

THE RED WINTER TRILOGY: BOOK ONE



Red Winter

ANNETTE MARIE

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Also by Annette Marie

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Red Winter

Book One of the Red Winter Trilogy

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ALSO BY ANNETTE MARIE

THE RED WINTER TRILOGY

Red Winter

Dark Tempest

Immortal Fire

THE STEEL & STONE SERIES

Chase the Dark

Bind the Soul

Yield the Night

Feed the Flames

Reap the Shadows

Unleash the Storm



Dear Reader,

The Red Winter trilogy was inspired by the rich and varied mythology of Japan. Though based on a unique, captivating, and very real country and culture, the world within these pages is a fantasy of my own creation.

I hope you enjoy the tale to come!

Annette Marie



A NOTE ABOUT NAMES

A full glossary of names and terms, including pronunciations and definitions, is provided at the back of the book.

A spoiler-free pronunciation guide for character names and key terms, listed in order of appearance in the book, can also be found just before the glossary.

Use the Table of Contents to visit the guide and glossary.

AMATSUKAMI
OF THE HEAVENS



KUNITSUKAMI
OF THE EARTH

CHAPTER 1

mi stood at the head of the path. Somewhere among the trees was the shrine where she would spend her last two months as a mere mortal.

Behind her, the car she'd exited rumbled quietly, the humming of the engine the only sound in the still air. The dirt road wound up the gentle slope of the mountain, but the heavy blanket of colorful leaves suggested it was seldom travelled beyond this point. Thick tree trunks lined the road like a towering fence, the barrier broken only by the path just beyond her toes.

A car door slammed and she started, tearing her eyes from the dark corridor through the trees. Her escort opened the trunk and pulled out two simple suitcases. He walked around the car and dropped them in the dirt beside her with a thud. She frowned at her luggage, then at her escort.

"Thank you, Akio," she said politely anyway.

The path drew her gaze back. A chill breeze rushed across her, tugging at her long hair, and her breath puffed out in a white haze. It was only mid-autumn but the wind had the cold taste of winter. Gray clouds stretched between the rolling mountain peaks, dimming the late afternoon light.

Leaves rustled and crunched beneath approaching footsteps. Emi smoothed her hair and shook out the long, billowing sleeves of her *kimono* so they hung more gracefully. As she folded her hands neatly in front of her, three figures materialized out of the shadows and hurried down the path.

The group was led by an elderly man with weathered skin and a wide smile. His dark purple robes—the traditional garb of a *kannushi*, a priest of the shrine—fluttered about him with minimal dignity. He rushed toward her, arms outstretched, but before she could panic that he might try to embrace her, he shuffled to a stop and dipped into a deep, respectful bow.

“My lady!” His crackling voice warbled with excitement. “It is an honor, such an honor. Welcome to Shirayuri Shrine. Our home is small and humble—nothing like you’re accustomed to, I’m sure—but everything we have is yours to—”

The car door slammed again, cutting the *kannushi* off. Emi turned, bewildered to see Akio back in the driver’s seat. The engine revved as he pulled a sharp U-turn and accelerated back down the road. Heat rushed into her face as she gaped after the vehicle. She spun back to face the *kannushi*.

“My apologies for the rudeness of my escort,” she stammered. “I—I’m not sure ...”

She trailed off, at a loss to explain away Akio’s humiliatingly abrupt departure. She didn’t want to tell them he’d been dying to get rid of her for six months. Babysitting, as she’d heard him call it, didn’t suit him.

The *kannushi* waved his hands. “Not a worry, my lady. I’m well acquainted with the eccentricities of the *sohei*. They aren’t chosen for their perfect manners, are they, Minoru?”

He cast a good-natured smile over his shoulder at the other man who’d accompanied him. Minoru’s pleasant, open expression lessened the subtle air of threat he carried—not helped by his wooden staff, topped with a foot-long blade. But Emi was used to the armed and deadly *sohei*. She had nothing to fear from the shrine guardians.

