

From *Jenny Kidd*:
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CHAPTER ONE

The Dandy Randi

Jenny Kidd stood at arm's length from the Vasily Kandinsky painting, "White Cross." She had an overwhelming urge to rotate it, so the upside down "3s" were righted, just to satisfy her visual curiosity. Sometimes she felt the same way about her life. If only she could examine it at a distance, turn its orientation, and set off in another direction. That wish had prompted her trip to Venice, a destination her grandmother had said was an enchanted place for artists.

The city was lovely in late September—still monstrously crowded and expensive, but Jenny had a quiet flat off Campo Santo Stefano, furnished and hers for ten weeks, an apartment swap arranged with a Venetian friend studying in New York. Even with the free rent, the cost of living and airfare had depleted Jenny's savings and was quickly skyrocketing her credit card debt. It would be such a relief to have a wealthy and supportive patron, someone like Peggy Guggenheim, whose famous art collection she was now admiring.

As she was musing on this, she began to walk out of the museum's drawing room, then hesitated, sensing vibrations coming from someone nearby. She studied the visitors but saw no one special. A few minutes later, when the place was closing, Jenny reluctantly left. Strolling home, she attributed the odd feeling to a desire to be with people. Living in this romantic city by herself was surprisingly sad, as if Venice's beauty could not be assimilated into her being unless she shared the experience. Despite her shyness, she had attempted to make friends, first by chatting with tourists, but soon learned this was pointless. They were like fruit flies: quickly gone. So, too, were most young Venetians, who scurried off at day's end for Mestre and the mainland because they couldn't afford to live in their own city. And even if she met someone, would it be a man or a woman? Jenny was frustrated by her ambivalence, a confusion that had become more pronounced in recent months and especially in this foreign place, where she was liberated from her personal history and the overshadowing influence of her parents.

The next morning, over a croissant and coffee, Jenny felt a compulsion to return to Dorsoduro and the Guggenheim Collection. She donned white shorts and a white linen collarless blouse and hurriedly brushed her hair back off her forehead, wishing for the millionth time she'd inherited her mother's radiant golden tresses instead of her father's

straight, nondescript, ash blond mane, as she disparagingly thought of it. Of course anything that reminded Jenny of her father was disagreeable, such as her angular cheekbones and chin, features that suited his autocratic personality but not her own.

Jenny gathered up her sketchbook and set off for the Accademia Bridge. At the high point of the arch, she paused to watch the frantic traffic on the Grand Canal: gondolas, a vaporetto, a construction barge, and several sleek water taxis nosing through the churning wakes. Crossing to the other side, she headed left for the museum, paid the entrance fee, and walked to the drawing room, where, to her annoyance, a woman was standing in front of the Kandinsky. Exactly in the spot Jenny wanted to view the painting.

She waited, sighing with impatience. The woman had cropped blond hair with a swatch in front of her ears, a kind of sideburn effect. Average height, with a languid posture that reminded Jenny of a dandy. Louche. Was that the word? The Kandinsky usurper rested her left hand on her hip as she studied the canvas, her back slightly swayed, one leg forward. All she needed was a lorgnette or pince-nez glasses.

Perhaps sensing the intense scrutiny, the woman turned, affixing large blue eyes on Jenny. Embarrassed that her examination had been noticed, Jenny looked away, but it was too late. The woman was coming toward her. A strange panic quickened her pulse.

“Isn’t this an amazing painting?” the woman asked, placing a light hand on Jenny’s arm.

Startled at the touch, Jenny gazed into a boyish face, almost pre-adolescent in its purity except for lines around the eyes that placed the woman a few years past her own age of 26. The woman’s features were neat and clean, with a modest, straight nose, and gold metal spectacles perched on top.

“Yes, it is,” she agreed.

“Simply mesmerizing, don’t you think?”

Jenny nodded.

“My name is Randi.” The woman’s smile was cheerful; the voice sounded British.

“Mine’s Jenny.”

Although she was usually reticent with strangers, Jenny found herself explaining that she’d visited the museum on the previous day and had been haunted by the Kandinsky. “I couldn’t get it out of my mind last night and so I came back to see it again.”

