

The RED WINTER

POWER IS A HUNGRY BEAST

CAMERON SULLIVAN

'An absolute feast of a book:
rich, red, sinfully delicious'

ALIX E. HARROW



About *The Red Winter*

A bewitching historical fantasy from a debut author, and the next global sensation from Tor. A blood-drenched hunt for purpose, power and redemption.

A devastating love story.

A bewitching twist on history.

A blood-drenched hunt for purpose, power, and redemption.

In 1785, Professor Sebastian Grave receives the news he fears most: the Beast of Gévaudan has returned, and the French countryside runs red in its wake.

Sebastian knows the Beast. Twenty years ago, it nearly cost him his life to bring the monster down. Now, he has been recalled to the hunt by Antoine Avenel d'Ocerne, an estranged lover who shares a dark history with the Beast and a terrible secret with Sebastian. With the help of his indwelling demon, Sarmodel – who takes payment in living hearts – Sebastian must return to Gévaudan for a final reckoning, while the Beast is poised to plunge the continent into war.

In this dark retelling of the hunt for the Beast of Gévaudan, Cameron Sullivan tears the heart out of history. He lifts the veil on the hidden world behind our own and reimagines the story of Europe, from Imperial Rome to Saint Jehanne d'Arc and the first flickers of the French Revolution.

The RED
WINTER

CAMERON
SULLIVAN



Pan Macmillan Australia

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For Mum and for Meg



FOREWORD

I decided to write this all down while on a business trip to my European offices in Florence. It was one of those romantically black and violent autumn days when the rain does not fall so much as dash itself against the city. The majority of the tourists were in their hotel rooms, trying like so many before them to come to grips with Italian television.

I should have been working, drawing up contracts for a very large acquisition on behalf of a very old client. But the intimate, empty streets beckoned, so instead I went wandering. I visited my most beloved friends—the wise ghosts of the Duomo; the Boboli Gardens; Laocoön and his sons in their ecstasy of fear—but I found them all cold and listless.

It was on my way back along the Ponte Vecchio, in the fairy-tale light of the goldsmiths, that I chanced on an exquisite brooch. I recognized it immediately—an antique cameo in amber and ivory, depicting a young woman. It was badly damaged and the setting had been stripped of its gemstones, but I paid the dizzying sum on the ticket and tucked it into my coat. In my head, I was already repairing the jewel. I knew somewhere in my archives there was a pouch of tumbled Persian sapphires that would fit perfectly in the antique setting. Manic with inspiration, I rushed immediately back to my offices, a sturdy stone manse in the old artists' quarter. I told Livia to handle my client appointments for the coming week—she's at least as good a lawyer as I am anyway—and headed for the attic. It's one of the things I love most about returning to the Old World: I always come across something unexpected, something I've forgotten.

I never found the sapphires¹ but at the back of the attic was buried an old wooden chest. It tugged at something in my mind; I think it may have been what I was really looking for all along. With some effort, I lifted away the sealed effigy of a long-dead patron and wiped the dust from the carved walnut panels. The chest was a beautiful, if neglected, relic of the French Empire, decorated with scenes of the Revolution.

The French Revolution. The peasant's dream that toppled kings and ignited decades of war across Europe—across the world. The faces carved into the wood were righteous and proud, an army of the downtrodden throwing off their shackles for Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.

I knew better.

The troubled young woman whose likeness was engraved into the cameo—she had known better, too.

A few phrases of eighteenth-century Occitan dissolved the Wards on the chest (still airtight after two hundred years, if you don't mind) and I knew that my gem-cutting plans had been postponed indefinitely.

I spent the rest of the day turning through volumes of notes and evidence from one of my most infamous and fascinating commissions. My indwelling Spirit, Sarmodel, had been silent for days, but I invited him to enjoy the rediscovered treasure with me—they're his memories too, after all.² After a little petulance, Sarmodel came forward in my mind, rousing himself like a drowsy cat, and joined me in reliving what was in retrospect quite a landmark case. We went through the old journals and specimen canisters with a sweet melancholy. A switch of Bombay thorn apple, jars of snowmelt, a pouch of wolf fur, a box of lavender-scented talc—each time I reached into the chest I retrieved another wonder.

I'd forgotten how much I loved that part of my life—the 1700s were a *glorious* time to be in Europe, until they weren't. And I felt truly close to Sarmodel, for the first time since we averted the End of Days the previous year.³ I have so few friends left and it was reassuring just to have him with me as my companion again, and to remember how well we can work together.

But the reason I decided to write this case down properly was right at the bottom of the chest, buried under a bushel of faded letters. It was a lambskin riding glove, shredded beyond repair and still spotted with bloodstains. Sarmodel and I had been trading happy remarks for hours, but now we both stopped. I felt a longing that my demonic Guest understood completely, and for once he didn't mock my human frailty as my eyes filled with tears.

Still, Sebastian? he asked quietly in my thoughts.

“Yes. Still,” I replied. “How did I forget?”

