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FLAMES



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SALT

The sand was hard and sharp and blowing up into Karl's shins, whipped cruel by the dead northerly coming in over the white-chopped sea. He increased his pace, trotting across the beach, juggling his bucket and tackle box and rod, heading for the boatsheds and the trail that lay between them, the one that curled through the boobialla and up to the smoky heat of his house and lounge and family.

His haul: two blackbacks and three lizards, dragged from the water near the salt-pocked pylons of the old jetty, the one that rotted around the turn of the Hawley headland. Each fish killed by a smack of Karl's knifepoint between the eyes. Some people nicked the gills and left them to bleed out in a bucket of seawater. Others filleted them alive, sliding

fillets off wriggling spines. And some left them to drown in the air, gills pumping, scales darkening. But a well-aimed strike to the brain is the fastest way to render a fish dead, and this was how Karl did it, with speed and precision and an absence of feeling.

Yet this—this standing on a rock, casting, waiting; slow breathing, glum patience, big stillness—this wasn't fishing. Not really. This was angling. Fishing, as far as Karl was concerned, happened out over the break of the waves and in the rolling navy, bobbing high and steady with a spear in one hand and the slick scruff of a seal in the other, waiting for the run of a beast more weapon than fish: the Oneblood tuna. A man couldn't hunt it alone, and neither could a seal, but together they could kill a beast twice as heavy as the two of them combined. Men from the north coast of this southern island—muttering men, salt-rinsed men, men like Karl—had been hunting this way since before records of the coast were kept. Each hunter formed a bond in their youth with a pup they would seek out from the rocky colonies offshore. Here, past the narrow heads that sheltered Hawley and its neighbouring towns from the wider strait, the seals hauled out on the narrow ledges of a few rock spires that rose from the sea, jostling for space amid gull guano and mussels. In spring the young northmen would row out to them, leaving their soft beaches and dappled bluegums to seek out a hunting companion; or more than that, if they believed their own myths: to find the half of themselves they had been born without.

Karl's seal was a New Zealand fur pup he'd locked eyes with while swaying in the slimy touch of a kelp forest. Their connection had been sharp and sudden: Karl diving from his dinghy, stroking across a reef to the kelp, then stopped by a head that emerged a metre in front of him. Two black orbs glowed out of the smooth brown dome with a heaviness that Karl had never known, and he had reached, without thinking, offering his hand for the pup to sniff or lick or maul. After what had felt like a whole season the pup leaned in to his grip and rested a slippery cheek and a comb of wiry whiskers against the lines of Karl's palm. Their staring continued. The pup grunted. Karl, now exhausted by furious water-treading, reached out with his free hand to cup the pup's other cheek. The ocean rolled into his mouth as he sucked upwards at the low sky. The seal rested, the waves chopped, and the true meaning of salt and water and air wobbled inside Karl's mind. And just as a blinding curtain of sting-water bobbed over his eyes the seal barked, jumped and flashed away into the underwater forest. Karl flopped back to his dinghy, drowned-rat wet and sore and numb, with no idea if it had worked, if he would ever see the pup again, if he'd done anything at all.

But two days later he moored his dinghy on a buoy out near the gushing current of the strait, lifted his grandfather's spear and looked out over the big-blown waves to see the pup, flippers in the air, eyes boring once again into his own. Karl sucked air and dived headfirst into the swell, kicked his flippers hard and headed for the tuna grounds—and with each

double-kick of his skinny legs he followed the twirling, back-and-forthing figure of his fur seal.