“Really? How fascinating!” Randi made this banal comment sound sophisticated. “I was here, too. In the afternoon.”

“Mmm.” Jenny pondered this coincidence, wondering if it had been Randi’s presence she’d felt the day before. She focused on the work in front of her and let the silence unwrap between them. Perhaps the woman would wander off in the absence of encouragement.

“This is a ripping collection,” the woman said. “Isn’t it?”

Jenny didn’t know how she felt about continuing the conversation. However, it was a relief to talk to someone, especially about a subject she was interested in. “Yes, this collection is astonishing. Once radical, but now most people consider the work tame. Personally, I think the art is very fresh.”

“Quite so.” Randi struck the earlier pose, right foot forward. “What element of this painting do you like best?”

Jenny was imagining Randi in a paisley smoking jacket. “That’s an interesting question.” She thought for a moment, then replied, “I suppose any use of figure/ground interests me.”

Randi turned to her, one eyebrow raised. “Figure/ground? Are you an artist?”

“Well, yes. I do paint a little.” Jenny felt a flush creeping up her neck. She hoped it wasn’t visible.

Randi noted the reaction with a twitch of amusement but said nothing. Looking at the Kandinsky, she asked, “Do you mean the way the white cross seems to lift off the black?”

“Yes, but in the white area of the same panel, the black squares also appear to advance, which creates optical discordance, a kind of forward and backward effect. The negative space becomes positive, the subject. Part of this is accomplished by the use of the white versus the black.”

“Oh?”

Jenny went on despite her shyness. “Optically, white and light colors tend to come forward; black and dark colors tend to recede. This sets up the trick, as the visual expectation is reversed, and the brain is confused and disoriented. In this painting, in this one section, opposite movements occur.”

Randi draped a hand on Jenny’s arm as if they were old friends. Jenny felt the heat even though the woman’s fingers were cool. “You must be a teacher.”

The color rose again on Jenny’s face. “Yes. I’m a painting instructor.”

“What fun! I am impressed! Where and for how long?”

“Since 1999. I moved to New York last year.” Encouraged, Jenny continued, “Kandinsky was experimenting with geometric shapes—the repeated circles, for example.” She was more comfortable looking at the painting than Randi, who had positioned herself within Jenny’s personal space.

The two women were silent, observing the work. Then, a little flustered, Jenny stepped back. “Well, it was nice meeting you.”

“Yes, but must you rush off? Fancy a cup of tea? Or a coffee?”

“I don’t think so.”

The hand on the arm again. “Oh, but I insist!”

Jenny examined the woman’s pleasant face. Why not? What could possibly happen?
“All right.”

“Crackerjack!”

Jenny was a little surprised by the hearty enthusiasm of the woman’s speech. She had a British accent, a refined one, but her words and expressions sounded forced, as if cobbled together from English movies. With some misgivings, Jenny followed Randi out through the courtyard. As she had the day before, she pondered the oft-told rumor that the Venier family had once kept a lion chained in the front area—one explanation for the name: Palazzo Venier dei Leoni. She related the story to Randi.

“That is absolutely marvelous!” Randi said. “Imagine a hungry, growling beast instead of that statue.” She pointed to a Henry Moore bronze.

“Or maybe the statue transforms into a lion. See the lion’s open mouth?”

Randi gave a short bark of laughter. “All the way to the tonsils!”

Thus chuckling over their invention, the two women walked along the Rio San Vio, a canal bisecting the Dorsoduro sestiere. At a small café, Randi stopped, crooked her head

as if to ask if the table was acceptable, and then pulled out a chair for Jenny. Very gentlemanly, Jenny thought, with some amusement and some discomfort. God, the woman was so obviously gay! Jenny asked for an iced tea. Randi ordered hot tea and was brought a selection in a cherry box. While she examined her choices, Jenny examined her. Handsome, fresh-faced, flat-chested—it was difficult not to notice since the woman's yellow Oxford shirt was unbuttoned far enough to reveal the absence of a bra. Blue-and-white seersucker pants and brown tasseled loafers. No socks. The most flamboyant aspect of her outfit was a red silk handkerchief blooming out of the breast pocket of her shirt. As if subconsciously aware of Jenny's inspection, Randi pulled it out and blotted some perspiration from her forehead.

