fat man in the face, spun, and landed poised and ready to take on the second one. Swayed out of his way when he lunged, grabbed his arm and two-stepped behind him, twisting his wrist so the knife clattered to the ground. Shoved his face into the wall, picked up the knife and suggested we run. That was fine with me.

At that point I'd only been on the island two days, and I'd already put this fortnight at the top of my list of best ever holidays. The ferry had lurched towards the harbour with me and Ali leaning over the rail like we were trying to get our noses over a finishing line. The cool morning sun bouncing off the waves, the little white houses huddling on the hill like sheep. Perfect moment. She had yoghurt, honey and fruit for breakfast. I had a boiled egg with the shiniest yolk I'd ever seen.

'Can we live here?' she said. 'Let's live here and tend goats.'

'I like the way you're thinking.'

We walked up a few winding streets and found a house offering rooms. Fell on to the sheets and dozed for a bit. Made love. Showered, packed a bag with books, towels, sun cream, wandered off and found the beach. Lunch, then more sunbathing, swimming, reading. I watched wind-surfers, their backs arched in grim effort. *No thanks, no grim effort for me, no effort of any kind.* Wandered back to our room, showered and dozed, then back to the harbour for drinks, sunset, dinner. Someone took a picture for us. We held

## TENDER

hands and grinned foolishly at the camera. The perfect moment had developed and blossomed, like they almost never do, into a perfect day. It was our first anniversary.

‘Congratulations,’ she said.

I touched her glass with mine. ‘Congratulations yourself.’

‘Seriously,’ she said. ‘This is Paradise. Let’s live here. Why not?’

We discussed it as if we meant it, playing with the fantasy, as if we lived lives free of ambition or responsibility, as if every day we spent here would be as good as the one just finishing.

Second day, much the same as the first. In the evening, after eating, Ali headed back to the room, tired, while I decided to explore a little. I don’t know how it happened. Two drunk blokes; the fat one called me a wanker. I don’t know why—something about me snagged his attention and pissed him off. I didn’t say anything, I sneered and kept walking, and that made them angry. It was a dark alley. The whole small town was dark alleys at night. I remember the honey smell of jasmine, the oddness of something so delicate and sweet coexisting with what happened next. The fat one grabbed my shoulder, yanked me round and hit me. I staggered back to see a knife coming out and a third man appearing behind them. I couldn’t believe it. I was at the centre of a perfect world, then I was in a nightmare. No pause between the two. But the third man wasn’t with them. Kick, spin, sway. Grab, twist, shove. The fight with the syntax of a dance. He acrobatically beat them both up and suggested we run. We ran.

Back on the harbour front, the Mediterranean jostling the quay and whispering, we shook hands.

‘Bill,’ I said. ‘Thank you.’

## TENDER

‘My name’s Loomis,’ he said. American. ‘Hope you didn’t mind me butting in.’

I laughed, not too hysterically, I hoped. Of course I despise all that—being good at hitting people. Why would anyone learn to fight like that? What would be the point? If you want to stay fit you might as well jog. Of course I envy it too.

‘Sure you’re all right?’ he said.

‘Fine.’

We parted. My walk back was fast but stuttery, pausing at corners, hurrying between them, like an amateurish thief.

Morning, and Ali rolled over and smiled sleepily at me. Her hand found my cock and squeezed it.

‘I suppose it’s another gorgeous day?’ she murmured.

‘It’s starting well.’

I shaved while I told her what had happened. Raking the blade over my stretched skin, thinking about knives. She sat on the chair with the saggy seat, silent until I’d finished.

‘Horrible,’ she said. She came up behind me and held me in something like a full Nelson, her face on my shoulder, kissing my neck.

‘Let’s get down to the beach and wash it off.’

I watched faces as we walked along the harbour front. Or, I glanced at faces, wanting to notice but not be noticed. What was I going to do if I saw them? Fat man and knife man. Nothing, probably. But if I saw them in daylight, among ordinary people, ordinary activity going on around us, I hoped they might be diminished.

