

LAURA JOH ROWLAND



BUNDORI

An exotic and fast-paced thriller of 17th-century Japan

Copyright © 1996 Laura Joh Rowland

The right of Laura Joh Rowland to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in Great Britain in 1996
by HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

First published in Great Britain in paperback in 1997
by HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

This edition published by arrangement with Random House, Inc.

A HEADLINE FEATURE paperback

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

ISBN 0 7472 5373 0

Typeset by
Letterpart Limited, Reigate, Surrey

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham PLC, Chatham, Kent

HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING
A division of Hodder Headline PLC
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

Edo

Month 3, Genroku Period/Year 2
(*Tokyo, April 1689*)

Prologue

As the hour of the boar approached, the great city of Edo lay shrouded in a heavy mist that blurred the darkness and muffled sound. A thin spring rain pattered onto the tile roofs of the Nihonbashi merchant quarter, puddling the narrow streets. Yellow lamplight glowed faintly behind the wooden lattices and paper panes of only a few windows; smoke from charcoal braziers rose to mingle with the mist and thicken the air still more. Although the city's many gates had not yet closed, blocking off passages from each section to the next, the streets were already as deserted as if midnight – nearly three hours away – had already arrived.

The lone stalker emerged from the shelter of a recessed doorway in a row of shopfronts whose sliding wooden shutters were closed tight against the hostile weather. The dank chill penetrated his cloak and seeped between the plates of the armor tunic beneath it. Cold moisture gathered under his wide-brimmed hat and inside the iron mask that covered his face. His body, already tense with anticipation, began to shiver. With each shallow breath, he inhaled and exhaled air that smelled of damp wood and earth and

LAURA JOH ROWLAND

the fishy taint of the Sumida River. Keeping to the shadows beneath the roofs' overhanging eaves, he moved sideways, stealthily, until he reached the next doorway. There he paused, all his senses alert for the first sign of his prey.

Moments passed. The night noises – voices from inside nearby houses, distant hoofbeats, the clatter of the night-soil carts making their way toward the fields outside town – gradually ceased as Edo prepared for the closing of the gates and the captivity it would endure until dawn. Quivering with impatience, the stalker peered down the street. His fingers traced the flat guards, shaped like human skulls, of his swords. Would the enemy appear tonight? Would he at last achieve the goal postponed for so many years?

The mist allowed him to see no farther than ten paces in any direction. To his right, he could barely discern the murky glow of a torch that lit the gate at the street's end. The night seemed empty of all movement and presence save his own. Frustration mounted; blood lust consumed him in waves of hot desire. As he waited, his fevered mind projected images at first vague, then more distinct, against the mist's dense blankness. If he squinted – there, just so – he could imagine himself back through the years to that time about which he'd heard so much that he knew it almost as well as his own. The time of constant and glorious civil war, before the village of Edo had burgeoned into a city of one million inhabitants; before the first Tokugawa shogun, Ieyasu, had subjugated his rivals and imposed peace upon the land.

The time of the greatest warlord who had ever lived.



Kiyosu Fortress, one hundred and twenty-nine years ago. A merciless summer sun blazed down upon the two thousand samurai sheltered within the wooden walls of the stockade. The stalker, though among the humblest of the foot soldiers, felt the unease that permeated their pitifully small army. This day could mean victory and life – or defeat and death – for them all.

‘He’s coming!’

The words, whispered from one man to the next, passed through the ranks. Along with his comrades, the stalker knelt and bowed, arms extended, forehead to the ground. But he couldn’t resist a quick glance upward as their feared and beloved lord passed.

Oda Nobunaga, lord of Owari Province, with ambitions of someday ruling the entire land, was resplendent in a suit of armor made from hundreds of metal and leather plates tied together with blue silk cord and lacquered in brilliant colors, and wearing a black iron helmet crowned with a pair of carved golden horns. He rode a magnificent black steed. His expression grave, he dismounted to confer with the three generals who accompanied him into the whitewashed wooden fort.