In their first year together they learned little and caught nothing. They were too young, small and inexperienced to take down a Oneblood—which weigh, on average, around four hundred and fifty kilograms. The most they could do was swim to where the fish congregated and watch them feed on kingfish and salmon, their huge barrelled bodies torpedoing through the water, scales shining, jaws lunging. To behold a Oneblood is to gaze upon a manifestation of strength and purpose that no human, no matter how gifted or determined, will ever even approach. A creature this large, this heavy, this wrapped in bulging muscle, should be sluggish; yet a Oneblood can fly through saltwater at over one hundred kilometres an hour. A fish this strong should hunt by force; but no, a Oneblood would rather sneak and pounce than rip and roar. A beast this mighty should be impossible to miss; but a Oneblood is camouflaged by the murk of the ocean, only appearing when it cares to be witnessed.

Hanging in the ocean, Karl saw the Onebloods appear from the depths as if through a portal: dark blueness one second, a missile of muscle and scales the next, rising up after its prey at a speed so fast the water boiled around its body. And then, with its quarry captured, it was gone—zipped back into the darker depths. Seeing one hunt was tricky enough; to Karl, killing one seemed impossible. But he knew it could be done—he had seen them brought back on Hawley boats since he was a child, mountains of ruby flesh with a

long spear protruding from the thick, purple-red artery that ran from their throat to their dorsal and gave the species its name.

His seal seemed to have no doubt they could do it. In that first year he joined Karl on every expedition, flicking his fast, sleek body around Karl's bobbing limbs as they watched the Onebloods feed. Sometimes he chased a tuna for twenty or thirty metres, but always broke off and returned to Karl, a doggish smile hanging from his whiskers. With no tuna meat to hand he fed on squid and salmon, slowly growing in weight and girth and strength. Karl kept himself alive by working as a decky on a fishing charter, helping smooth-gripped tourists drag in snapper, couta and some of the smaller tuna varieties, such as bluefin or albacore—beasts that were to Onebloods as house cats are to jaguars. It was after one of these trips, while depositing some lawyers back on the docks at Hawley, that Karl saw the McAllister matriarch rising from the tide, reborn, bedecked with cowries, sand-skin and a large abalone stuck to her neck. Karl didn't take much notice; McAllister women, he'd always been told, were trouble, whether they breathed with lungs or gills or not at all.

After work, after helping his parents around the house, Karl was always back out in the water with his seal. In their second year together they began making half-hearted chases after juvenile Onebloods. His seal now weighed eighty kilograms, and would feint and slip after the tuna in a twitchy dance that their supposed prey would largely ignore. Karl ignored him too, for the most part, until the day his seal

flipped back to him with a single glimmering scale clenched in his mouth. Three weeks later he drew blood; a mid-sized Oneblood shot away from them leaking a thin trail of iron-rich redness, and the seal could barely move his jaws for days after nipping at such a ferocious force of movement.

In their third year they began choreographing the moves that every tuna team must master. First, the seal must pick up the flashing premonition of the Oneblood as it surges from the depths. Then he must dive below the great fish and begin to harass it, through a series of turns, nips, circles and feints. A Oneblood is faster than any seal over a straight line, but in short angles its massive bulk can't keep up. Corralled in this way the Oneblood will seek to catch the seal and rip the irritating mammal into hot pieces. When it can't, its next move will be to escape, and it is then that the seal must really get to work. As the fish looks for an easy exit the seal must herd it upwards, gradually, patiently, towards the stabs of sunlight and the wind-cut surface and the waiting spear of his partner.

By now the Oneblood is uncomfortable, furious and, probably for the first time in its life, afraid. Since the seal has begun its corral the fish has not been in control of its movements, and it does not like this: not at all. Most of all it hates the seal—in the same way humans hate the whine of a mosquito that fizzes past the ear just as they are tumbling into sleep—so it does not even notice the dangling legs of its other hunter, nor the gleaming barb of its weapon.

When fish and seal have come within three metres of the sea's lid it is time for the human to act. And it is not hard,

really, not when compared with what the seal has done, but it takes precision, and speed, and a certain calmness. As the Oneblood reaches striking distance the paddling hunter must dive beneath the surface, ready his aim, wait for the flash of the fish's white underbelly and, most importantly, the purple seam of life that threads through its body. When the artery is visible he must strike. He cannot miss, not even by an inch, because a spear plunged into scales and muscle will no more annoy the tuna than the nips of the seal, and it will escape. The point and barb of the spear must cannon into the glowing artery, where the scales are thin and the life is beating. Blood will cloud the sea, and the eyes and mouth of the Oneblood will yank wide.

