

KASEY MICHAELS
THE CHAOTIC
MISS CRISPINO

An Avon
Regency
Romance

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HE WAS AN
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PASSIONATE
LE OF WITS...
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THE CHAOTIC MISS CRISPINO

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藏书章

KASEY MICHAELS

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THE CHAOTIC MISS CRISPINO

She raised a hand to cup his cheek. "You were going to say something to me the other day. Perhaps you will tell me now, while I am so very much interested in listening."

But now Valerian wasn't listening. The feel of her, the scent of her, the taste of her, had driven all rational thought from his mind. Talk? Who wished to talk when there were so many more delightful things they could be doing? There was plenty of time to talk. They had a lifetime to talk.

"Valerian? You will tell me—"

He silenced her with his mouth, his kiss shattering all thought as they melted together on the bench in the back garden.

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*To my niece and godchild, Lisa Scheidler Johnston,
who is as chaotically wonderful as Allegra,
and just as beautiful!*

One



VALERIAN FITZHUGH stood before the narrow window he had pushed open in the vain hope that some of the stale, dank air trapped within the small room might be so accommodating as to exchange places with a refreshing modicum of the cooler, damp breeze coming in off the moonlit Arno.

Both the river that divided the city and the lofty dome of the Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore were vaguely visible from Fitzhugh's vantage point, although that particular attribute could not be thought to serve as any real consolation for his reluctant presence in the tumbledown *pensione*.

Florence, birthplace of the Renaissance, had been one of Valerian's favorite cities when he had visited Italy during his abbreviated Grand Tour some sixteen years previously, although his youthful adventures had come to an abrupt halt when the brief Treaty of Amiens had been shattered. So it was with a willing heart that he had begun charting his current three-year-long return to the Continent in Brussels the very morning after Napoleon had been vanquished forever at Waterloo.

Touching a hand to his breast pocket, Valerian felt again the much-folded, much-traveled sheets of paper that had led him, two and one half years into his journey—and not without considerable

trouble—to this small, dark, damp room on quite the most humble street in Florence.

It was damnably wearying, being an honorable man, but Valerian could not in good conscience turn his back on the plea from Lord Dugdale (his late father's oldest and dearest friend) that had finally caught up with him at his hotel in Venice—and the crafty Denny Dugdale, never shy when it came to asking for assistance, had known it.

So here Valerian stood, at five minutes past midnight on a wet, wintry night just six days after the ringing in of the year of 1818, waiting for the baron's difficult-to-run-to-ground granddaughter to return to her pitifully mean second-story room in a decrepit *pensione* so that he could take a reluctant turn at playing fairy godmother.

"... and chaperon . . . and traveling companion," Valerian said aloud, sighing.

He stole a moment from his surveillance of the entrance to the *pensione* beneath the window to look once more around the small room, his gaze taking in the sagging rope bed, the single, near-gutted candle stuck to a metal dish, the small, chipped dresser, and one worn leather satchel that looked as if it had first been used during the time of Columbus.

"One can only hope the chit knows the English word for soap." A second long-suffering sigh escaped him as he turned back to the window once more to continue his vigil.

"*Chi é? Che cosa cerca?*"

Valerian hesitated momentarily as the low, faintly husky female voice asked him who he was and what he was looking for. He stiffened in self-reproach because he hadn't heard her enter the room, then a second later remembered that he had glanced away from the entrance for a minute, probably just as she had come down the narrow alley to the *pensione*.

Slowly turning to face her through the dimness that the flickering candle did little to dissipate, a

benign, non-threatening smile deliberately pasted on his lean, handsome face, he bowed perfunctorily and replied, "*Il mio nome é Valerian Fitzhugh, Signorina Crispino. Parla inglese, I sincerely pray?*"

The girl took two more daring steps into the room, her arms akimbo, her hot gaze raking him up and down as if measuring his capacity for mayhem. "*Sì. Capisco. That is to say, yes, Signor Fitzhugh, I speak English,*" she said at last, her accent faint but delightful, "which makes it that much easier for me to order you to vacate my room—*presto!*"

Instead of obeying her, Valerian leaned against the window frame and crossed his arms in front of his chest. His relaxed pose seemed to prompt her to take yet another two steps into the room, bringing her—considering the size of the chamber—within three feet of her uninvited guest.

"You speak, signore, but do you hear? I said you are to leave my room!"

"Do not be afraid. I am not here to harm you, signorina," he told her, believing her aggressive action resulted more from bravado than from fearlessness.

