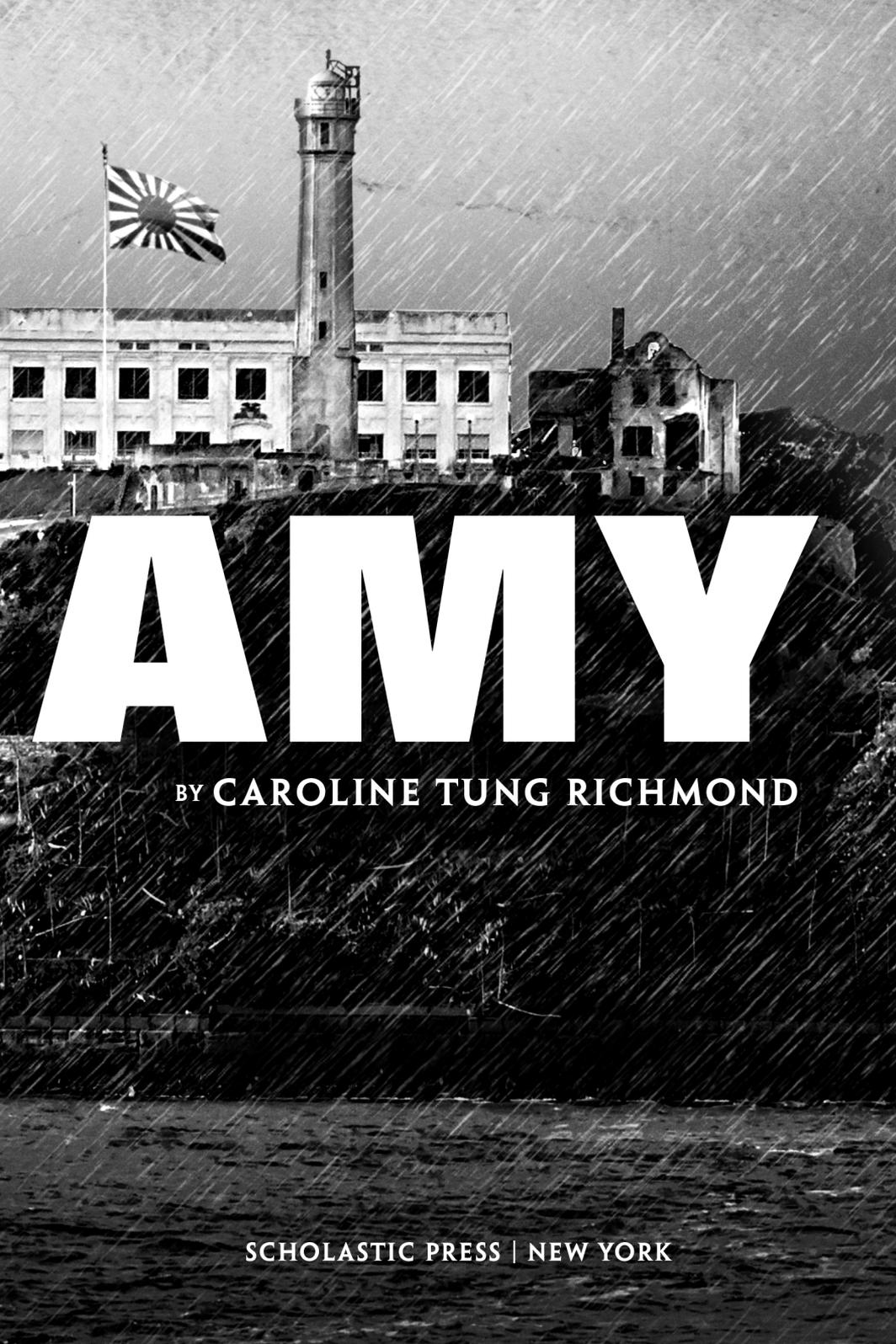


A black and white photograph of a coastal scene. In the foreground, there is a body of water with ripples. A steep, rocky cliffside rises from the water's edge. At the top of the cliff, a classical-style building with several columns is visible. The entire image is overlaid with a heavy rain effect, represented by numerous diagonal white lines. Large, bold text is superimposed over the center of the image. The text is split into two lines: the top line is in black and the bottom line is in white.

**LIVE IN**  
**INF**



# AMY

BY CAROLINE TUNG RICHMOND

SCHOLASTIC PRESS | NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-11109-5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 18 19 20 21 22

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, April 2018

Book design by Phil Falco

# 1

By the time he turned sixteen, Ren had witnessed three executions.

The first criminal had been a boy, barely old enough to shave. Ren had been seven at the time and had watched from behind his mother's back as the soldiers dragged the boy up the cliff and pushed him to his knees. But that hadn't stopped the boy from shouting, "Freedom or death! Long live the United States of America!" Until, at last, he was silenced.

The second criminal had been a young father, still dressed in the gray pajamas that he had been wearing when the soldiers first arrested him. His crime? Paying a bribe to free his wife from Alcatraz prison. His sentence? Immediate death. As the winds howled over the Pacific bluffs, the young father had begged for mercy – not for himself but for his children. His three daughters had also been taken into custody, even the youngest, who still sucked her thumb. Rumor had it that the girls were sent to an orphanage on the Oregon coast or driven south to an internment camp near New Tokyo, the city formerly called Los Angeles. Either way, Ren never saw them at school again.

