

READ IT FIRST



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE RŌNIN'S MISTRESS. Copyright © 2011 by Laura Joh Rowland. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. For information, address St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

www.minotaurbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rowland, Laura Joh.

The Rōnin's mistress : a novel / Laura Joh

Rowland.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-312-65852-6

1. Sano, Ichiro (Fictitious character)—Fiction.
 2. Japan—History—Genroku period, 1688–1704—Fiction.
 3. Samurai—Fiction.
 4. Domestic fiction.
- I. Title.

PS3568.O934R66 2011

813'.54—dc22

2011018771

First Edition: September 2011

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



THE BLIZZARD ENDED by morning. The sky cleared to a pale blue as dawn glided over the hills east of Edo, leaving the city serene under a mantle of fresh, sparkling snow. Cranes flew over the rise where Edo Castle perched. The great fortress wore white frosting atop its walls and guard towers. In the innermost precinct of the castle stood the palace. Dark cypress beams gridded the white plaster walls of the low, interconnected buildings; gold dragons crowned the peaks of its tile roofs. In the garden, boulders and shrubs were smooth white mounds. Ice glazed a pond surrounded by trees whose bare branches spread lacy black patterns against the brightening sky. The snow on the lawn and gravel paths was pristine, undisturbed by footprints. The garden appeared deserted, but appearances were deceiving.

Under a large pine tree, in a shelter formed by its spreading boughs, three samurai crouched. Sano Ichirō, the shogun's *sōsakan-sama*—Most Honorable Investigator of Events, Situations, and People—huddled with his two top detectives, Marume and Fukida. Although they'd covered the ground with a quilt and they wore hats, gloves, fleece-lined boots, and layers of thick, padded clothing, they were shivering. They'd been here all night, and their shelter was cold enough that they could see their breath. Sano flexed his numb fingers and toes in an attempt to ward off frostbite, as he and his men watched the palace through gaps between the bristly, resin-scented pine sprigs.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” said Fukida, the slight, serious detective.

“I would think it a lot prettier if I were sitting in a hot bath.” The big, muscular Marume was usually jovial but was cross now, after an uncomfortable night.

Sano didn’t join the conversation. He was too cold and too downcast after a long run of trouble. Although he usually put on a cheerful appearance for the sake of morale, that had gotten harder as the months passed.

Footsteps crunched the snow. Sano put his finger to his lips, then pointed outside. A man slouched into view. He wore a straw snow cape and a wicker hat. Furtive, he looked around. No one was watching that he could see. Sano had given the patrol guards the night off.

“It’s him,” Fukida said. “At last.”

Their quarry sidled up to the palace, climbed the stairs to the veranda, and stopped by the door. He lifted his cape, exposing stout legs, the loin-cloth wrapped around his waist and crotch, and voluminous white buttocks. He squatted and defecated.

This was the person who’d been sneaking around and fouling the palace late at night or early in the morning.

Sano, Marume, and Fukida leaped out from under the pine boughs. Marume yelled, “Hah! Got you!”

The man looked up, startled. He was a pimple-faced youth. Terrified by the sight of three samurai charging toward him, he jumped up to run, but he slipped in the snow and fell on the dung he’d just dropped. Marume and Fukida caught him. They held him while he struggled and began to cry.

“You’re under arrest,” Fukida said.

“Phew, you stink!” Marume said.

Sano asked the captive, “What’s your name?”

“Hitoshi,” the man mumbled between sobs.

“Who are you?” Sano said.

“I’m an underservant in the castle.” Underservants did the most menial, dirtiest jobs—mopping floors, cleaning privies.

“Why have you been defecating on the palace?” Sano said.

“My boss is always picking on me. Once he made me lick a chamber pot clean.” Hitoshi turned sullen. “I just wanted to get him in trouble.”

“Well, you succeeded,” Marume said. The supervisor of servants, who

was responsible for keeping the castle clean, had been reprimanded by the shogun, the military dictator who lived in the palace and ruled Japan. The shogun had ordered Sano to personally catch the culprit. "Now you're in even bigger trouble."