Antoine’s, the glove and the blood both. I was hundreds of years old before I ever met him, but that day we were both young. Danger was nothing to him and his sense of abandon was contagious. It was inevitable that we would end up broken and bleeding in a midden somewhere, given the situation, but it was spectacular fun just the same. I didn’t realize how long it had been since I’d remembered Antoine. His innocence. His wild blond hair and ridiculous inability to light a campfire. I had the thought, for the first time in months, that life without death is a miserable gift.

So these pages are for him, one of my dearest ghosts.

For Antoine Avenel d’Ocerne.

Sebastian Grave

Florence

2013

P.S. I take no responsibility for Livia’s contribution.

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1. I love my European staff, but they are avid little thieves.
 2. Not that he would be able to read any of my notes—Sarmodel holds the written word as the pinnacle of human vanity, a position it shares with matrimony. Where I have endeavored to learn the myriad languages of humans, demons and angels, my indwelling Spirit wears eight thousand years of illiteracy like a medal.
 3. About which I will not go into detail here—we got it done and you can go back to your online shopping. Suffice it to say the Mayan calendar’s pinpoint accuracy had nothing to do with astronomy.

PART ONE

A Contract Unfulfilled and a Terrible Secret



Eastern Piedmont

1785

The girl was surprisingly beautiful in the moonlight.

“Surprisingly” for two reasons. First: she had a reputation for beauty. In my experience, this would usually mean only that she’d managed to keep all her teeth in the long weeks between puberty and pregnancy. And second: she was two days dead, and I have violated enough graves to know that corpses are not, to common tastes, beautiful.

I believe her name was Cristina. Her ghost sat opposite me on a crude tombstone, watching me work. Now, the *ghost* was beautiful, but they often are. This spirit girl’s hair was typical of Piedmontese folk, thick and dark and curly, falling just below her shoulders. Her eyes were large and bewitchingly deep with the gravity of the hereafter. Her shade glowed softly, wearing the same white smock I had just cut away from her corpse.

“That was *expensive*,” muttered the girl, looking at the ruins of the dress.

“I can tell,” I replied. “Aren’t you pleased that it’s not going to rot in the ground?”

Sarmodel, my indwelling demon, had Projected himself in human form to sit beside her, with the very worst intentions. He appeared as a black-haired boy of about ten years, with a long face and an exquisitely aquiline nose, which I assume was how I looked when we were first joined.¹

“Aren’t *you* pleased, Sebastian, that you can add to your stock of used cerements?” Sarmodel asked me, smiling. “And wasn’t this worth leaving home for?”

Among many other things, I have need of good cloth in my line of work, and the dress would not be wasted. But Sarmodel’s point was plain; Cristina was a charity case.

“We weren’t doing anything else,” I replied.

In truth, I had hoped Cristina’s late-night visitation might result in more than another evening combing through entrails at the cemetery. I had been, if not quite preoccupied, a little out of sorts over the previous few days. I had experienced a growing sense of *waiting* for something, which I have learned never to ignore. The pretty ghost with her tale of a deadly curse had seemed a promising start.

“I guess it doesn’t matter—it’s just a dress,” Cristina sighed. “Have you finished?”

I had dissected the girl’s body (rather neatly) at her behest and examined it for the cause of her demise.

“Yes, I have, Cristina. But you haven’t been completely honest with me.”

“What do you mean? I was killed, wasn’t I?”

“Well yes, and no,” I offered. “You certainly didn’t die naturally—”

“*Bastarda!* I *knew*—!”

“—but I don’t think White Marta was responsible. Not unless she snuck into your home and strangled you with your own hands.”

“My own hands?” She looked at me with her wide, wide eyes.

“I’m afraid so. The bruising and scratches on your neck are a perfect match—see?” I held her corpse’s hands up to its throat to demonstrate. “Note also the scraps of skin under your fingernails.”

“But that’s impossible! I didn’t kill *myself*—I swear it!” She crossed herself, scandalized. “The pastor says there’s only damnation for *suicides*.” She whispered

the last word as though the Almighty might be eavesdropping from the hedgerow.

"I believe you, Cristina, if only because it would, in fact, be impossible to kill yourself this way." I let the dead hands fall once again. "At least not on your own."

"Who was it then?" she persisted. "It had to be White Marta! She's the only one it could be."

"And why is that?"

"I went to her not a week ago, and she turned the evil eye on me, she must have!"

"Went to her for what?" I knew Marta quite well. She was a competent hedge-witch, but the "evil eye" was not really her style (or anyone's, given it is utter nonsense).

Cristina resisted, but she'd made a Contract of Truth,² and she was bound to answer. "I asked her for a blessing. I am . . . I was newly married."

I raised my eyebrows. "A 'blessing'? A fertility charm, you mean. Witchcraft."

"No! Well, yes."

"And?"

"I went all the way out to the scree to find her, with a fat hen as payment, and all she gave me was a strange little pouch. She said I was to put a tooth inside and leave it under my pillow and I would dream of my future child." Spectral tears brimmed in her lovely eyes. "Instead, I dreamed of a woman with no face, choking me in my bed, night after night."