Sunbathing, swimming, reading. I had a book about screenplay. Three act structure, plot points, conflict, blah,

## TENDER

blah, blah. I said to Ali, 'Aristotle got there first,' but she was asleep. I also said 'You know how long the script for *Walkabout* was? Fourteen pages.' No flicker from her sleeping face. So I just looked at her. Her salt-stiffened hair in Medusa curls and tails, her lips squashed to one side, as if she was deep in thought. The gentle bulge of her closed eyes. The line of whiter skin on her breasts where she'd turned down her bikini. I resisted the urge to put my face into her neck and inhale. I still sometimes got a sense of my good fortune. The collision in midfield mud, the impulsive invitation at the sports injury clinic, her surprising acceptance. She'd told me she wanted to swim the Channel. I liked that, saw myself in a boat alongside, urging her on, handing her a thermos of hot soup.

Her face was suddenly in shadow. I looked up and Loomis was standing in her sun, looking down at her.

He smiled. 'She's with you?'

'My wife, Ali.'

'She's burning.'

Annoyingly, he was right. A scarlet stain on her cheekbones and the tip of her nose. Before I could move he'd shifted our umbrella. He settled in the sand, looked at her again.

'She's lovely.' What was the right response? *Thank you?* He continued before I could speak. 'You recovered?'

'Yeah, yeah, I'm fine.'

I was trying to work out why I wasn't pleased to see him, when Ali raised herself on an elbow and squinted at him. His face lit up with one of those film-star grins Americans have. 'Ali, it's a real pleasure. I'm Loomis.'

A *real* pleasure? Was it a fake one with most people?

She said, 'The guy who saved Bill?'

He shrugged in a winning, self-deprecating, nauseating

## TENDER

way. She eyed him, appraising. Suddenly I knew why I wasn't pleased to see him.

She asked a couple of questions, and he was off on a monologue about busking round European capitals. He'd trained as a dancer, apparently, but his thing wasn't dancing, or music, it was magic. 'Putting razors in my mouth and pulling them out on a string, stuff like that.' Casual, like any real man did stuff like that without a second thought. Ali told him she was a physiotherapist. 'I thought you looked fit,' he said. He was tall, with one of those big, regular American faces, slim and muscley of course, all the way from his calves to his neck. The kind of man you imagine is manufactured by the thousand in some Californian laboratory. Red-haired though, which was pleasing. He'd burn easily.

'Swim?'

He was looking, at last, at both of us. I said no, thinking Ali would too. She'd had a swim just before she fell asleep. 'Sure,' she said, and she was on her feet and they were running away from me, splashing through the shallows and diving into the sea like seals. I watched him struggling to keep up with Ali's strong, effortless crawl. *OK. I could sit here like a lifeguard and watch her every movement, or I could be adult about this.* I flopped back down on my towel.

'Grow up,' I said, to the umbrella. 'You're behaving like a teenager.'

'You talking to *me*?'

I sat up again.

'You *talking* to me?'

It was a short young woman in a small green bikini. Short dark hair cut to the shape of her head. I'd noticed her on each of the previous days. She was going for the big-breasted but boyish look. She was doing an Italian-

## TENDER

American voice, badly.

'No,' I said. 'Myself.'

'Bad sign, hon.'

Hon? I smiled at her.

'I'm seeing two towels,' she said. 'Is that you and a mate, or you and your girlfriend?'

Now I laughed. 'You don't waste time.'

'At home I'm demure and shy, on holiday I'm a disgrace.'

I wasn't sure what to say. I nodded at the book she was carrying. 'What you reading?'

'I'm Bobby,' she said. 'Do you want to be disgraceful with me?'

Loomis and Ali were coming back. She saw me looking, winked and moved on. 'I know you'll think about it.'

Ali watched her go, registered the compact shape, the hint of swagger. 'Who was that?'

I shrugged. 'Robert de Niro.'

Sex that afternoon was weird. I was not thinking about Bobby, and I was wondering if Ali was not thinking about Loomis. In fact if I was thinking about anyone other than Ali, I was thinking about Loomis, which was not at all what I wanted. And did that mean that Ali was thinking about Bobby? What was she thinking? And what if I thought about Ali *and* Bobby, would that be all right?

'Hey.' Ali was looking up at me, puzzled. I'd stopped moving.

I shook myself, refocused. *Forget him, he's nobody, forget him.*

But that evening he was at the harbour, he was doing his act, between the stall selling corn on the cob and the man selling pistachios. Black shorts, black vest, a red sweatband round his head. His hair spiky, like his scalp was on fire. Some spooky music was playing, and he moved to it, one