The *kannushi* gestured widely. “But let me perform the introductions so we can quit standing here in the chilly wind! My lady, I am Fujimoto Hideyoshi, *kannushi* of the Shirayuri Shrine. Minoru here was trained by the best and his sole duty is to ensure your safety, as you know.”

She offered Minoru a small smile in greeting, which he returned. She relaxed a little. Maybe he wouldn’t resent her the way Akio had. Maybe this

shrine would be better than the last one.

“And this,” Fujimoto continued, indicating the woman beside Minoru, “is the lovely Nanako, our esteemed *miko* of nearly twenty years.”

Almost all shrines had at least one *miko*—a shrine maiden who assisted the *kannushi*. Nanako stood primly beside Minoru, her hands folded into the wide sleeves of her white kimono. Her red *hakama*—pleated, wide-legged pants—were as much a part of her uniform as the kimono. Emi wore the exact same uniform—with one minor difference. Nanako’s garments were worn and threadbare, the colors duller than they should have been and interrupted by thin, carefully stitched repairs. Emi’s, on the other hand, were of the finest material, the white as pure as fresh snow and the crimson *hakama* as vibrant as the red spider lily that grew wild in the forests and meadows of the mountains.

Emi attempted another smile, but Nanako merely nodded, the motion jerky and her brown eyes unfriendly. Emi swallowed a sigh. Maybe this shrine wouldn’t be any better after all. But it didn’t really matter; this was the last time. In two months, she would be gone, and the enmity of a *miko*, or any human for that matter, would no longer concern her.

To her consternation, Fujimoto launched into a brief history of his shrine instead of departing the barren roadside. She listened attentively anyway as he spoke of the shrine’s founding over a millennium ago, the location chosen to be a safe bastion on the edge of the barely explored wilderness to the north. Though it had suffered severe damage multiple times from wars and weather, the local people had lovingly rebuilt it, the most recent reconstruction having occurred two centuries ago.

The chilly wind whipped through the trees again, sending a swirl of autumn leaves dancing through the air. Fujimoto grabbed at his tall *kannushi* hat as the gust tried to snatch it from his head, breaking off halfway through his explanation of the recently updated housing on the grounds.

“My apologies,” he mumbled, waving Emi forward. “Why don’t we get out of the cold?”

She gratefully followed him onto the path, passing Minoru and Nanako. Her gaze rose warily as the forest canopy closed in over them. Green spruce and pine trees competed with arching boughs laden with yellow, orange, and red leaves. The occasional bare branch twisted through the colorful display like a skeletal arm.

The quiet clearing of a male throat stopped her. She glanced back to see Minoru standing on the path halfway between her and the road. He pointed with his chin.

Her luggage sat on the side of the dirt road, abandoned.

Fujimoto wrung his hands as his face reddened. "Minoru, good man, fetch the lady's bags, would you?" The words came out in a rush, his embarrassment obvious.

"I'm afraid I can't," Minoru replied in the kind of slow, deep voice that could quell any fear. He lightly thumped the butt of his bladed staff on the ground. "I can't be encumbered, just in case."

"Ah, yes, yes, the lady's safety is ... of course."

"I—I can get them," Emi said quickly. She'd never carried her bags before. She didn't even know how heavy they were. But she could do it. Nothing wrong with her arms.

She took a hurried step toward her luggage. Fujimoto made another yelping sound and grabbed her arm to stop her. She gasped.

Stuttering apologies, Fujimoto whipped his hand away as though she'd burned him. She backed away, pulling her composure around her like an invisible cloak, and projected a sort of distant calm that hid her true feelings.

"The envoy from Shion went through all this with you," Nanako said, cutting through Fujimoto's stream of apologies. Her rudeness toward her superior surprised Emi enough that she had to work to keep her expression blank. "You know the rules about touching the *lady*." Her cold eyes swept over Emi. "I will carry her bags."

Nanako strode past Emi, her hakama flapping around her legs. Didn't she know her pants wouldn't flap unbecomingly if she took smaller steps? Emi

might have mentioned it if not for that hint of a sneer when the woman had said “lady.” Emi had heard that sneer before and knew what it meant.