Now arrives the hardest part of the hunter's job: holding on. As its life-juice leaks away the tuna begins to thrash with all the strength and panic stored up in its mighty body, and the hunter must not let go of his spear; he must remain connected to his prey, even as he is torqued and whipped through the water like a kite in a storm, even as the air is shaken out of his lungs in big rush-rising bubbles. It is only when this wild thrashing slows down—which could take two, three, five minutes—that the watching seal flies in to clamp a hard mouth onto the spine at the back of the Oneblood's head, crunching down on the brain stem; and finally, out of blood, out of mind, the great fish dies, and the exhausted seal and drowning hunter must drag it to the boat, where it is gaffed and winched aboard before sharks sniff the blood and bring more, unwanted death.

This process is easy to describe, much harder to carry out. During that third year Karl and his seal attempted it dozens of times, never getting close to making a kill, usually coming much closer to being killed themselves by their harried, huge prey. More happened in this year—Karl’s parents gave up on coastal life and moved to a unit down south in the capital, leaving the family cottage to Karl with the proviso that he occasionally visited them; his seal swelled to one hundred kilos and began to grow a thick mane around his scruff; a storm smashed up the fishing boat Karl worked on, robbing him of three months’ wages; and when it was repaired, on their first charter with a group of tourism-industry bigwigs, he met Louise.

Early on there was talk that he’d move across to Devonport, where she ran her holiday-booking business, but this idea never caught on. (Karl only went along with it out of courtesy; he knew that Hawley had hooked her.) When Louise realised there was no uprooting Karl she moved herself into the cottage, bringing her business with her and turning the spare room into an office. Karl, by now in his late twenties, felt an itch beneath the salt on his skin when he started seeing her on his shabby deck every evening as he trudged home, and knew, even though he had never spoken to anyone about women or courting or even the reddening notion of love, that he needed to do something permanent about her. He knew it as surely as he knew the Hawley tides—but it wasn’t all up to him.

For the final approval he goaded Louise into his dinghy,

muttering not much at all in response to her questions, and chugged out to the spires beyond the heads. Here he raised his spear, as he always did, and within a minute his seal joined them. He splashed Karl with both fore-flippers, eager to hunt, but stopped when he saw Louise. A heavy stare. A long blink. A slow, submerged circumnavigation of the boat. A re-emergence and a querulous bark. Louise baulked. *Reach for him*, Karl asked. *Please*. After a few moments of hesitation she did, looking back and forth between Karl and the seal, not panicked, but certainly not comfortable. The seal splashed, barked louder, and moved in. The heat of its breath stank across her knuckles. The seal's mouth opened, revealing small, bright-white daggers. Its head dipped, rolled, twisted...and then it was butting her hand, turning it over, revealing the thin, vulnerable skin of her wrist and the blue veins shining through it. Her eyes shot circular and she nearly yanked back her arm, but Karl said: *Wait, wait. Let him come*. Against all her instincts she did, with her eyes closed, so she didn't see the seal swim an inch closer and lean his face against her palm; she only felt it. At his touch her eyes opened, and she looked down to see the resting watery face throwing a heavy stare up at her. *Now your other hand*, said Karl. *Use both*. And just as he had done years earlier, she moved in and cupped the seal's head, now far larger than when Karl had first held it. The moment lingered. A contented bark leapt from his hot mouth and then, with a diving flip, he was gone, leaving Louise to shriek with relief and wonder, and turn to Karl and see two trails of hot water running down his cheeks, mixing salt with salt.