The last criminal had been a middle-aged woman, with bruised eyes and a broken nose but who kept her head held high until the very end. Ren had just turned eleven and was burning with the winter fever that would nearly kill him, but that hadn't stopped him

from watching the execution — because attendance was mandatory and because the criminal was his mother.

While the crowd had gathered on the sunny beach, Ren wheezed and leaned on his father's broad shoulder. Forty feet above their heads, the soldiers marched Ren's mom to the lip of the killing cliffs. Ren's father held back tears while Ren almost threw up. Neither of them could do a thing, except watch.

The executioner sharpened his long blade, while Crown Prince Takamado of the Western American Territories lifted a bullhorn to his lips. First came the charges: *treason*. Then the sentence: *death*.

Through it all, Ren's mother never flinched, even though she would soon meet a slow and painful end. She stared out at the cold waves before she searched the crowd for her family. When their eyes met, she nodded at her husband and she gave Ren — her son, her only child — one last smile.

"Don't look," she mouthed to them both.

Ren's father tried to shield his son's eyes, but Ren struggled free.

"Help her," Ren whispered desperately. "We have to help her."

But the sword plunged in fast.

The blood poured in a rush.

And Ren collapsed to the sand.

That would be the last execution in the town of White Crescent Bay — until today.

# 2

The shop closed early that day for the killing.

At a quarter past two, Ren finished a neat row of stitches on a pair of trousers while his father locked up the cash register. Not one customer had stepped into the Cabots' tailoring and cobbling shop since they opened their doors this Friday morning, and Ren couldn't blame them for that. Nobody was in the mood to buy a spool of thread or drop off a shoe with a broken strap — not with a three o'clock execution looming over their heads.

"Time to go," said Mr. Cabot, glancing out the front window that overlooked East Main Street. "Looks like they're starting the roundup already."

Ren lifted his gaze from the worktable, which was piled high with bolts of low-quality wool and secondhand cotton, and squinted through the window blinds. Beyond the shop door, a dozen soldiers from the Imperial Japanese Army barked orders along the road, each one armed with a pistol on the hip and a rifle over the shoulder. Theirs looked particularly hungry today.

One of the soldiers read from a piece of paper, bellowing: "Attention all! By decree of the Empire of the Rising Sun, every resident of White Crescent Bay must head to the beach for a formal announcement. Anyone found in noncompliance will be fined and face arrest."

Up and down the road, the citizens obeyed. The grocer's lights shut off, followed by the pawnshop. The apartments emptied out, too. The residents hurried onto the sidewalk, forming a row as neat as one of Ren's stitches, but one of them — an elderly woman who sold vegetables around the corner — tripped, stumbling into a soldier's back. She bowed in apology, but not fast enough. The soldier slapped the woman hard and pushed her onto the sidewalk before storming off. After he left, she struggled to her feet, with her knees bloodied and shaking. No one dared to help her.

At the sight of it all, Ren tensed and stood from his worktable. He wanted to make sure that the woman was okay, but his father quickly shut the blinds.

"Leave it be," Mr. Cabot said, a weary warning. "It's not our business."

Ren stood on his tiptoes to get another look, looming a half head taller than his father, thanks to a recent growth spurt. "I just wanted to see —"

"You know we have to be careful. Those soldiers have orders to keep an eye on us."

"I know." Ren sank back onto his heels, and his heart sank with them. "But I had to know if that lady was all right."

"I'm sure she'll be fine. Get the lights." Mr. Cabot turned away from his son. The matter was closed.

Ren swallowed the sour taste in his mouth. Five years ago, his father would've helped that old woman. His mother would have, too. But that was before the Cabots had lost everything — before Ren's mom was arrested and killed on top of the cliffs, and before the patrol cars started lingering outside the shop. Ren had lost count of

the times when the soldiers would pop into the store unannounced and stomp upstairs to the Cabots' apartment. They'd kick over the beds to search for contraband: illegal radios, banned newspapers, an old copy of the Constitution, anything that could lead to an arrest. But they never found a thing – Mr. Cabot made sure of it. Losing his wife had changed him. Nowadays, he followed the rules and fell into line and forsook his past, rarely mentioning the rebel Resistance that he had once been a part of and never speaking about the illegal newspaper that his wife had run almost single-handedly. And he expected Ren to do the same.

Ren may have lost his mother to Imperial Japan, but in some ways, he had lost his dad to it, too.

“Can you grab the keys?” Mr. Cabot called from the back room.

Ren was about to do just that when he saw someone approaching the shop. Dread filled every corner of his stomach. “Dad? Looks like we’ve got company.”

His father hurried back into the shop's main room. “Is it a patrol? Or a Ronin Elite?”

Before Ren could answer, the front door was flung open and a single soldier stomped into the store with his rifle swinging. He wore a cloth cap on his head, a rising sun patch on his arm, and a standard gray uniform that marked him as a low-ranking private. Fortunately, he wasn't a member of the Ronin Elite – the most feared soldiers in the imperial military – but Ren's throat still closed like a noose. He would never get used to these visits.

“Why haven't you two left yet?” the soldier asked in Japanese. He looked about Ren's age, but the haughtiness in his eyes was generations older. “Didn't you hear the announcement?”