Her next words quickly disabused him of that notion. "Harm me? Ha! As if you could. These walls are like paper, signore. One scream from me and the whole household would be in here. Now, go away! Whatever position you are offering me, I must tell you I have no choice but to refuse it. I leave Firenze tonight."

"Position? I don't follow you, signorina. But, be that as it may, aren't you even the least bit interested in how I came to know your name?"

"Such a silly question." She threw back her head in an eloquent gesture of disdain at his blatant admission of ignorance. "Everyone knows me, signore. I am *famosa*—famous!"

Valerian's lips quivered in amusement. "Is that so? And modest too, into the bargain. However,

if you don't mind, we'll pass over that for the moment and get on to the reason for my presence here."

She sighed, her impatience obvious as she rolled her eyes upward. "Very well, if you insist. But I have not the time for a long story."

Valerian spoke quickly, sensing that what he had to tell her was rough ground he would wisely get across as rapidly as possible. "I am not here to employ you. I have been sent here by your English grandfather, to fetch you home. How wonderful that your mother taught you her native tongue. It will simplify things once you are in Brighton. Excuse me, but what is that smell? There are so many vile odors in this room, but this one is new, and particularly unlovely."

"Smell? How dare you!" Her hands came up as if she were contemplating choking him, then dropped to her sides. "*Mia madre?* I don't understand. What do you know of my dearest *madre*, signore? Or of my terrible *nonno*, who broke her poor heart?"

The hands came up again—for the urge to remove Valerian from the room had overcome her temporary curiosity. "*Magnifico*, signore! You almost deflected me, didn't you? But no, I shall not be distracted. I have no time, no interest. It's those terrible Timoteos. I must pack. I must leave here, at once. As soon as I eat!"

So saying, she reached into the low-cut bodice of the white peasant blouse Valerian had been eyeing with some interest—Miss Crispino might be a mere dab of a girl, the top of her head not quite reaching his shoulders, but her breasts were extremely ample—so that his disappointment could be easily assumed as he watched her retract her hand, holding up a foot-long string of small sausages.

His left eyebrow lifted a fraction, his disappointment tempered by the realization that the blouse remained remarkably well filled. "At least

now I know the origin of that unpleasant odor I mentioned earlier. How devilish ingenious of you, Signorina Crispino. I should never have thought to keep sausages in my shirt."

She waited until she had filled her mouth with a lusty bite of the juicy meat before replying, waving the string of sausages in front of his face, "You never would have thought to steal them from the stall on the corner either, Signor Fitzhugh, from the look of you. But then you don't give the impression of someone who has ever known hunger."

"You filched the sausages?"

She took another bite, again thrusting the remainder of the string up near his face. "Ah! I congratulate you, signore. You have, as we say, discovered America—asked the obvious. Of course I filched them. I am a terrible person—a terrible, desperate person."

"Really." Valerian remained an unimpressed audience.

"This filching; it is a temporary necessity." She stepped closer, the nearly overpowering aroma of garlic stinging Valerian's eyes and aristocratic nostrils. "But I do not sell my favors on the street for food—or for anything! I make my own way, in my own way. You can tell *il nonno*, my grandfather, that when you see him—which will be in Hell, if my prayers to the Virgin should be answered. Now get out of my way. I must pack."

She turned to pick up the scuffed leather case but was halted by the simple application of Valerian's hand to her upper arm. "Oh, no, you don't," he commanded softly. "I have wasted nearly a month chasing you from one small *città* to another. I have stood here patiently and watched as you displayed a lack of good manners that would have distressed your dear mother to tears. Now you, signorina, are going to hear me out.

"Duggy—your grandfather—is dying, and he

wants to ease his way through Heaven's gate by leaving his fortune to his only grandchild. You, Signorina Crispino, more's the pity, are that grandchild. I am here to offer my assistance in returning you to Brighton, to"—he could not resist a glance at the bodice of her blouse—"the bosom of your family."

"*Basta!*" Miss Crispino turned her head to one side and very deliberately spat on the scarred wooden floor. "Enough! I spit on my grandfather! I spit on my mother's family—seed, sprout, and flower!"

"How utterly charming," Valerian remarked, unmoved. "Your aunt Agnes will positively adore you, I'm sure—once she has recovered from her faint. Now, if you have finally done with the overblown Italian theatrics, perhaps you will take a moment to listen to what I have to say. Duggy may have disowned your mother for marrying your father, but he has lived to repent the action. He's dying, signorina, and he wants to make amends for his sins.