Three months later a sharp-cut diamond was bouncing light off her finger, paid for by the first Oneblood that Karl and his seal caught.

After the kill Karl had lain prone in the boat, sucking in gulps of air, rubbing the ruff of his seal as it dozed against his leg. The hunt had gone more or less the way it was meant to: a smooth shepherd, a tight breath, a true strike. Steel met blood in a jagged rupture, and Karl had just held on to the shaft as his bones were jiggled by their writhing, dying prey. When the seal had crunched into the spine and the fish went limp Karl was so surprised he almost forgot what they were meant to do next. Pushing, heaving and winching the Oneblood into the boat had drained all the strength they had left.

Now he floated under a pale sun. The sky was half wiped with the fluff and cream of clouds, but enough yolky heat was leaking down onto his tired limbs to keep him from shivering. His other half lay sleeping beside him. Their victim lay glassy-eyed and still-gilled. Thoughts were flicking through Karl's mind, not holding, running away from him before coherence caught up. He dropped one hand into his partner's ruff and lifted the other upwards. A warm breeze brushed against this risen hand, a breeze carrying tang and salt and the clearing scent of eucalyptus as he clenched his fingers around wet, warm fur.

△

He sold the Oneblood meat to a Japanese wholesaler named Oshikawa for an amount of money that made his head

swim in ways that no fish or seal ever could. Oshikawa had wanted the whole animal, guts and head and all, but Karl had laughed—those parts belonged to the seal, and everyone in the fish industry knew it (including the seal, who wolfed down his share on the dock in front of a troop of delighted schoolchildren). With the money he had bought Louise's ring; and a month later they caught another Oneblood, selling it to the same wholesaler for an even higher price. After their third catch he quit his job on the charter boat and dedicated every working day of the season to the tuna grounds.

In the next year they caught four fish, and the season after they brought in six. This proved to be their average number over the next decade: six fat, fierce, fighting Oneblood tuna, sometimes as few as three, occasionally as many as ten. The seal stopped growing at one hundred and sixty kilograms, but he didn't lose any of his zip, and at his full weight and strength he could herd up the largest Onebloods going around, giving Karl—whose spear arm had become reliably accurate—the unenviable task of holding on to the violent death throes of a furious six-hundred-kilo fish.

Their victories in the water were matched by Louise's success on land. The tourism industry around the north coast thrived, and after a couple of years she was able to rent an office in town, allowing them to turn her home office into a nursery, which was soon occupied by their first daughter. Eighteen months later another daughter appeared, and amid all this swimming and spearing, earning and child-rearing,

Karl noticed that they were getting older, all of them, and he didn't mind anywhere near as much as he thought he would have.

Eventually he retired—much sooner than he had planned to. But he retired, nonetheless; why else would he now be trudging along a windy beach, carrying tiny, line-caught fish that a Oneblood wouldn't even bother to nibble? It wasn't his choice; it wasn't his idea; but the salt and waves held other plans for him.

It came about on a clear day, with a hard blue smear of sky shining above his boat, a perfect day for being in the water. A normal start: half an hour of floating until the tuna began to bullet upwards after the pilchard swarms, then a few false chases before his seal ran a ring around a big male. The corral was seamless, and Karl's spear had shot true. The shake and bite and blood cloud had all been uncomplicated, and the kill was completed in a routine manner. It was only as they were hauling the fish towards the moored dinghy that Karl felt something go wrong. It was not a mental feeling, no gut twinge or rumbly sense of fear—it was physical, a feeling of something huge and powerful bumping into his hip as it slid past him through the water.

His first thought: shark. But he knew, even before he turned around, that this wasn't a shark; the bumping weight had been wrapped in smooth, rubbery skin, not the rasping cartilage of shark hide. Swivelling in the water, still not seeing the creature, his ears were filled with a rapid rhythm of clicks and high-pitched squeaks. And finally, after a full three-

hundred-and-sixty-degree turn, he saw it, in all its fins and flukes and black-and-white immensity: an orca.

