



The  
Sinking  
City

CHRISTINE COHEN



canonball

BOOKS

an imprint of canonpress

MOSCOW, IDAHO

Published by Canonball Books, an imprint of Canon Press  
P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, Idaho 83843  
800.488.2034 | [www.canonballbooks.com](http://www.canonballbooks.com)

Christine Cohen, *The Sinking City*  
Copyright © 2021 by Christine Cohen

Cover design by James Engerbretson, [james-e.com](http://james-e.com)  
Cover illustration by Meghan Antkowiak, [instagram.com/meg.kowiak.art](https://www.instagram.com/meg.kowiak.art)  
Interior design by Valerie Anne Bost  
Interior illustration by Forrest Dickison

Printed in the United States of America.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without prior permission of the author, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Library of Congress CIP data is forthcoming.

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

FOR JOEL,  
*my best friend through calm and troubled waters.*





# Chapter One

**E**IGHT.

That's the number of times Master Anselmi has insulted me today. I might appreciate his gift for colorful comparisons, if they weren't so often aimed at my musical shortcomings.

"You scrunch your fingers together like a baby clutching his rattle," he mutters.

*Nine.*

He pushes my fingers apart on the wooden bow, and I suppress a scowl. I'm standing near the balcony, and the cool breeze drifting off the canal brushes my forehead with

a sympathetic hand. My neck itches, and my arms ache from this wretched position. I want to put the violin away and escape upstairs, back to the garden patch on the upper terrace where my tulips are unfolding in bloom. But, so long as Father hasn't changed his mind, this will be my last music lesson. So I swallow my irritation and adjust my fingers once more.

"Better. Again. One, two, three, four. One, two, and begin."

I hold the violin to my jaw and slide the bow across the strings. Closing my eyes, I imagine the girls who played at the Pietà last week. The graceful dip and curve of their arms, the gentle bobbing of their heads—

"Your wrist!" Master Anselmi snaps, and my eyes fly open. "Keep your wrist higher than the bow. *Higher*, Signorina Liona."

From her perch at the writing desk across the room, my younger sister Olivia giggles, her black curls dancing like marionettes. Beside her sits a kitten made of smoke that Mother bought from a street magician. Smoke animals don't last much longer than a week, and this one is starting to fade around the edges. When Olivia laughs, the kitten bunches up its cloudy legs, leaps off the desk, and drifts behind her chair. I scrunch up my face at Olivia in mock annoyance.

"How many times have I said this?" Master Anselmi continues. "And yet your wrist droops like . . . like a sinking gondola."

*Ten.*

My teacher pushes the velvet curtains aside and gazes out the window as if he'd like to jump into the canal and be free of me. I'm tempted to suggest it. I should be eating honey cakes and examining dissected flowers with my magnifying glass, not forcing my fingers to perform a task they detest. "Again," he commands. "One, two, three, four."

I crook my elbow and run the bow across the strings, and for a moment the sound is pure and crisp. Then my arm slips, and the violin lets off a shriek.

Master Anselmi flinches. "Mother Mary, help me," he mutters. "I do my best with what you have given me."

A gull screeches outside the window, drawing my attention to the radiant beauty of the late winter morning. The sky is a vivid violet swath above the green lagoon, as if the heavens have unfurled a banner for my sixteenth birthday. In the distance, the sails of fishing boats hover like crimson birds above the water. If I squint, I can see the rich web of spells that supports our floating city gleaming in the sunshine. Venice is ripening with the colors of approaching spring, and my hands itch for my gardening tools to welcome all this exuberant new life into the world. Most Venetian noblewomen, including my mother, hire magicians to make their gardens more lush, their flowers brighter. I prefer patience and a good trowel.

Master Anselmi clasps his hands behind his back. "And again. One, two—"

A knock at the door disturbs his counting.

“I’ll answer it,” I say quickly, thanking whatever saint oversees well-timed interruptions.

When I open the door, the words die on my lips. The young man in front of me is shaking. Sweat cuts rivers through the dust on his face. He holds a girl no older than two who is solemnly sucking her thumb and forefinger. I recognize him instantly, although it’s been years since we last spoke. His father works as an examiner on my father’s ships, ensuring that they’re seaworthy. We’d played together as children, until mother decided I was too old for trips to the Arsenal.

“Benito, what’s wrong?” I open the door wider, wondering how he slipped past the servants. “Come in.”

“I can’t stay,” he gasps, and shifts the girl higher on his hip. This must be his sister; I remember four younger siblings, but I never met this one. “They’ve already taken him away.”