At Fujimoto’s prompting, Emi followed him deeper into the forest. The path was wide enough for several people to walk side by side but she followed a few steps behind him instead. Minoru trailed after them and Nanako trudged along at the rear, a suitcase in each hand.

Fallen leaves crackled under Emi’s sandals as she walked. The only other sound to interrupt the silence was the trickling song of a nearby creek. Minoru’s presence behind her was a comfort; nothing would harm her with an experienced sohei as an escort. He would die before he allowed any harm to befall her. Akio, despite his personal feelings about it, would have done the same.

A familiar structure emerged from the shadows and another notch of tension released from her spine. Ahead, two wooden columns rose on either side of the path. A horizontal beam across the tops of the posts created the shape of a doorway over the trail, and a second, thicker beam sat a foot above it with the distinctive curled ends that lifted toward the sky. The *torii* gate marked the end of the land of mortals and the beginning of the shrine grounds—the territory of the *kami*.

Fujimoto scurried through the gate without a thought. Emi stopped just before it, her gaze travelling over the faded red paint. Closing her eyes, she bowed solemnly before the gate to show her respect for the sacred, protected ground before she stepped across the threshold. As her foot touched the dirt path on the other side, visually indistinguishable from the mundane earth of the forest, a quiet peace whispered through her. Here she was safe.

As she joined Fujimoto, she belatedly noticed his red face, the embarrassed flush more pronounced than before. Minoru approached the torii, hesitated, then quickly bowed, following Emi’s example. Nanako stalked through last, no hesitation in her step. She brushed right by the three of them and started up the stone steps that rose just past the torii. Her sandals slapped against each step like an admonishing whip crack.

Nibbling her lower lip, Emi trailed after Fujimoto. She hadn't meant to embarrass him by observing protocol he had thoughtlessly skipped, but entering a new shrine—one that would be her home, however temporary—without bowing was just too disrespectful.

And really, as the kannushi, he should be the most obedient to the proper practices. It was *his* shrine.

She was still mulling over Fujimoto's unusual character—friendly and quite endearing, but lacking the poised and polished kannushi demeanor she was accustomed to—when she reached the top of the steps and the second, larger torii that denoted the shrine itself. She stopped to bow again before stepping onto wide, perfectly uniform stones. Across the long courtyard was the main building of the shrine. The hall of worship had two levels and bore a traditional roof in the shape of a shallow pyramid covered in clay tiles, with eaves that curled upward like once-rolled paper that would no longer lie flat.



As she examined the building, as shabby and faded as Nanako's miko uniform but just as well cared for, a fleck of white twirled downward a few inches from her nose. Another drifted down, and then snowflakes were falling all around them. Tiny spots of cold touched her cheeks as she tipped her face toward the overcast sky.

"The first snow!" Fujimoto remarked. "And only the second of November. Even in the mountains the snows don't usually arrive until December."

Footsteps scuffed against the stone path while Emi gazed upward. The first snow of her last winter. She gave herself a mental shake. Not her last forever, of course, but everything would change for her before the spring sun touched her skin again.

"Ah, look who's here," Fujimoto said cheerfully. "My lady, may I introduce your second guardian, a promising young sohei direct from Shion. Perhaps you've met?"

Pulling her attention away from the snow, she turned to the new arrival standing beside the kannushi. Her blood turned to ice, splintering in her veins.

"My lady, this is—"

"K-Katsuo!" she gasped, unable to stop herself.

"Ah!" Fujimoto looked between them. "So you two are acquainted, I see."

The young man smiled uncertainly at her. Of course she knew him. Three years had passed since she'd seen him, but his face was painfully familiar—those eyes, so dark but still somehow so warm, and his shaggy black hair brushed aside to reveal that little wrinkle of concentration between his eyebrows. Oh yes, she knew him. He'd featured in her nightmares so many times she could never forget his face.

Katsuo's smile faded under her shocked stare.

Fujimoto cleared his throat again. "My lady, may I offer you a tour of the —"

"I am tired," she announced, bowing in apology. "I would like to rest. Please take me to my lodgings."