The seal had swum to his side and was watching the whale double back. Karl wasn't worried, not initially. Orcas don't attack humans, and a single one won't go after a full-grown fur seal—twisting agility and sharp teeth make it too risky a meal. It probably just wanted their tuna. Karl pushed the dead fish towards it and started back-paddling towards the boat. But the orca ignored the carcass, pushing it aside with a nudge of its tail—and then a second clicking song thrummed through the water. The seal flipped around faster than Karl could move, as a second orca wafted past them on the left. A third approached them from the right and a fourth—dark, fast, its click song a jittering swarm of sound—swam directly beneath them. They peeled off to join the circling movements of their pod mates. Now the orcas were whirlpooling around them, and the seal was spinning around Karl even faster, trying to keep eyes on them all. Karl clutched his spear. His pulse tripped staccato.

And then: relentless and inevitable, it began. Each orca took turns barrelling towards the seal from a different direction, breaking off its charge at the last minute as the seal turned and showed its teeth. Karl followed the orcas with the point of his spear, keeping it outstretched towards them, but they started charging in weaves; he couldn't keep up. The seal couldn't run—they would catch it over a straight line—but it wasn't trying to escape. With each aborted charge it moved closer to Karl, spinning around him, and Karl realised he

was being protected, even though the orcas were not hunting him.

And then, in his right periphery, he saw the rushing gape of a glossy pink maw. He lurched in the cold wet and aimed his spear forward, as his seal bobbed in front of him, lips bared, muscles coiled. He thrust the spear and missed by metres, miles, oceans, as the orca baulked, and the tiny bounce of relief that hung in his stomach was overtaken by a vast swell that rushed him backwards, followed by an even bigger thwack of rubber and muscle. He was tossing now, overturning and disoriented, only just seeing the fluke of a different orca that had risen beneath him and sent him somersaulting through the water.

After two full revolutions his body stopped flipping. He regained his bearing and cracked his head through the surface, sucking in air before diving back below. He couldn't see his seal. He couldn't see the orcas either, but he could still hear their clicking songs. He swivelled and spun and swam in every direction, left right up down north south, but there was nothing but bubbles and navy and clicks.

But then another noise intruded—a harsh slap that sounded like it had come from above the water, not through it. Karl surfaced. First he saw nothing; but from behind his head he heard the slap again, so he turned, and there he saw it. He saw it happening through his waterlogged, salt-reddened eyes. He saw it sped up and slowed down. He saw his seal's body being slammed against the water by the orcas. They took turns gripping its tail in their teeth and flinging

their heads left to right, over and over again, using the hard lid of the ocean to break Karl's seal into ragged chunks of brown-red meat.



In the months between the orca attack and his walk down the beach, clenching his teeth against the grit blowing into his shins, Karl tried to forget that clicking sound. But it was lodged in a hole between his ears, a backdrop to his days that he feared and hated but could not escape. He was reminded of it constantly: when a light switch was flicked, when Louise clicked her fingers, when his leaping daughters clicked their heels, when Sharon at the fish-and-chip shop clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth as she waited for the oil in the deep fryer to heat up. All these humdrum sounds and more stirred up the bouncing echolocation of the orcas, and with them came the images, and the memory of the warm salt breeze, and the slapping crack of his seal as its body was broken against the ocean's face.

He didn't find another seal; he didn't even try. He knew of other hunters who had successfully re-partnered, but he didn't have the energy or appetite to start the training process all over again. And the idea of seeking out a fresh pup raised bile in his throat—it made his own seal swim up through his memories, resting its young face against his palm. And then the clicks would return, haunting snaps that floated through the water endlessly towards him, and Karl would mash thumbs into his ears or take a chainsaw to a bluegum

or gargle rum until one of his daughters found him hacking dry sobs at the bay.