"Bloody hot," she exclaimed.

"Mmm, yes."

"What's your last name?" the woman asked.

"Kidd."

"Like the pirate?"

Jenny nodded. "Same family, several centuries back."

"So you're from a family of dodgers? I say, do you have treasure buried somewhere?" Randi asked with a trace of flirtatiousness.

"I should be so lucky."

"Stolen hearts, no doubt."

This was outright flirting. No mistaking it. A quick diversion was in order. "What's your last name? And where are you from?" Jenny was still puzzling over Randi's odd accent.

"Carroll," she replied. "I'm from here and there. Roundabouts." This elusive statement was accompanied by a carefree grin.

"You must be from somewhere—"

"Why? Perhaps I just sprang up like a wild garden rose! Ha!"

The exuberance was a bit disconcerting. "London?" she guessed.

"At times."

"Do you live here?"

"Not quite. I spend a few months every autumn. Depends..."

Intrigued in spite of her reticence, Jenny was curious. "On what?"

Randi had been tipping her chair back and now sat forward. "On the weather...or if things hot up with a beautiful girl." Here, she lowered her head and stared over her rectangular glasses.

"I see." Unsettled by this clear indication of attraction, Jenny fiddled with her lemon wedge. "And what do you do? I mean, for a living."

"My dear!" She opened her arms expansively. "I do as little as possible. It is not my nature to worry about such things."

Jenny had never encountered a person like Randi and was at a considerable loss. Distracted, she added a second packet of sugar to her iced tea.

"And where are your digs?" the woman inquired.

"Do you mean in New York? I live in Greenwich Village."

"Ah, a bohemian? First rate! Hmm, I have rather a good thought. You're just the person to perk up tonight's soiree. Sometimes they're dreadfully dull." She gave Jenny an owlish look. "But then again, sometimes the most amazing things happen. At any rate, the

Barbons have a get-together once a month when the moon is full. I know it's short notice, particularly since it's fancy dress—you know, costumes—but it would be absolutely super if you'd come."

This was the only invitation she'd received during the first eight days of her ten-week stay. Jenny conjured up a smoky, opium-filled den replete with women in black tie and wished the event was a standard heterosexual party, dinner for six, polite. She attempted to swallow her indecision with tea and choked. Randi instantly stood and slapped her on the back. Coughing, Jenny thanked her and insisted she was fine.

After the fit subsided, Randi leaned toward her. "So, are we on?"

Jenny wiped her eyes with a tissue. "In costume?"

"I'll give you the name of a place where you can rent duds." Without waiting for a reply, Randi took out a purple fountain pen from a trouser pocket and wrote two addresses on a napkin. "This one's the fancy dress shop," she said, "and this is where the party is. Pop round about 9:00. Not crack on, but thereabouts."

Jenny stared at the block capital letters and was reassured by the neat handwriting. "Okay. Can I bring anything?"

"Just yourself. Now, so sorry, mate, but I have to do a runner. Can't be helped." She stood up and walked into the café before Jenny could offer to pay. When Randi came out, she grinned. "Later! Cheerio!"

Stunned by the fast departure, Jenny finished her tea and contemplated the evening's prospects.

Calle del Paradiso indeed! Jenny thought it was a joke until she had consulted a map and located the street near the Rialto Bridge in San Polo. Now, out of breath and hot in her black floor-length cape, tricorne hat, and full-face Tragedy mask, she rued drinking a half bottle of wine for courage before coming.

After being directed to the fourth floor of the *palazzo* by a maid, the effects of the alcohol became apparent as she climbed the stairs. At the top, she hesitated. It was 9:40 and already the party sounded very lively, with laughter, voices, and music emanating from behind the closed door. She had opted to be late, partly because she was unsure whether to come at all, partly because she didn't want to appear eager—which she wasn't. Or was that an honest assessment? There was something about wearing a costume that made her feel invisible, that gave her permission to be someone else for the evening. In selecting the mask, she had struggled between Comedy and Tragedy. Which would tonight's entertainment prove to be?