"If you can't bring yourself to forgive him, perhaps you can screw yourself up to the notion of inheriting every last groat the man has collected over the years. It's not an inconsiderable sum, I assure you."

She pulled her arm free of his grasp and picked up the satchel. "You begin to interest me, but *belle parole non pascolano i gatti*, signore—fine words don't feed cats. How do I know my fickle grandfather won't have had yet another change of his dark heart by the time I reach this place, this Brighton?"

Valerian answered truthfully, his job done—at least in his mind—now that he had delivered Lord Dugdale's message. "You don't know that, I suppose. It is also true that a woman—even one of your obvious, um, *talents*—would perhaps find it difficult to make her living in England alone. So, as you seem to be getting on so swimmingly here

in Italy, I can see that you might be reluctant to trade all this luxury for the chance at a fortune."

"You make fun of me, signore; you doubt me. But I do not care. My *talent*, it is not inconsiderable." She busily pulled various bits of clothing from the dresser drawers and flung them into the open satchel. "I inherited it from my magnificent *papà*, who was the master of his age! I am a most famous *cantante*—an opera singer—and I am in great demand!"

Valerian watched as she unearthed several rather intimate items of apparel and wadded them into a ball before stuffing them into the satchel, doing her best to keep her back between the undergarments and Valerian's eyes.

"Really? Then I stand corrected," he remarked coolly, peeking over her shoulder to see that her hands were shaking. "But I have been in Italy for two months. Isn't it strange that I have not heard of you?"

"I have been resting, signore," she said, wincing, for the term was one that many singers used to explain why they were unemployed. She could find work every night of the week if she wanted to—if it weren't for those horrible Timoteos, curse them all to everlasting damnation!

"It's my throat," she lied quickly. "It is strained. But I will be performing again soon—very soon—in Roma."

"Which of course also explains your rush to quit this charming *pensione* in the middle of the night," Valerian said agreeably, wishing he was not interested in knowing why the girl was in such a hurry, or why her hands were trembling. "I should have guessed it. Perhaps you will allow me to transport you safely to the nearest coaching inn?"

She pulled a length of rope from the drawer, using it to tie the satchel closed, as the clasp had come to grief months earlier, not by accident but merely by rotting away with age. She hefted the

thing onto her shoulder. "You'd do that, signore? You aren't going to press me about accompanying you to England?"

Valerian shrugged indifferently. "If you're asking if I'm about to carry you off willy-nilly against your wishes, I fear you have badly mistaken your man. I've been most happily traveling across Europe in a long-delayed Grand Tour of sorts, and interrupting it to play ape-leader to a reluctant heiress was not part of my agenda. No, Signorina Crispino, I have wasted enough time with this project. It is time I continued my journey."

She looked at him carefully, piercingly, for the first time, taking in his well-cut, modish clothes, his tall, leanly muscular frame, and the healthy shock of thick black hair accented by snow-white "angel wings" at the temples—although they didn't make him look the least angelic, but rather dashing in a disturbing sort of way.

"*Naturalmente*. If I had looked harder, I should have seen more. Like overcooked pasta, Signor Fitzhugh, you are appealing to the eye, but upon further investigation, can be quickly dismissed as unpalatable, being soft at the center and rather mushy. Now, if you will excuse me?"

Valerian merely bowed, her verbal barb seemingly having no effect on him.

Just as she turned for the door it crashed open, banging loudly against the inside wall and nearly ripping free of its rusted hinges. A heartbeat later a large masculine shape appeared in the doorway. "Ha!" the shape bellowed, his roar one of triumph as he caught sight of Signorina Crispino.

His elation quickly dissipated, however, when he espied Valerian, who was once more standing near the window. The man turned to Signorina Crispino, asking, "*Chi?*" even as he extracted a small metal mallet from his breeches pocket, raised it above his head, and advanced in Valerian's direction.

"*Bernardo, no! Un momento, per favore!*" Allegra

made to grab at the man's arm, but he flicked her away as if she were an annoying fly. "Signor Fitzhugh, be careful! He is crazy and won't listen to me! I can't stop him! You must run! *Bernardo farà polpette di tuo*—he will make meatballs out of you!"

"Sì, the little meatballs!" Bernardo concurred in heavily accented English, grinning his appreciation of that description of what he and his little mallet would soon be doing to Valerian, the weapon gleaming dully in the faint light.