Another whisper swept the ranks: ‘Marune has fallen!’

Dread paralyzed the stalker. He gasped with the others. With the capture of Lord Oda’s frontier fortress, nothing stood between them and the enemy Lord Imagawa’s troops, twenty-five thousand strong, who were advancing on them even now. They were doomed. But his fear for Lord Oda overshadowed that which he felt for himself.



The sound of footsteps jolted him back to the present. Relinquishing his lingering terror and the image of the imperiled fortress, he looked into the street. Out of the mist to his left shuffled an elderly samurai, with the customary swords, one long and one short, at his waist.

The stalker savored the heady rise of excitement as he grasped the hilt of his own long sword. Trembling, he waited for the man to draw nearer. He focused his thoughts on the confrontation ahead. But a part of his mind leapt backward to that morning long past.

The fortress gates opened to admit two panting scouts. 'Imagawa's army is in the gorge outside Okehazama village!' they cried, hurrying to convey the news to Lord Oda.

Almost before the stalker or his comrades could comprehend the significance of this information, they were on the march. All two thousand of them, so few compared to the massive force that awaited them, mounted and on foot; first banner-bearers, gunners, and archers, then the swordsmen and spear-carriers, with Lord Oda and the generals bringing up the rear. They sweltered in the heat that baked the hills and rice fields.

Midday came. At last they stopped behind a hill just short of the gorge and waited for the command to act. From inside the gorge, the stalker could hear voices raised in drunken laughter and song. Imagawa's troops were celebrating their earlier victory. He listened and waited some more. A tense hush gripped the hillside and held him motionless, afraid to breathe.

Suddenly a mass of dark storm clouds boiled up out of the west, hiding the sun. Lightning split the sky; thunder shook the earth like the beat of a great war drum. The first raindrops pelted the earth. As if on this signal from the heavens, Lord Oda raised his great gold war fan and brought it down again, cleaving the air in a decisive motion. The conch trumpet blared the order:

Charge!

In one movement, they rose and ran toward the gorge. Great sheets of rain lashed the stalker as he struggled against the wind. Ahead of him, the first rank had disappeared into the gorge. He heard the boom of gunfire and the startled cries of Imagawa's army. Then, his heart pounding louder than the thunder, he skidded down the slope and into the swirling chaos that filled the gorge.

The storm had driven Imagawa's men to seek shelter under trees. Now they scrambled to load drenched and useless arquebuses, groped for bows, spears, and swords lost in the mud. But it was too late. Oda's troops fell upon them, slaughtering them by the hundreds. The clash of steel blades echoed up and down the gorge. Guns roared, emitting clouds of black smoke. Arrows sang through the air to strike flesh with meaty thumps. Screams of death agony echoed the attackers' murderous shouts. The metallic scent of blood overpowered the summer smells of sweat and rain. Into the raging battle rode Lord Oda. Sword raised high, he made straight for Lord Imagawa, who stood alone and unprotected. One expert slash of Oda's sword, one triumphant yell, and Imagawa lay dead.

Wild with ardor and admiration, the stalker drew his

sword and plunged into the melee. 'Lord Oda, I offer my life in your service!'

Now the old man had almost reached the doorway. The stalker could hear his wheezy breaths. His sword, already drawn for that battle long past, was in his hand. A fierce eagerness burned inside him as he slipped from the shadows to block his prey's path. The man uttered a whimper of surprise and stood still, one hand lifted in a gesture of greeting, or entreaty.

The stalker raised his sword in both hands and swung it in a swift, sideways arc. The blade sliced cleanly through the old man's neck. It severed his head, which hit the ground and rolled a few paces before coming to a halt faceup in the muddy street. A great gush of blood, black in the dim light, spewed from the neck as the body crumpled and fell.

Filled with the sweet fire of conquest, the stalker beheld the carnage that lay at his feet. He saw the remains of his present-day enemy; he could also see the fallen bodies of dead and wounded soldiers in the gorge. He longed to stand there and play out in his mind the short remainder of the Battle of Okehazama.

