

## At first



BLOOD.

There is blood everywhere. On his hands, on her hands, on his shirt, on his face, on the tiles, on the small round carpet. The carpet used to be blue; it never will be blue again.

The blood is red. He is kneeling in it. He hadn't realized it was so bright . . . big, burst droplets, the color of poppies. They are beautiful, as beautiful as a spring day in a sunny meadow . . . But the tiles are cold and white as snow, and it is winter.

It will be winter forever.

Strange thought: Why should it be winter forever?

He's got to do something. Something about the blood. A sea—a red, endless sea: crimson waves, carmine froth, splashing color. All these words in his head!

How long has he been kneeling here, with these words in his head? The red is starting to dry, it is forming edges, losing a little of its beauty; the poppies are wilting, yellowing, like words on paper . . .

He closes his eyes. Get a hold of yourself. One thought at a time. What must be done? What first? What is most important? It's most important that nobody finds out.

Towels. He needs towels. And water. A rag. The splatters on the wall are hard to remove . . . the grout between the tiles will be stained forever. Will anybody find out? Soap. There's dried blood under his fingernails, too. A brush. He scrubs his hands until the skin is red—a different red, a warm, living red flushed with pain.

She's not looking at him. She's turned her eyes away, but she always turned away, didn't she? That's how she lived—with her eyes turned away. He throws the dirty towels into the dark, greedy mouth of the washing machine.

She's just sitting there, leaning against the wall, refusing to speak to him.

He kneels down in front of her, on the clean floor, takes her hands in his. He whispers a question, a single word, "Where?"

And he reads the answer in her cold hands.

Do you remember? The woods? It was spring, and under the beeches, small white flowers were blooming . . . we were walking hand in hand and you asked me the name of the flowers . . . I didn't know . . . the woods. The woods were the only place we had to ourselves, a place just for us . . . back in the only time we had together, just the two of us . . . do you remember, do you remember, do you remember?

"I do," he whispers. "I remember. The woods. Anemones. I know what they're called now. Anemones . . ."

He lifts her up in his arms like a child. She is heavy and light at the same time. His heart is beating in the rhythm of fear as he

carries her outside, into the night. Hold onto me so I don't drop you. Hold on, will you? Why won't you help me? Help me! Please . . . just this once!

The cold envelops him like an icy robe; he smells the frost in the air. The ground hasn't frozen yet. He's lucky. A strange thought . . . that he's lucky on this February night. The woods aren't far. They are too far. He looks around. There is no one. No one knows . . . no one will remember what happened tonight.

There aren't any small white flowers blooming in the woods. The ground is muddy and brown, and the gray beeches are bare, leafless. He can't make out the details . . . it is too dark. Just dark enough. There aren't streetlights here. The earth gives way, reluctantly, to the blunt spade. He swears under his breath. She still won't look at him. Propped against a tree, she seems far away in her thoughts. And suddenly, anger wells up in him.

He kneels in front of her for the third time. He shakes her, tries to pull her up, make her stand on her feet; he wants to shout at her, and he does, but only in his head, silently, with his mouth open wide.

You're the most selfish, thoughtless person I've ever known! What you've done is unforgivable. You know what's going to happen, don't you? You knew it all along. But you didn't care. Of course not. All you thought about was yourself and your small, pitiful world. You found a solution for yourself, though not a solution for me . . . for us. You didn't think about us for a second . . . and then he's crying, crying like a child, with his head on her shoulder.

He feels her stroke his hair, her touch light as the breeze. No . . . it is only a branch.