What Hitoshi had done wasn't just unsanitary. It was a grave criminal offense.

"Come along," Fukida said. He and Marume hauled Hitoshi down the steps.

Hitoshi resisted, dragging his feet. "Where are you taking me?"

"To the shogun," Sano said.

As Hitoshi protested, pleaded, and wept, the detectives hustled him along. Fukida said, "Another job well done."

"Indeed." Sano heard the rancor in his own voice. This was a far cry from solving important murder cases, as he'd once done. It was also a huge fall from the post he'd once held—chamberlain of Japan, second-in-command to the shogun. But Sano couldn't complain. After the catastrophe almost two years ago, he knew he should be thankful that his head was still on his body.

Marume said quietly, "Sometimes in this life you just have to take what you can get."

IN THE AUDIENCE chamber inside Edo Castle, Shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi sat on the dais, enfolded in quilts up to the weak chin of his mild, aristocratic face. He wore a thick scarf under the cylindrical black cap of his rank. Smoking charcoal braziers surrounded him and three old men from the Council of Elders—Japan's chief governing body—who knelt on the upper of two levels of floor below the dais. The sliding walls were open to the veranda, where Sano stood with Marume and Fukida. Hitoshi knelt at their feet, sobbing. The shogun had forbidden Sano to bring the disgusting captive inside the chamber. Hence, Sano and his detectives were out in the cold, as if they were pariahs—which, in fact, they were.

"So this is the man who has been defiling my castle?" The shogun hadn't even bothered to greet Sano. He squinted at Hitoshi.

"Yes, Your Excellency." Sano knew the shogun didn't owe him any

thanks for his work or for fourteen years of loyal, unstinting service. That was Bushido, the Way of the Warrior, the samurai code of honor. But the snub rankled nonetheless. "We caught him in the act."

The shogun said to Hitoshi, "What have you to say for yourself?"

"I'm sorry!" Hitoshi was hysterical with fright. "Please have mercy!"

The shogun flapped his hand. "I hereby sentence you to execution." The elders nodded in approval. The shogun spoke in Sano's general direction: "Get him out of my sight."

Marume and Fukida raised the blubbing Hitoshi to his feet and dragged him away. Sano frowned.

At last the shogun deigned to acknowledge Sano's presence. "What's the matter?"

"The death penalty seems excessive," Sano said.

Two years ago the shogun would have quailed in the face of criticism from Sano, his trusted advisor; he would have doubted the wisdom of his decision. But now he said peevishly, "That man insulted me. He deserves to die."

"Any act against His Excellency is tantamount to treason," said one of the elders, Kato Kinhide. He had a wide, flat face with leathery skin, like a mask with narrow slits cut for the eyes and mouth. "Under Tokugawa law, treason is punishable by death."

Another elder, named Ihara Eigoro, said, "Not in all cases. Some people are the lucky exceptions." Short and hunched, he resembled an ape. He looked pointedly at Sano.

Sano tried not to bristle at this mean-spirited reference to the incident that had precipitated his downfall. He faced the two elders, his political opponents. "There was no treason in the case you're referring to." He'd never betrayed the shogun; he'd not committed the horrendous act for which he'd been blamed.

"Oh?" Ihara said. "I heard otherwise."

The third elder spoke up. "You've been listening to the wrong people." He was Ohgami Kaoru, Sano's lone ally on the council. Quiet and thoughtful, he seemed young despite his eighty years and white hair.

The shogun frowned in vexation. "You're always saying things that don't make sense." Not known for intelligence, he never grasped the

veiled allusions, the undercurrents of a discussion. Entire conversations took place over his head. But lately, Sano noticed, the shogun perceived that they were taking place even if he didn't comprehend them. "I don't like it. Say what you mean."