“Taken who?”

Behind me, Master Anselmi clears his throat.

Benito rubs at his eyes with his free hand. “Father. They found him guilty.”

And then I remember. One of my father’s ships—*La Micella*—sunk last month. I’d assumed it was a storm, but now my stomach tightens in fear. I can see Benito’s father in my mind: his graying beard and kind smile. The knotted rope ends he saved for us to play with.



“Guilty?” I repeat.

“They say he didn’t perform the final checks, that he sent the ship out with a cracked rudder. It’s not true.”

“Where are they taking him?”

Benito’s face twists. “The prison by Saint Mark’s Square. They’ll hang him this afternoon.”

“Hang him,” the girl pulls her fingers out of her mouth and echoes him brightly, uncomprehending.

“Liona, shut the door.” Master Anselmi’s voice is high and annoyed, but I ignore him.

“What can I do?” It’s too late for a character witness. And if they are already leading him to the square . . .

“Ask your father to write a letter of pardon,” Benito says.

“Mama sleeping,” his sister remarks.

I shake my head. “He can’t overrule the magistrate.”

“Mama *sleeping*,” the girl says impatiently. Benito puts a hand over her mouth.

“She’s not sleeping, Vi, she fainted. Liona, please. Please help me. He’ll hang like a criminal. But it wasn’t him.” He lowers his voice. “It was the Seleni, I’m sure of it.”

At the mention of the underwater creatures, a chill courses through me. When we were young, Benito had whispered stories of ships sinking in still lagoons and children disappearing from bridges at twilight. *Don’t stand too close to the water’s edge. They’re always watching. Always waiting.*

Master Anselmi scoffs from behind me. “Nonsense. The Seleni are a peaceful race.”

“I don’t think a letter of pardon will help,” I say. I glance around as if the answer might come to me in the drawing room. Olivia worries her lip as she watches us. Her smoke kitten bats at its evaporating tail. Master Anselmi’s arms are crossed. His foot taps a disapproving beat.

“But it’s your father’s boat.” Benito’s eyes tighten in desperation. “I’ve seen it before. A patrician can pardon if it’s his own boat. But you have to ask him now, they’re—”

“Signorina Liona,” Master Anselmi interrupts. His leather shoes pad across the rug toward us. “We have another half hour of lessons.” Without a glance at Benito, he shuts the door.

“Wait!” I cry, but Master Anselmi refuses to move. His wide black robes eclipse the door. Vi whimpers on the other side.

“I am paid to provide violin lessons, not hear charity cases.”

I ball my hands into fists, thinking quickly. As his student, I’m obligated to obey him, but as a patrician’s daughter, I could order him to step aside. No, I can’t waste time arguing, and Master Anselmi is in no mood to hear it anyway. My sister and I lock eyes. She points at herself and holds her hands up in pantomime of a violin. Precious Olivia, she’s giving me a way out. *Thank you*, I mouth. As Anselmi leads me back across the room, my sister sashays toward us.

“Master Anselmi,” I say firmly, “today you may give your lesson to a far superior student.”

Olivia snatches up the violin and slides into position by the window, beaming a smile. I bob a curtsy, dash across the room, and throw open the door. Benito is still standing there. Hope flickers in his eyes.

“Let’s go.” I gather up my skirts and break into a run down the long hall to the grand marble staircase with Benito and his sister close behind.



Father’s office is on the ground floor beside the canal. Each day gondolas pass through his portico and deposit their wares, and Father is always there to meet them.

I love spending time in his storeroom; the air holds a host of different smells, depending on which of his ships has made port. Sacks of cloves and cinnamon, baskets of ginger, the musky smell of rolled carpets, the sweet, milky scent of sandalwood. I can almost imagine myself in the bazaars of far-off lands, haggling over pepper or wax or weightless silks.

But I can’t daydream today. I’ll need all my wits to convince Father. His ships are as precious to him as children, and losing one to the waves is a bitter fortune.

I’ll need to tread carefully. And I’ll need to go alone. I glance at Benito as we walk—his disheveled clothes and dirt-smeared face—and Vi whose nose is now dripping between the fingers still lodged in her mouth. If I bring them, Father will be even less likely to help. He’ll remind me of

other families bereft of food and wages because his ship failed to reach its destination.

Perhaps I should have sent Olivia instead. Father grants her requests far more often than mine, but there's no time to get her now. And while I may not be the favorite daughter, I am better at arguing a case.

As we pass one of the adjoining storerooms, I guide Benito and Vi inside.

