

April 1864

Adolescent devils screamed from bushland behind the house, but it wasn't the hellish shrieks of small black marsupials tearing flesh from bone that kept eighteen-year-old Lizzie awake on the first starless night of her father's return. The joeys fought over rotting rabbit and rat carrion most evenings; with each other, and their parents, Lizzie assumed, for some of the cries were deeper and altogether more threatening.

No, the reason Lizzie could not sleep was a loud and rhythmic *thump-thump-thump* through the wall as her father enthusiastically reacquainted himself with her mother's tender flesh. She had forgotten that sound, of a woman conquered, in the year and one half he had been gone, but she sensed with his return how her mother was again trapped by his formidable presence, the burden of his carnal expectation, and the children that would no doubt follow.

His pounding continued unabated, and Lizzie noted both her mother's silence, and a new, fresh sting of cooler air in the room. There might soon be an early frost. Light from a scythe moon briefly found a gash in the clouds and revealed the contours of six small forms in two beds: all siblings living and breathing but lying all around, dead with sleep. Lizzie attempted to pull a thin blanket higher around her chin, but it was pinned by Sophia's weight. Her closest sibling was two years younger and often took up more than her half of the bed. Lizzie sighed heavily. She envied her sister's capacity to sleep through their father's exertions and attempted to slow her breath to match Sophia's peaceful, predictable rhythm. But it was no use. Through the wall her father's commitment to his task was even more emphatic. He had found a more fervent rhythm of his own, and Lizzie wondered why, only this morning, she had been so eager to see him again.

When he had stepped off the lighter at the river's edge, she had attempted to show him the orchard, the potato crop, the chicken house, but he had waved her off, thrown her his coat