"I'll be glad to explain what everyone's talking about, Your Excellency," Chamberlain Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu said as he strode into the room, accompanied by his son, Yoritomo. Mirror images, the two had the same tall, strong, slender physique, the same dark, liquid eyes, lustrous black hair, and striking, masculine beauty. Sano didn't react outwardly to them, but inside he seethed with anger and hatred.

He and Yanagisawa had been rivals since he'd first joined the regime fourteen years ago. Yanagisawa had then been chamberlain. Events had led to Yanagisawa's being exiled and Sano's becoming chamberlain. But Yanagisawa had staged a miraculous comeback. The shogun had then decreed that Yanagisawa and Sano would share the position of second-in-command and run the government as co-chamberlains. Sano would have accepted that, but Yanagisawa couldn't. With a brilliant, stunning act of cruelty, Yanagisawa had engineered Sano's fall.

"Good morning to you, too, Honorable Chamberlain," Sano said. "To what do we owe the honor of your company?" But he knew. Yanagisawa had a sixth sense that warned him whenever Sano was with the shogun. He always managed to put in an appearance.

Yanagisawa ignored the greeting. "Sano-*san* and the Council of Elders are discussing the terrible crime that he committed against you two years ago, when he investigated a case of kidnapping. Five women were kidnapped and raped. One was your wife. She suffered terribly because Sano-*san* didn't solve the case soon enough to prevent her from becoming a victim."

"Now she's too sick and too afraid to leave her bedchamber," Yoritomo said. He always tagged after his father, whom he adored.

Under other circumstances the shogun might have forgotten the whole affair. Two years was too long for his capricious nature to sustain a grudge, and he cared nothing for his wife. Their marriage was a matter of political convenience, and he preferred men to women. But Yanagisawa and Yoritomo were always reminding him. Now he glared at Sano.

“How could you do such a terrible thing to me?” the shogun demanded. Never mind that his wife was the one who’d suffered; he took everything personally. “After all I’ve done for you. Without me, you would be a, ahh, nobody!”

Sano had been a *rōnin*—a masterless samurai—until he’d entered the Tokugawa regime as a detective inspector in the police department. During his first murder case he’d caught the shogun’s attention. The shogun had created a new position just for Sano—Most Honorable Investigator of Events, Situations, and People. Ever since then he’d accused Sano of ingratitude and overlooked the fact that Sano had more than earned his good fortune, often paying for it with his own blood.

Nettled, Sano defended himself yet again. “With all due respect, your wife’s kidnapping wasn’t a part of the set of crimes. Chamberlain Yanagisawa engineered her kidnapping and rape.”

“Rubbish,” Kato scoffed.

Ihara seconded him; they were both Yanagisawa’s cronies. “You’ve no proof.”

Sano had tried and failed to turn up any evidence against Yanagisawa, who’d thoroughly covered his tracks.

“Sano-san’s accusation is a pitiful attempt to shift the blame, Your Excellency,” Yanagisawa said. “It’s his word against mine. And you’ve already decided whom to believe.”

He mounted the dais and knelt in the position of honor at the shogun’s right. He gave Sano a smug smile, enjoying his own privileged status and Sano’s ignominious position outside in the cold. Yoritomo sat close to the shogun, on his left. He gleamed maliciously at Sano.

An eerie shiver rippled down Sano’s spine. The resemblance between Yoritomo and Yanagisawa grew stronger every year, while the son aged and the father never seemed to change. And they shared a history as well as their looks.

In his youth, Yanagisawa had been a mere son of a vassal of a minor lord. Then he’d enchanted the shogun with his beauty, charm, and sexual skills. The shogun came to rely on his counsel and turned over the administration to Yanagisawa.

Yoritomo was the product of an affair between Yanagisawa and a court lady-in-waiting, a distant cousin of the shogun’s. Yoritomo too had en-

chanted the shogun with his beauty, charm, and sexual skills. Now he occupied his father's former position as the shogun's favorite lover. The shogun relied more and more on his advice. Yanagisawa and Yoritomo had a hold over the shogun that no one could break.