Valerian was not by nature a timid man, far from it, nor was he incapable of protecting himself. He just, frankly, wasn't in the mood for a fist fight with a man no taller than he was but twice as muscular and at least five years younger. Was this Bernardo even real? No human should be so beautiful—at least not a man. Besides, the fellow was armed, and that didn't really seem fair.

He decided to even up the odds a bit. Reaching into his breast pocket, Valerian pulled out a small pistol and pointed it at Bernardo, halting him in mid-attack.

"Call off your dog, signorina," he ordered amicably enough, "before I am forced to place a small hole between the eyebrows on his pretty face. And I so abhor violence."

Signorina Crispino lifted her slim shoulders in an eloquent shrug before turning her back on the pair of them and heading for the door. "And why would I warn him, signore?" she called over her shoulder. "Shoot him, *per favore*. You will be doing me a great service. *Addio*, Bernardo."

The pistol wavered, only slightly and only for a moment, as Valerian watched the girl go, leaving him standing almost toe to toe with Bernardo, who was jabbering at him in something that sounded like Italian, but not like any Italian the Englishman was accustomed to hearing.

Now what was Valerian going to do? He certainly wasn't about to shoot the man—he had never really considered doing that—but with that

option lost to him, the metal mallet did once more make the two of them an unmatched pair.

"Signorina Crispino—come back here!" he yelled as Bernardo growled low in his throat, raising the mallet another fraction as if unafraid of either Valerian or the weapon in his hand. "I warn you, I shan't hang alone. Come back here at once or I'll tell the authorities that you ordered the killing!"

Her head reappeared around the doorjamb. "You English," she said scathingly. "What a bloodless lot. You can't even put a hole through a man who is trying to bash in your skull. And as for honor—why, you have none!"

"It's not that, signorina," Valerian corrected her urbanely. "It's just that a prolonged sojourn in one of your quaint Italian prisons until explanations can be made ranks very low on my agenda. I've heard the plumbing in those places is not of the best. Now, are you going to call this incarnation of an ancient Roman god off or not? I'm afraid his notion of the Italian language and mine do not coincide, and I don't wish to insult him further with some verbal misstep."

Shrugging yet again, Signorina Crispino walked over to Bernardo and gave him a swift kick in the leg in order to gain his attention. "*Bernardo, tu hai il cervello di una gallina! Vai al diavolo!*"

"Oh, that's lovely, that is," Valerian interposed. "Although I hesitate to point this out, I could have told Bernardo here that he has the brain of a chicken. I also could have told him to go lose himself somewhere. Can't you just tell your lover that I'm harmless—that I'm a friend of your grandfather's?"

"My lover! You insult me!" she exploded, throwing down the satchel. "As if that were true—could ever be true!" Her hands drawn into tight fists, she wildly looked about the small room in search of a weapon, seizing on the lighted can-

dle that stood in a heavy pewter base, not knowing whom to hit with it first, Bernardo or Valerian.

Bernardo, who seemed to have tired of staring down the short barrel of the pistol, and who did not take kindly to the insults Signorina Crispino had thrown at him, took the decision out of her hands by the simple means of turning to her, his smile wide in his innocently handsome face. "Allegra—*mi amore!*"

"Ah, how affecting. The Adonis loves you," Valerian said, earning himself a cutting glance from Allegra.

"*Fermata!* Stop it—both of you!" she warned tightly just as Valerian's pistol came down heavily on the side of Bernardo's head and the man crumpled into a heap at her feet. She looked from Valerian to Bernardo's inert form and then back at Valerian once again. "*Bene, signore. Molto bene.* I thought you said you abhorred violence."

Valerian replaced the pistol in his pocket. "I have learned a new saying since coming to Italy, Signorina Allegra: '*Quando si è in ballo, bisogna ballare.*' When at a dance, one must dance. Your Bernardo left me no choice. Thank you for coming back, by the way. It was cursed good of you."

He looked down at the unconscious Bernardo. "I didn't really wish to hit him. It was like taking a hatchet to a Michelangelo. I don't think I've ever seen such a pretty face."

"Behind which resides the most bricklike brain in the good Lord's nature," Allegra retorted, giving Bernardo's inert figure a small kick. "He speaks some English, you know, but it goes straight out of his head—pouf!—when he has to do more than stand up straight and be handsome. *Sogni d'oro, Bernardo*—golden dreams to you. Now, Signor Fitzhugh, I suggest we take ourselves out of this place before he rouses, for Bernardo has a very hard head and won't sleep for long."

Valerian bent to retrieve her satchel. "A praise-