"Wait—a tooth? Whose tooth?"

"Mine."

"Are you lying to me, Cristina?" She lowered her eyes and I knew I had the right of it. The mark of my Contract burned brightly on her right palm, and she covered it with her other hand.

"Well . . . Marta said to use one of mine, but I went to the field below the granary instead. They're always digging up bones there." She lowered her gaze. "I knew it wasn't right, but I couldn't cut out my own tooth, I just *couldn't*."

I grimaced. "Cristina, that field is full of bones because it's sitting on a mass grave."

"From the plague?" She looked aghast.

I shook my head. "From the witch hunts. I think you may have unintentionally brought home more than a tooth. Old bones are dangerous, and those ones in particular."

"What do you mean?" She seemed on the verge of tears again.

“I believe you may have collected a witch’s bone, containing either her angry spirit or one of her familiars. It doesn’t really matter which.” I sighed. “It’s dreadfully unlucky—very few of the women in that field were actually witches at all. Can you guess how they were executed?”

“They were strangled,” she murmured.

“I’m afraid so. And now one has had her revenge, misdirected as it was.”

She looked around helplessly. “But . . . but I didn’t *know*! I didn’t mean to! With my own hands?”

“That’s your Truth, Cristina. I am sorry,” I said, and I meant it. Death had come unfairly for this one. The burning mark on her hand faded away, signaling the fulfillment of my Contract. The identical mark on my left hand soon followed.

“It doesn’t matter anymore, my lovely one,” I continued. If I could have dried her tears, I would have.

“Please—*please* don’t tell the pastor,” she implored. “I don’t want to go to Hell.”

“There’s no fear of that,” I said. “It was an accident. God never punishes an accident.”³

“Truly?”

“Truly.”

“So, I can . . . go?”

Sarmodel sat up now, suddenly interested. “Yes! Yes—there’s nothing to fear,” he said. “You can rest now, take my hand.”

“Sarmodel,” I said. “*No*.” I dragged the girl’s body back toward the edge of her grave.

He gave me an unfriendly look. “Just get that meat back in the ground,” he said. “This is not your concern, Sebastian. How else do you think she’s going to pay?”

“She’s a *client*.” I leveled the knife at him. “We agreed on this.”

Generally speaking, a Contract must be paid for immediately on completion, either in coin⁴ or in anima—spiritual energy—proportionate to the Contracted service. Cristina had only herself to offer, but I consider consuming the client as a very last resort, so I had accepted her pretty funeral dress as payment.

“Oh truly,” continued Cristina dreamily. “Do you mean it? I can go, and I won’t be damned?”

“She’s not a client anymore,” Sarmodel insisted. He lifted the ghost girl’s hand, now clear of the Contract mark. “Look!” She was barely paying us any attention, but her light was beginning to grow; Cristina was getting ready to leave.

“Sarmodel, you cannot possibly be hungry! Only last week—”

“Sebastian Grave of Larnaca?”

A man’s voice shocked us all into silence.

Distracted by the business at hand, I hadn’t noticed the rider approaching up the grassy slope. He directed his horse slowly toward us.

“I am *Professor* Sebastian Grave of Larnaca, yes. Who goes there?” I demanded through clenched teeth. I was acutely aware that of the three of us, I was the only one visible to the Mundane; to a casual observer I would appear to be arguing with nobody in a cemetery in the middle of the night. I prayed that it was dark enough to hide the mess I had made, never mind the naked, mutilated corpse I was discreetly nudging with my foot.

“I am Monsieur Jacques Avenel d’Ocerne,” replied the newcomer, with an accent. He was wearing a broad hat and a scarf that covered the lower half of his face, so I couldn’t see much of him other than his eyes. Then he switched into Provençal Occitan and added, “Son of the Baron d’Ocerne.”

“Ocerne. Your father—Antoine d’Ocerne is your father, sir?” I finally succeeded in tipping Cristina’s body into the grave, where it landed with a wet thump.

Sarmodel—Antoine’s son!

Sarmodel had forgotten the ghost girl for the moment and was watching with great interest. I felt a growing excitement, something between joy and trepidation. This was it! *This* was what I’d been waiting for—it had to be.

“He is indeed. I will speak plainly, for the journey here was long and I am weary.” He drew himself up. “Sebastian of—Professor Grave, my lord father summons you to return immediately to Gévaudan with me, to complete the contract which he holds unfulfilled, signed by you at Château d’Ocerne and witnessed by the Bishop of Mende in the presence of our Holy Father.”

“*Summons* me? Contract unfulfilled?” I repeated, quickly smothering the flutter of fear in my gut. In my mind, I could see the blood on the snow, and the frozen gorge full of roaring white water. “But that was *twenty years* ago!”

“Just so,” said the young man grimly. “But we must ask your aid once again. The terror of the Red Winter has returned.”

I made a show of packing my tools back into my valise.

It’s not possible, I said to Sarmodel. *Is it?*

Oh, Sebastian, he replied. Sarmodel shook his head, half sad, half mocking. His childlike Projection faded into shadow and he receded to his customary position in