She rapped on the door, then knocked louder. It was finally opened by a Harlequin, who took her arm and led her through a sea of Pierrots, Casanovas, Plague Doctors, Columbines, Suns, Moons, Cats, Lions, and more Jesters than she could count. Whether they were men or women, gay or straight, in most cases, she wasn't certain. And, she suddenly realized, since she herself was tall, no one knew which she was. This made her feel light-headed with daring.

The Harlequin handed her a glass of white wine and bowed, leaving her standing in the middle of a high-ceilinged, beamed room. The air was warm and smelled of perfume and cigarettes, though few people were smoking because of their masks. The furnishings were old, very fine: an inlaid chest and table, carved chairs and sofas upholstered in burgundy velvet, all sitting on a black, gold, and ruby floral carpet. A second rug had been

rolled up so the guests could dance on the parquet wood floor, which was polished to a deep luster.

Jenny passed through open double doors to an *altana*, a roof-top terrace flanked with flowers residing in terracotta pots and swirling up lathed white trellises. Along one side was a splendid view of the Grand Canal, now black except for the play of lights on its choppy surface. In the distance, the floodlit *campanile* of St. Mark's Square pricked through the thick hodgepodge of red-tiled roofs and thrusting chimneys. Behind her, a camera flash went off.

Despite being in costume, Jenny hated having her picture taken. She walked to the outside wall near a potted fig tree, hoping to avoid the camera and to avail herself of the opportunity to tip her mask and drink without being seen. After finishing the wine, there were no more flashes so she re-entered the salon and observed a Plague Doctor in a white wig and gold waistcoat negotiating the long, awkward beak of his mask in order to place another record on the player. As the music started to play, people stood to take partners. Turning, she saw a Comedy mask approaching—the matching half to her Tragedy costume. Comedy was wearing a similar hat and cape and the same silver buckled shoes and black hose. A man or a woman? Jenny couldn't tell. The person was an inch or two shorter, with covered face and hands. Before Jenny could refuse, Comedy took Jenny's gloved hand and was led her onto the large dance floor. Grateful for her mother's insistence that she take two years of ballroom dancing, she followed her partner without difficulty, feeling the room spin in the heat and the candlelight. A few minutes later, Comedy handed her off to a Jester, a person about Jenny's height, who also began to lead, although with a sensual grace that made the dance seem to suspend its tempo. The Jester's tunic, leggings, and mask were decorated with gold and blue diamonds; three gold balls dangled from the mask's crown. As the music ended, the Jester bowed slightly and disappeared into the crowd.

This left Jenny standing in the middle of the room by herself. She looked about her and saw a beautiful woman in a rose satin court gown smiling shyly at her. The woman's face was painted in stark white, with rouged cheeks, her lips perfect in red lipstick. Jenny felt a flutter of nervousness as the woman closed the space between them. Without speaking, she laid her hand on Jenny's right shoulder, indicating that Jenny should lead. Jenny stepped out tentatively, holding the woman at arm's length, but before long, the woman moved in closer, pressing her breasts against Jenny's. After tightening her embrace, Jenny began to whirl the woman around the floor, her head growing dizzy with the spins and the dark perfume that emanated from the woman's décolletage. With a shock, she realized she liked the woman's body against hers.

When the dance finished, the woman curtsied. Jenny held her hand, wanting to maintain the exciting connection, but a Joker pulled the woman away, leaving Jenny aroused and embarrassed, grateful for the anonymity that the mask afforded. She went in search of the bar, found it in a side room, and accepted some sparkling prosecco. Trying to steady her teetering libido, she drank it down quickly and removed herself to the cooler air of the roof.

As Jenny was admiring the panorama, a gold Sun offered her a glass from a silver tray. She drank the wine furtively, with small tips of the mask, and then relinquished the empty glass when the music resumed. The Jester appeared again and brought her inside to join two other dancers. A *quattro*, she thought, pleased that she remembered the Italian word. When the music changed into a sultry tango, the Jester crushed her against his body

and sinuously moved them around the floor—his physical excitement made his gender certain. Afterward, they walked to the corner of the room, hand in hand. The man was silent at first, but finally began speaking in soft Italian, which she couldn't follow except for a few words. Confused by her sexual reaction to the woman in pink and now this male Jester, Jenny wanted to respond, but to whom?