Perhaps this abandonment of the hunt was a good thing. He started hearing rumours that the Oneblood stocks were declining. At first he thought the other fishermen were lying, trying to drag his spirits up from the seabed, but then a story appeared in the paper that was headlined ‘Worst Tuna Season in Decade’.

He spoke to his old wholesaler, the fastidious Oshikawa, who confirmed the report. *Bad year*, he told Karl over a pint of stout. *Not many fish, and the fish I have seen are small.* Karl lapped at the creamy tide of his dinner and Oshikawa, fingering a coaster, said: *Maybe a disease we haven't picked up. Maybe a monsoon somewhere messed up the food chain. Maybe the water is getting warmer.* He tore the coaster into white flecks. *Maybe just a bad season.* Karl sipped, fiddled with his own coaster and was about to ask a question, but as he opened his mouth someone closed the pub door, and the latch shouted out a loud, clear click that forced Karl to change the subject.

Money was no problem. Years of catching and killing Onebloods had left him with what many people would call a small fortune, certainly enough to pay for the groceries, insurance, even to send his daughters to a private boarding school in Launceston. Louise was still pulling in a decent income, so there was no need for him to go back to work on the charter boats. He knew he needed to do something to keep himself occupied, but all he knew was swell and spear and seal.

So: the family went on holidays, up and down the rocky peaks and dipping valleys of the island. They spent a long weekend in a former hydro factory in the highlands. For five days they wandered up and down the frosty crags of Cradle Mountain, sleeping in a roomy stone cabin owned by Oshikawa. They ate abalone, hammered tender before their eyes, on a wharf at Stanley. Louise took them to the glistening greenness of Notley Fern Gorge, west to the dark moonland of the Queenstown hills, and to the wren-blue tide of Boat Harbour, where Karl dragged his toes through the surf but didn't wade past the depth of his knees. They went south, almost as far south as they could, down to the wide wilds of Melaleuca. Their younger daughter grew bored and sullen, but the older one—Nicola, recently turned eighteen, soon to begin studying at veterinary school—became so wide-eyed and enamoured with the place that she didn't want to leave. Karl tried to match her enthusiasm, but he couldn't feel what his daughter's soul was touching. He hiked white quartzite mountains and watched wombats stumble and stared out at the green buttongrass plains at this southern end of the world, and though he smiled at Louise and the girls (and even occasionally laughed) all he saw through the grass was a seal hitting the sea, and all he heard in this high empty sky was a pulsing rhythm of underwater clicks.

Back at home the girls showed no interest in hunting Onebloods. Instead, he taught them to push hooks through frozen squid and hurl them out into the water, which they loved as much as he found it boring. And through sharing

this banal activity with his daughters he somehow developed an affection for the activity itself, and found himself angling off the rocks even when the girls were away in Devonport, casting and catching and occasionally crying, but only when the mist was clear and he could see past the heads towards the tall spires where the seals still hauled out, or so he assumed.



This was how angling put Karl on the beach on that windy evening, feeling the whipped sand feast on his shins. Soon he would figure out what to do next. Soon the clicks would stop, and he would stop hearing his seal hit the sea, and an idea or direction or purpose would swim up at him. The wind hammered. He kept trudging into the sand.

As he neared his cottage he saw a young man riffling through a clump of driftwood. He was not quite six feet tall, with milky skin and sharply dark hair. Underfed angles jutted out from his chin, cheeks, collarbone. He held a long white-grey branch in his hands, lifting it with difficulty to his eyes, which bored deep into the pattern of the barkless wood. His arms looked even more malnourished than his face.

Evening, Karl mumbled as he passed. The young man said nothing but turned around, transferring the intensity of his stare from the branch to Karl's face. Karl stopped. *Nice branch.*

I thought so, the young man said, *but no. It's not right.* Karl looked up at the light he could see blinking from his deck and thought about walking straight there, getting out

of the wind and away from this odd stranger, but small-town courtesy compelled him to pause. *Not right for what?*

The young man swivelled the branch in his hand and ran his free fingers up and down its knobby length. *For a coffin.*

Karl felt surprise creep into his brow, but kept it out of his voice. *Not gonna make much of a coffin with driftwood, mate.*

No. The man sighed. *I suppose not.* He underarmed the branch onto the sand and bent over to resume picking through its siblings.