Sano thought of his own son, Masahiro, who was eleven years old. He could never make Masahiro into such a political pawn. He loved Masahiro too much.

"You're right," Yoritomo said to Ihara. "Sano-*san* has been bad for the Tokugawa clan, and he's lucky to be alive."

He hated Sano as much as his father did. When Yanagisawa had been exiled, Yoritomo had stayed in Edo with the shogun. Sano had befriended the youth, who was vulnerable to his father's enemies. Then Yanagisawa had secretly returned, and Yoritomo had helped him stage his comeback. Yanagisawa had attacked Sano from behind the scenes until Sano had lured Yanagisawa out of hiding. Sano had used Yoritomo for bait, in a cruel trick that Yoritomo couldn't forgive, even though Sano had apologized. It didn't matter to Yoritomo that he'd conspired against Sano and deserved retaliation. Yoritomo was now Sano's bitter enemy.

"Yes, I, ahh, should have put you to death for what you did to me, Sano-*san*." The shogun looked puzzled. "Why didn't I?"

Everybody spoke at once. Sano said, "Because you know in your heart that I'm innocent," while Yanagisawa said, "Because you're too kind, Your Excellency." "Because Sano-*san* manipulated you," Yoritomo said. Ohgami said, "Because you need his services."

There was truth to all these reasons why Sano had been demoted to his former position instead of being forced to commit ritual suicide, the samurai alternative to execution. The shogun wasn't entirely cowed by Yanagisawa and Yoritomo, and he probably suspected they'd set Sano up. He did have some compassion under his selfishness. Some fast talking by Sano had convinced the shogun not to give him the death penalty. And the shogun had always needed Sano to save the regime from various troubles.

Furthermore, Sano still had friends among important Tokugawa officials and powerful *daimyo*, feudal lords who ruled the provinces. They'd pressured the shogun to keep him alive. And Yanagisawa had many enemies, who supported Sano as their best hope of checking his rise to

absolute power. But no one could say any of this openly. The shogun didn't know about the struggle over control of the regime. Yanagisawa and his rivals didn't want their lord to find out. A conspiracy of silence reigned.

But that didn't prevent Yanagisawa and Yoritomo from doing everything they could to denigrate Sano in front of the shogun. Yanagisawa said, "Even though Sano-*san* deserves a harsher punishment, at least he's back where he belongs."

Sano gritted his teeth. The demotion was an extreme loss of face, a crushing blow to his samurai honor. Although he knew he must persevere for the sake of his family, his retainers, and everyone else whose fortune depended on him, in his darkest hours he thought death would have been better than this constant humiliation.

"Being chamberlain was too big a job for Sano-*san*," Yoritomo chimed in. "Catching louts who defile the palace is more his size."

Ihara and Kato nodded their agreement. Ohgami said, "That's ridiculous, considering that Sano-*san* did a commendable job running the government in the past." He aimed a pointed glance at Yanagisawa. "Better than some people."

The corrupt Yanagisawa had embezzled from the treasury, had bribed and threatened officials and *daimyo* into swearing loyalty to him, and had usurped power from the shogun. The honest men in the regime didn't like the return to that state of affairs. Less did they like the fact that the current strife between Sano and Yanagisawa wasn't just another episode in a long-running feud. Yanagisawa was more dangerous than ever. Yanagisawa had demonstrated his willingness to shed blood to win power. If provoked, he could start a war that Japan couldn't survive.

Ohgami was too afraid to speak openly against Yanagisawa. The other elders ignored Ohgami. The shogun frowned, irate because the conversation was going over his head again.

"Well, I hope you have, ah, learned your lesson, Sano-*san*." The shogun waved his hand. "You're dismissed. Oh, and shut the door before you go. I'm cold."

"Yes, Your Excellency." Sano had no right to object; the shogun could treat him however he chose. A samurai must serve his lord without complaint, regardless of the lord's behavior or character faults. That was the

Way of the Warrior. But Sano's endurance was stretched to its limits. He turned to leave before he did something he would regret.

