

A Violent Season

By Sara Walters

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When Cash told me he wanted to kill Porter Dawes, we were standing on the peak of Lawson's Bluff, our sleeves pulled down over our hands. It was the first day of November and winter already had Vermont between its fists. Below us, Wolf Ridge spread out like an open wound, a gash sliced through the mountains. We went up there to smoke what weed we had left from the weekend and to be away from town. Wolf Ridge had a way of closing in on us. The mountains crowded us. Finding higher ground was the only way we felt less suffocated.

I slid my lighter into my back pocket and crushed the last nub of the joint we'd been sharing. Cash stared at his feet, inching the tips of his shoes closer to the edge of the bluff.

"I mean it," Cash said. "I'll do it."

My skull felt too small for my brain. My head floated a few inches off of my shoulders. When I looked at Cash, it took a moment for my eyes to follow.

"Shut up, Cash."

He pulled a crumpled pack of smokes from his jacket pocket. Caught a filter between his lips. I handed him the lighter from my back pocket.

"I even know how I'd do it," he said, talking around the cigarette. He took a hard pull, the embers lighting his face in orange.

"Oh yeah?"

He nodded and said, "Would be messy, though."

"Messy?"

“Maybe too messy.”

I tried to imagine it—Porter Dawes with all of his blood on the outside. Porter Dawes as a pile of wet splinters.

I knew better than to encourage Cash. The last time he got an idea like that and I played along, he ended up on probation. When I played along, he only got hungrier.

But I was hungry, too. He offered me his half spent cigarette and I took it, thinking of Porter Dawes in pieces.

“Messy how?” I asked. I rolled the cigarette filter between two fingers and watched him. I was always watching him. I was always waiting to see his face change, to see his lips move. I memorized every half smirk and every crease that gathered in his forehead when I said something wrong.

“Too bloody. Hard to clean up after.”

It was already almost dark. Winter in Wolf Ridge meant making sure you were off the mountain before the sun dipped behind it. Before the cold wrapped itself around the town and pulled tight. My lips tingled with nicotine. My fingers were numb, but I felt warm. Somehow, I was certain I could feel Cash’s warmth beside me. He burned and glowed like the lit-end of my cigarette. He spiraled up above our heads like smoke.

It took me a second, but I realized I was grinning. Grinning about Porter Dawes, insides on the outside, bright and red and angry.

That’s what happened in Wolf Ridge every November. No one was ever sure why, or where it came from. It was one of those bedtime stories they tell the kids there—a boogeyman legend to keep them from getting into trouble when they got older. Every November, the young people in Wolf Ridge were suddenly overwhelmed with hunger for violence. We were plagued and delighted by images and dreams of murdering strangers

and friends and ourselves. Everyone knew it was real, but everyone pretended it wasn't. Our parents lied to us and said it was an urban legend, but we all knew they dreamt about slitting their own parents' throats when they were teenagers. We all knew.

If it was a sickness—some kind of seasonal virus—then just like the flu, there were those of us who ended up coming down with it harder than others. Cash was pretty much patient zero in our year. He practically salivated over violence. I could almost see his urges radiating off of him.

“Why Porter, though?” I dropped the cigarette and stubbed it out with the toe of my shoe.

Cash slid his hands into his pockets, and I could see his cheeks were turning pink, cold-bitten. It was getting darker. We needed to leave.

“Because he deserves it the most.” Cash watched the city below us. The streetlights were popping on in rows.

I didn't know what Porter Dawes did to make Cash mad. But it was November, so it could have been nothing. It could have been that Porter looked at him wrong. Our November Sickness had infected Cash to his core. He must have carried that sleeping virus from birth, but now, it was awake. And it was hungry.

I looked back over my shoulder at the car, parked a few yards back, behind the DEAD END sign nailed to the fence blocking the rest of the dirt road. The fence was new. The November before, Kristen Daniels smashed through the old one in her dad's truck. I remember my pulse quickening when the news made its way through the school hallway the next day. My mouth watering. Cash skipped school that day and went up there to see the crime scene tape laced through the tree limbs, to peek over the edge of the bluff and see the mangled remains of the truck still down there. It took them days to

get it out. A few of us stood along the treeline smoking cigarettes as they brought the crane in to lift it out of the twisting branches and underbrush. There was a constellation of blood splatter across the spiderwebbed windshield.

Cash's hands were still tucked into his pockets. I wanted to slide my fingers around his wrist, inch my hand between his arm and hip bone. I didn't. I looked down at Wolf Ridge, watched the headlights moving down Getty Street. Sometimes I could see my house from the bluff, but that night, it was too dark. The lights must have all been off. No one was home.

"Maybe I'll just burn the whole thing down." Cash lifted a hand out in front of himself. Flicked the lighter on.

Even in the glow of the flame, his eyes still looked black.