Again Karl glanced up at his cottage, its light, its promise of warmth and food and Louise. *Mate, do you need any help?*

Pardon? He didn't look up.

I mean. I dunno. Karl exhaled. *Is everything okay?* The young man straightened up with a quizzical expression on his face, as if Karl was the one behaving strangely. Karl extended a hand. *I'm Karl.*

He accepted Karl's palm in his own. *Levi.* And then, as if his surname was an afterthought: *McAllister.* He let go and ran his hand through his hair. *Everything's fine.*

Righto. The name bumped around between Karl's ears where the clicks usually lived. *I'm sorry.*

The quizzical expression reappeared on the young man's face. *What about?*

This coffin. Your loss.

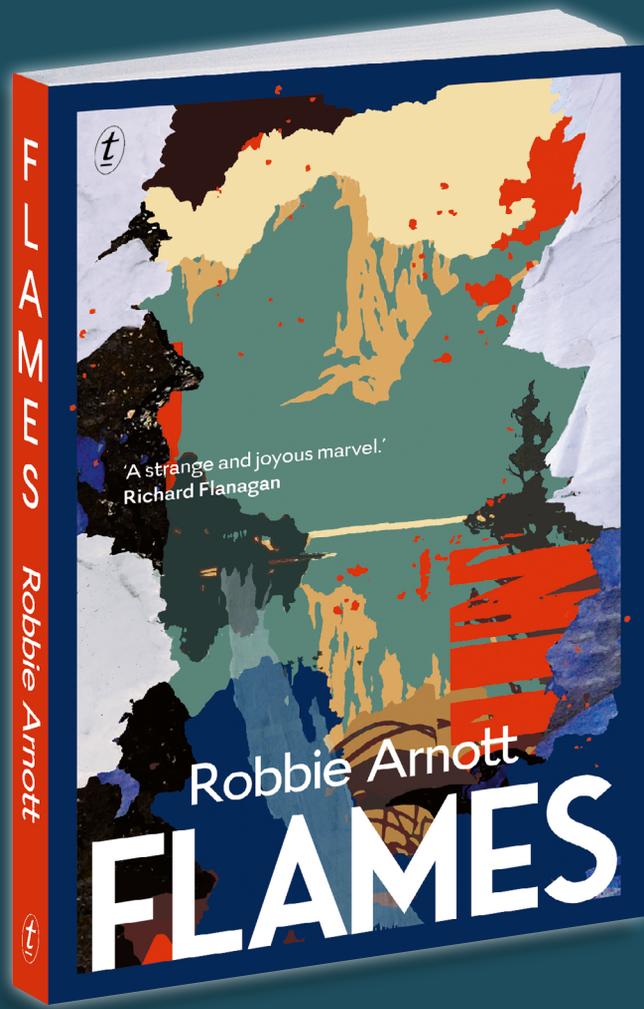
Now a smile spread across the sunken, youthful cheeks. *Oh. No. Nobody has died. Well, not recently.* He waved at the pile of wood as if that explained something. *I'm just getting things ready for my sister.*

Is she sick?

No.

Karl's bouncing thoughts snagged—the name: McAllister. His eyebrows came together; he knew how things went. He'd seen one of them climb from the water, beshelled and undead, back when he was young and his seal was half-grown. He knew about the flames, and he knew what happened next, and he heard himself ask: *How old is she?*

The wind died, as if blown out like a candle, and the stinging sand fell to the beach as Levi McAllister peered into Karl's bucket to stare at the still gills of the dry, head-stabbed fish. *She's twenty-three.*



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