"Wait here," I say. "It's better if I speak to him alone."

Benito hesitates as if he means to argue, but I shake my head. "Trust me. I'll do what I can."

I pat the buoyant curls on Vi's head and walk away, gathering my thoughts as I hurry toward the door at the end of the hall. It's closed, which means Father is in a meeting. Otherwise, it stays open so he can watch the comings and goings in the storerooms.

Before I even reach the door, I know who's on the other side. The smell slips through the wood, soaks into my skin, and I suppress a shiver. It's the smell of rotting seaweed, of salt and bogs and decay. Of death by water.

*Seleni.*

Traders of pearl. Ancient as the waters they inhabit, they swam into our lagoon long before anyone now living was born and begged to be allowed to stay. Some think the patricians should never have agreed to it, no matter how much pearl they offered. My father calls them tricksters and refuses to trade with them, so I'm baffled that there's one with him

now. I quiet my breathing and press my ear against the door.

“There must be another way,” my father says. His words come out fast and strained.

“There is none.” The voice grates like a knife on rocks.

“I have three ships—”

“What use have I for ships?”

I strain to catch the answer. Are they talking about the sinking of *La Micella*? Is Father in danger of losing more cargo?

Something crashes in the room and I jump, reaching for the door handle, ready to rush in at the first sounds of a fight. The Seleni may have signed a peace agreement, but I don’t trust any creature with that many teeth not to bite. Then Father speaks again, and I exhale, pulse pounding.

“I won’t do it.”

I smile slightly. The Seleni love to lure patricians into rash trades, but my father has always stood firm. Others have paid a steep price for their greed, but the Carvatti family’s hands are clean.

The Seleni laughs. I’ve never heard one laugh before. It sounds more like the bark of a sea-lion, quick and harsh.

“You have no choice.”

The air turns cold, and I back away from the door. Unlike the patricians who wear dark robes—solemn guardians of the great state of Venice—the Seleni’s pearl-colored robes drape over their lithe forms like burial shrouds. They all look the same, more or less: willowy as reeds, a head taller than an

average man, their skin the opalescent hue of milk droplets in water. My father says that the ones he's met have all been male, and that if there are female Seleni, then they stay below the waves, but I'm not convinced there is a difference. They all look like monsters to me. As a child I was so frightened of their pale faces that I would burst into tears if one passed me on the street. It seemed as if those eyes lingered especially long on me. Even now, as the door opens, my stomach constricts at the overpowering smell of death.

This Seleni stares down at me as he glides past. His eyes are round with large pupils, deep golden irises, and no eyelids. I do not look away. I want him to know that I'm not intimidated by his presence.

Something *is* different about this one. He's larger than the others, and he carries himself the same way our esteemed doge does, as if all of Venice rests on his shoulders. He wears a silver crown inlaid with pearls. Silver bracelets wrap up his wrists and scrape together as he moves. The sound sets my teeth on edge. He stoops into a bow that catches me off guard.

"Signorina Liona," he murmurs. "I have been waiting for you."

"I wasn't summoned," I snap. I should not be so afraid of this monster. He's in my house, my city. He has no authority here, and yet a damp chill still spreads across my skin.

"Tell me, what do you know of my kingdom?" he asks.

"Kingdom is a generous term," I say. "It's a tomb."

His nostrils flare. “The halls of my palace shine not with gold, but they have a splendor far surpassing anything your feeble sun might shine upon.”

“It’s easy to mistake pebbles for pearls when you live in the shade,” I reply.

He barks again. “Such quick wit.” He raises his arm, and his clammy fingers brush my cheek. “And such pink skin,” he murmurs. I clench my teeth and hold my ground.

“That’s enough!” My father claps his hands twice. “My servant will see you out.”

A man appears from the closest room and motions for the Seleni to make his way down the hall. He bows to me again, but this time there is mockery in the motion.

“I am the lord of the Seleni,” he says. “Soon, you will bow to me instead. All of you.”

Before I have a chance to respond, he sweeps down the hallway. Our servant walks stiffly behind, one hand resting on a dagger at his waist.

When I turn back, my father is seated at his desk, watching the creature’s retreat. His eyes are troubled. A broken Greek vase lies in pieces on the ground.

“Father,” I say tentatively.

Slowly he focuses on me, but still he doesn’t smile. I’m not surprised, he rarely smiles at me.

“Liona,” he says, blinking as if to clear his eyes of emotion. “Come in.” His shoulders straighten and, as if by reflex, I straighten mine as well.