

Except from John D. Cressler's *Emeralds of the Alhambra*, 2013

## Slash of Crimson

A steady, warm drizzle falls through the night, ending just after daybreak, slaking the thirst of the magical garden. The lush terraced earth exhales, refreshed and jubilant. The cypress roots sense their opportunity and begin anew to worm vertically into the softened soil. Their coffers bulging, the wind-tilled reflecting pools offer a warm welcome to their long-lost cousins. The gray and purple marbled sky has split open in several rough patches, the sun's streaky yellow rays brazenly stretching through down to the earth, brushed in with egg yokes. The bird-gossip is boisterous, bawdy, an avian shouting match almost deafening in its enthusiasm. All is dark, damp and new. Glistening. Beads of sweat cling stubbornly to the canary rose petals and ruby cannas lilies, who luxuriate in the humid air, resisting the urge to dog-shake them to the ground.

Aisha's leisurely crunch upon the pea gravel path is echoed by Musa and Yazdan. The two bodyguards walk to either side of her, a half pace behind, as if she is their worry. Their eyes gauge the fog-tinged landscape, sweeping the garden for any hints of mischief, signs of danger. Aisha's eyes lazily track about as she day-dreams. An especially generous buffer of thirty paces separates the three chaperones from their charges, ample space to enable the cacophony of fountain splash and birdsong to render the lovers' conversation private.

To their left are rose beds in voluptuous full bloom, dozens of interspersed red, yellow, white and pink blossoms. A pleasing musky, spicy, citrus scent hangs heavy in the moist air. To their right a head-high, sculpted cypress hedge lines the gravel path, marked by periodic keyhole-shaped privacy niches.

They walk deeper into the Partal Gardens, listening to the birdsong and basking in the garden's simple harmony. Chandon is the first to break the silence. "Your father told me that we may ride together on Wednesday. Provided, of course, our favorite twosome accompanies us." He grins.

She answers with a smile. "Yes, he mentioned it last night. That will be fun, I miss my riding. Before my Sufi training began, I used to roam the Vega several times a week."

"The Vega is a wonderful place to ride. Blue is a fine stallion, fast and proud. I have never ridden his equal."

"He was one of my father's favorites. He has ancient Arabian blood lines, you know, one of the finest Andalusians in the kingdom. However, I must warn you, sir, that my Afán has never been bested."

He laughs. "We shall see, my Lady, we shall see. Your Afán has yet to challenge Blue." He offers a coy, mock frown. "I am afraid for poor Musa and Yazdan. I suspect their stallions will not be able to keep up with us." They share a knowing look, simultaneously grin, stroll on in silence.

As they approach the third keyhole entry in the cypress, a head-high boxwood hedge springs up on their left, providing the cover he has been seeking. Chandon snatches Layla's arm, pulls her into the concealing cypress niche. The chaperones' eyes immediately track to the disappearing movement. Instead of issuing an alarm, however, both men grin in unison. Aisha turns to check behind them. No one. The three do not alter their pace, knowing that at best the lovers will have only two minutes of privacy.

Her spontaneous squeal at his daring vanishes as he begins to kiss her. With no time for tenderness, this kiss is impassioned, urgent and wet. He bends his knees to equal their heights, circles both arms around her waist and pulls her tight against him. She lifts her right foot from her sandal, slides it beneath his robe and hooks it behind his left calf, warm flesh deliciously caressing warm flesh. He pulls her tighter still, kisses her harder. Tender, muted pleasure murmurs seep from her into the air surrounding them. Thirty seconds more then he abruptly releases her, pushes her back in self-defense. Their faces are flushed and serious, their bodies now throbbing in lockstep with their pants. As they catch each other's eyes, they break into hysterical silent giggles, doubling over to keep them hushed. She takes a deep breath to steady herself, steps back into her sandal, smooths her robe, looks into his eyes and whispers in English, "I love you". She then waggles her finger in mock anger and hisses, "You are bad!"

He returns a sheepish grin, shrugs helplessly and whispers, "I am in love, what can I do?" They both laugh.

They emerge from the niche with the chaperones still ten paces out, as if nothing happened. They do not make eye contact with the inquisitive trio, but simply turn right, begin to pick up their pace to re-establish some distance. The lovers exchange wicked smiles, begin to wind their way through the Partal maze. The sun is beginning to break through the lifting fog. Soon their hearts are beating normally once more, the throbbing still coiled dangerously, but with fangs mercifully withdrawn.