Suddenly, the Jester turned. Behind him, stood a slender figure wearing a bauta mask, which was white except for grinning purple lips, crimson circles on the cheeks, and black brows edged in lavender. The person wore a pale blue satin waistcoat, breeches trimmed with silver, a lavender sash across his or her breast, white hose and gloves, a silver cockade hat, and diamonds on the shoe buckles. Somehow, this apparition had the effect of moving the Jester away, although no words were exchanged. A barcarole from *The Tales of Hoffmann* began, and with that, Jenny's hand was taken. The person dipped his or her head, asking permission for the dance. Jenny nodded and was gathered up in the arms of her partner and whisked across the room with dazzling speed. Whether it was the wine, the smoothness of the figure in blue, or Jenny's own skill, she seemed to be flying, her black cape flowing off her shoulders in the wind created by their movement. As the salon blurred into sizzling burgundy and gold, Jenny's exhilaration rose to a crescendo. She thought about the opera, how Giulietta steals Hoffmann's soul, runs off in a gondola, and laughs at his foolishness. Was she a Giulietta or perhaps a pirate like her forbears? Jenny Kidd, thief of hearts? She wished she had chosen the Comedy mask so everyone could see her smile. Happy and willing to take any partner—male or female—the new Jenny. Her rigid ideas of sexuality melted in the warm golden light.

When the music ended, she was ushered onto the *altana*, where her companion accepted two glasses of prosecco from a passing waiter and placed one in Jenny's gloved hand. Jenny didn't want to show her face, but she wanted to drink, so she turned discreetly. As she did, she sensed her partner doing the same. A moment later, feeling unsteady on her feet, she tried to excuse herself, but the figure in the blue costume moved in closer, encircling her with both arms and producing in Jenny an unsettling mixture of lust and dizziness. Jenny pulled away and walked inside, fearing she might be sick, and asked several people for the bathroom. She eventually found a small ante-room where she waited in line for the toilet. Just then, the Jester passed by, adjusting his tight-fitting leggings. At the mirror, he stopped to remove his mask. His reflection shocked Jenny. He was a very handsome woman! But the pressure below the waist? Her head was spinning as she escaped into the powder room.

After blotting her face with cold water, Jenny sat on an upholstered stool and rested her head against the wall until she felt more composed. Re-entering the salon, she hoped to find the figure in blue, but he—or she—was gone. The woman in the rose gown was not on the dance floor, either. Disappointed, she removed herself to a carved armchair and watched a Cat dance with a Lion, the whiskers on their two masks entwining. Although the Cat was half a head shorter, he or she was leading. This appeared to amuse them both.

Feeling warm and uncomfortably tipsy, Jenny decided to leave while her legs could still carry her down the long flights of stairs. Outside, leaning against the ochre walls of the *palazzo*, were several people in costume, one smoking a cigarette through a grinning mouth hole. Jenny hurried along the unlit street toward the Grand Canal.

It seemed like miles to her apartment. Although she felt silly walking through the city in her Tragedy outfit, she was grateful for the anonymity. Unlocking her door, she

entered the dark room, peeled off the hot mask, cloak, and stockings, kicked off her shoes, and fell into bed.

In the morning, out-of-tune brass bands blared in her head. Desperately thirsty, Jenny poured some bottled water, gulped it down, and sank against the bed pillow, cursing herself for drinking too much alcohol. Two hours later, feeling better after a shower, she dressed and reached for the wallet she'd hidden in the desk before the party. The wallet wasn't there. She opened all the drawers. Not only was her wallet missing, but so, too, were a gold bracelet, her grandmother's sapphire ring and diamond engagement band, and a crystal necklace she'd bought for her mother. Even the Donna Leon mystery she was reading was gone.

Horrified, she collapsed into a chair. What should she do? She recalled her father's shrill warnings about being careful with money, a litany that had started when she was nine, when the family was at financial risk, and had never stopped despite the fact that her parents were now well off. Before her trip, he had been even more emphatic than usual.

Jenny checked the city map and located the Questura. Embarrassed and angry at herself, she slowly trudged to the police station to report the theft.