But he must not let his fantasy make him forget where – and in what time – he was, or the danger of remaining at the scene of a murder he'd just committed. Besides, he had much work to do before the gates closed. Sheathing his sword, he picked up the severed head and tucked it under his cloak. Then he hurried away through the misty streets and alleys.



The returning troops swarmed into Kiyosu Fortress on a wave of riotous excitement. Cheers and laughter rattled the stockade walls. Glee replaced the morning's despair. The battle of Okehazama had ended moments after it began – with Oda the victor. Lord Imagawa was dead; those few of his troops not killed in the gorge had fled in panic. Mikawa, Totomi, and Suruga Provinces belonged to Oda now, and the way was cleared for his march on Kyōto, the capital. The celebration would last through the night, with much drink, song, and revelry. But first would come the solemn ritual to mark Lord Oda's brilliant triumph.

Alone in a cramped room lit by a single guttering oil lamp, the stalker knelt and unwrapped the severed head. Tenderly he washed his bloody prize in a bucket of water and dried it with a clean cloth. Beside him sat a square board with a sharp iron spike thrust up through the middle. He mounted the head on this contraption, grunting with the effort as he forced it down upon the spike. At last the point penetrated the brain, and the neck was flush with the board. Carefully he combed the wispy grey hair and tied it in a pigtail with a piece of white string. He applied rouge to the pale, wrinkled cheeks to restore the color of life, and buffed the bald crown. He prodded the eyeballs with his fingers until they gazed downward in the manner considered most auspicious. Lighting a stick of incense, he waved it around the head to sweeten its odor. Finally he added the most important touch: the white paper label inked with black characters that explained the purpose of his deed. This he fastened to the dead man's pigtail. Then he stood and surveyed his

work. His heart swelled with pride as he gazed upon the head.

His *bundori*. His war trophy.

On the ramparts of Kiyosu Fortress, banners swayed in the evening breeze beneath the setting sun's red globe. War drums boomed; singers' chants rose to the heavens. Flaring torches lit the yard inside the stockade, where Lord Oda Nobunaga, still clad in full armor, sat on a stool, flanked by his generals. Arranged in ranks before him knelt his troops. Lord Oda nodded solemnly, ordering the ceremony to begin.

From the fort came a procession of samurai. Each brought a mounted head, which he placed at his lord's feet, then bowed before returning to the fort to fetch another. The stalker was fourth in line. His spirit soared skyward with the chants and drumbeats; he could scarcely contain his joy. Today he'd distinguished himself in battle by killing forty men singlehandedly. His reward: a place of honor in the procession and the recognition of his lord and peers.

This is only the beginning, he thought deliriously. He envisioned the future, seeing himself first as a commander, then as a general. And, when his end came, he would die in the glory of battle, paying his lord the ultimate tribute: his life.

Now it was his turn to pass before Lord Oda. Squaring his shoulders and looking straight ahead, he stepped forward, his *bundori* extended in both hands.

Outside the mist had thickened; the rain continued. Bent

under the weight of the large basket on his back, the stalker hurried through the empty streets toward the resting place he'd chosen for his precious trophy.

'Hurry home now,' a night sentry called to him as he slipped through a gate. 'Almost time for closing.'

The stalker ignored him. He must place the *bundori* where everyone could see and admire it and know the great deed he'd done. His time was rapidly slipping away; every moment increased the risk that someone might stop him. Yet he felt no fear or anxiety -- only a yearning for completion.

Quickly he scaled the rungs of a ladder that climbed up a shop's wall, above roof level to the platform of a tall, rickety wooden firewatch tower. The mist enfolded him, obliterating his view of the city below. He opened his basket and took out the head. His mind populated the night with shadowy figures and filled the dripping silence with drumming and chanting. He placed the head carefully on the platform and bowed deeply.