"Wait," Yanagisawa said, enjoying Sano's humiliation, wanting to prolong it. He asked the assembly, "Haven't we any other jobs for Sano-san?"

"I hear there's been a rash of shoplifting in the Nihonbashi merchant quarter." Yoritomo smiled spitefully at Sano. "Maybe he should investigate that."

"That's a good idea," the shogun said.

Indignation rose in Sano. That he should be relegated to chasing petty thieves! "Fine," he said. "I'll investigate the shoplifting." Duty was duty, and delivering petty criminals to justice was serving his personal code of honor, even though on a small scale. "Then I'll go after the real criminals." He cut a hostile glance at Yanagisawa and Yoritomo.

They were planning nothing less than to take over the country. Yoritomo had Tokugawa blood, which made him eligible to inherit the regime when the shogun died. He was far down the list for the succession, but Yanagisawa was determined to make Yoritomo the new shogun someday. He meant to rule Japan through Yoritomo for as long as they both lived.

That was nothing new. But Yanagisawa's chances of success increased every day. The shogun was getting older and frailer. Someone had to stop Yanagisawa soon.

Yanagisawa narrowed his eyes at Sano, then smiled a slow, tantalizing smile. "You're in no position to make threats. Not as long as your family is on this earth."

That was the threat that held Sano at bay—the harm that his enemy could do to his beloved wife and children. There was no place they could hide from Yanagisawa. His reach was long, his spies everywhere. Sano began to fear that he would never recover from the blow Yanagisawa had dealt him, that he would only fall further. But he resisted the defeat that tried to creep under his skin. He must regain his status and honor, and he must satisfy his burning need for revenge on Yanagisawa.

But how? And when? At age forty-five, he felt in danger of running out of time.

A palace guard entered the chamber. "Please excuse me, Your Excellency, but I have a messenger here, with news that can't wait."

“Bring him in,” the shogun said, smiling with a childlike delight in surprises.

Sano lingered on the veranda. Even though most affairs of state were no longer his business, he was curious about the news.

The guard ushered in the messenger. He was a boy, about twelve years old, dressed in a faded coat. He was panting and shaking. Snow clung to the hems of his trousers. He fell to his knees before the dais and bowed. His face was flushed, his eyes round, dark pools of fright.

“Speak,” the shogun commanded.

The messenger gulped, then said in a thin, trembling voice, “The honorable Kira Yoshinaka has been murdered!”

Shock stabbed Sano. A murmur of consternation rippled through the assembly. The shogun gasped. “My master of ceremonies? Ahh, what a blow to me this is!”

Master of ceremonies was a very important post. The court had elaborate rituals for banquets, audiences with the shogun, religious observance, and countless other occasions. That had made Kira indispensable. He’d been in charge of overseeing all details of the rituals. He’d coached the participants and rehearsed them. He’d been the only person who knew every minute, arcane rule of etiquette.

“How do you know Kira has been murdered?” Yanagisawa asked the messenger.

Kato said, “When was this?”

Ihara said, “Where?”

The messenger struggled to compose himself. “Last night. At Kira-san’s estate. I’m a kitchen boy there.” A sob caught in his throat. “I saw.”

Because his relationship with Kira had been strictly professional, Sano didn’t feel any grief over Kira’s death, but without Kira, Edo Castle could dissolve into chaos. Aside from the duties he’d performed for some forty years, Kira was a *hatamoto*—a hereditary Tokugawa vassal—from a high-ranking family, as well as a distant relation of the Tokugawa clan. His murder was bound to cause a sensation.

“How did it happen?” the shogun asked fearfully.

Tears spilled down the messenger’s cheeks. “His head was cut off.”

Exclamations of horror arose. “Who did it?” Yanagisawa seemed personally disturbed. Kira had been one of his cronies, Sano recalled.



THE RONIN'S MISTRESS

BUY THE BOOK NOW

**Amazon
Barnes & Noble
IndieBound**

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE BOOK

macmillan.com