'Honorable Lord Oda,' he whispered. An almost sensual satisfaction overwhelmed him. 'Please accept this, my first tribute to you.'

Then he shouldered his basket and descended the ladder. Head high, he started homeward, feeling as if he'd slain not just one man but a legion of enemy soldiers, all the while dreaming of future victories.

1

In the vast, deep pond at Edo Castle's martial arts training ground, Sano Ichirō trod water furiously, trying to stay afloat. The two swords and full suit of armor he wore – tunic and shoulder flaps made of leather and metal plates, chain-mail arm shields, metal leg guards, helmet, and mask – threatened to drag him to the bottom. In his left hand he held a bow; in the right, an arrow. His lungs heaved with the effort of keeping these and his head above the water. Around him bobbed other samurai, fellow retainers of the shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, attending this morning's training session to practice the skills they would need in case they ever had to make war in a river, a lake, or at sea. At the pond's other end, more men fought a mock battle on horseback. Their movements churned the pond. A big wave washed over Sano's head. Water, foul with mud and horse droppings, gurgled into his helmet and mask. He gasped, spat, and barely managed to gulp a breath of air before the next wave hit him.

'You, there!' the *sensei* yelled from the bank of the pond. A long pole rapped sharply upon Sano's helmet. 'Body

straight, legs down. And keep that arrow dry! Wet feathers don't fly straight!

Mustering his strength, Sano gamely tried to follow the orders. His legs ached from executing the circular kicks necessary for maintaining an upright position. His left arm, recently wounded in a sword fight, throbbed; the other arm had gone numb. Each painful breath felt like his last. And he was freezing. The uncertain spring weather hadn't warmed away the pond's winter iciness. How much longer would this torture last? To take his mind off his physical distress, he squinted upward at his surroundings.

Man-shaped straw archery targets dotted the grassy space beside the pond. To Sano's right loomed the dark green pines of the Fukiage, the forested park that occupied the castle's western grounds and surrounded the training area. On his left, he could see the stands of the racecourse, from which came shouts, cheers, and hoofbeats. In the distance directly ahead of him rose the high stone wall that surrounded the inner castle precincts, where the shogun, his family, and his closest associates lived and worked in luxurious palaces.

Sano kicked harder to raise himself an infinitesimal distance higher above water level. The brilliant sunlight made dazzling jewels of the droplets that sprayed his eyes. He blinked them away and tilted his head back to look up at the castle keep: five splendid stories of whitewashed walls and multiple gleaming tiled roofs and gables that soared against the blue sky. A visible symbol of the complete and overwhelming Tokugawa military power, Edo Castle filled Sano with awe. After two months of living within its walls, he still

couldn't believe that it was home to him now. Even less could he believe in the fantastic series of events that had brought him here.

The son of a *rōnin* – a masterless samurai – he'd earned his living as an instructor in his father's martial arts academy, supplementing his family's meager income by teaching reading and writing to young boys. Then, just three months ago, through family connections, he'd attained the position of *yoriki*, one of Edo's fifty senior police commanders. He'd lost that position, suffered disgrace, dishonor, and physical agony, solved a puzzling murder case, saved the shogun's life – and ended up as Tokugawa Tsunayoshi's *sōsakan-sama*: Most Honorable Investigator of Events, Situations, and People.

The appointment was an undreamed-of honour, but Sano's move to the castle had created an enormous upheaval in his life. Cut off from everything and everyone he knew, he'd found himself adrift in a strange landscape filled with unfamiliar faces, swamped by new and confusing regulations and rituals. The training pond wasn't the only place where he had to struggle to keep his head above water. But the changes in his life hadn't stopped there. His father, whose health had been poor for many years, had died just fifteen days after Sano had left his family's house. With a sorrow still fresh and raw, Sano remembered his father's passing.

Kneeling before his father's bed, he'd pressed the old man's withered hand to his chest. Through the grief that swelled his throat, he tried to express the love and esteem he felt for his father, but the latter had shaken his head,