

Sara Allen was born in London in the mid-1960s to parents from Portland, Jamaica. The late 1970s were a time of change in London, which caused the author to grow up understanding that determination was the key; to never let it be said, “You can’t” without giving everything. This determination led her to obtain a degree in The History of Art, from SOAS, in London.

Dedication

For those seeking love and understanding, and my very own
Aminah. For Saliha

Sara Allen

PRINCESS AMINAH

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I would like to thank first and foremost my family, who put up with me having more to say to my written pages than to them, also my publisher who took a chance on me and gave me the will to throw this out to you, the reader.

I would also like to thank my editors who fixed my mad ramblings and made them something that you could read and understand, without too much difficulty.

Lastly, without my belief in myself and God, I would not have been able to do this, strong will and determination are something, but the desire to continue is something that only comes from a desire to fulfil our destiny. I take one day at a time and never give up. Don't give up your dreams because that is what makes us strong.

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PLOTS AND PLANS

My name is Aminah Bint Abu Ishaq Muhammad Ibn Harun Al Rashid, also known as Al-Mutasim Billah. I was the daughter of the Abbasid Caliph and his fourth Consort, a Mesopotamian Princess, who was given by her father to the Caliph Al-Mutasim Billah, as a gesture of peace between them. I was the lowest of my father's daughters, and as such, I had only one purpose to serve: marry and bring about a peaceful alliance for my father.

To this end, my father had given me in marriage to the brother of the Sultan of Cordoba in Spain, and I was soon to travel to my husband's house with a party of my servants and an escort of guards who were loyal to the Sultan and my father.

By the time I arrived at my husband's house, I would have reached my eighteenth year, on a journey that would take us through the summer and into the early part of autumn.

It was now the spring, there in my father's house, and I stood awaiting the seamstress as she made my wedding garments. I'd been standing motionless for nearly an hour, legs cramping in stiffness and pain, yet I dared not complain; my father's first wife was overseeing the preparations, and in order not to

antagonize her, it was best if I held my position, like the manikin they expected me to be.

There was little love lost between us. This was due to my mother, may God rest her soul, who had died when I was but a girl, leaving me under the tutelage of my mother's rival.

There was nothing special about me, or so I had been told often enough by my stepmother, and I'd been raised to believe that my sole purpose was the fulfillment of my father's political needs, in making an amicable marriage that would serve the Empire. I was doomed!

"Raise your arms!" the seamstress screeched again. I saw her look at the Amirah, my stepmother, for approval. Bitches, both of them! I raised my arms higher in obedience, not willing to suffer the regret of trying either of these two women's patience.

They had forgotten, conveniently, that I had been standing there like a coat hanger for the past hour, as they tried to out-do each other in their ridiculous extravagances. The Amirah urged me to stand straight, while showing off my best side. The seamstress complained that I had no redeeming features for her to work with, and that my arms were as floppy as five day old fish!

They both knew the lies that they heaped upon my head, but I swallowed my retorts, those that sprung to my lips, continuing to suffer for the short time that I would remain with them. I wanted nothing more than for this to be over so that I could return to the quiet of my room and my friend, who I had only two days left to be with. Two days to come to terms with the fact that I would never see her again.

I refused to consider it. If I thought about leaving, those huge tears would smother the colour from my eyes and I would fall to the floor in despair. I would not be that daughter.

The pin pricked me again, causing the seamstress to grin with glee. I'd been pricked so many times that day, that I no longer felt anything and the desired response that the mean spirited woman had hoped to achieve had failed, again.

"I have finished with her, Your Highness," she exclaimed.

"When will the garments be ready? She is due to leave in two days."

"Tomorrow, Your Highness. We will work on the last touches through the night to ensure that the final fitting is tomorrow, no later than the noon meal." The seamstress bowed low, almost removing her fat nose from her fat face on the flagstone floor. I lowered my head, so that they could not see the smile that spread across my face, as my stepmother dismissed her with an imperious wave of her hand.

When the seamstress at last closed the door, behind her ample bottom, her posse of tailors trailing along like her bridal train, I waited, knowing that my torment was far from over. I would be made to stand until I was told that I could leave, and no sooner.

But, I had no hope of an early reprieve, as the spiteful woman left me standing upon the pedestal, contemplating me with a shrewd look. She knew that once I left her house she would have no influence over me, and her devious wheels were turned in her mind, the clockwork cogs almost showing through the skin of her face, she schemed so hard.

I waited, knowing that there was almost no time left for her in which to play her hand. Whichever of her manipulative schemes she wished to plot would already have been put into motion, and she sat, thinking only of how she would make me suffer before she revealed it.

“You are more fortunate than most, Aminah.” She looked at me, calculating where she would stick her knives. I said nothing. It wasn’t a question or a conversation that she wanted me to take part in. This, for her, was the pre-emptive strike, her torture on my mind would begin as always, with her allegations and ploys.

“It is fortunate that there are no other eligible females in the harem, that could take your place, and I am loathe to lose one I value so much.” Her hooded eyes skimmed my pale features, assessing the damage her words had had.

There. There it was. This was where she would attempt to find a way to keep me, a way to prevent me from the freedom that I had been hoping for for these past twelve months. She still had hopes that I would be her willing tool. That I would accept to remain constantly under her eye, never be able to have a thought or feeling for myself, never be able to have a voice, never be able to live.

She knew not that when my father had summoned me and told me of the Sultan’s request to cement ties with the old country, I had accepted the proposal graciously, as any obedient daughter would, secretly knowing that it was the chance I craved to be free. Understanding it was my chance to get out from under my stepmothers’ clutches and breathe air free of the taint of intrigue and lies. And she hoped that I would willingly give that up?

I kept my comments to myself, waiting to see what she would do.

“I have asked your father to reconsider.” The words dropped like a stone in my stomach. I tried hard to contain my reaction to her statement. But some part of me must have given away my distress, perhaps it was the small sound that had escaped my lips, I did not know, but I held on, clutching to my hope nonetheless.

“I have asked your father to send Myriam instead.”

All colour left my face, and the small sound that escaped my lips, was beyond my ability this time to contain, making it more audible than the other. Myriam was my only friend in the harem of Al Mutasim, my half-sister and my confidant. We were inseparable, and the Amirah knew this. Further, Myriam was only twelve years old, and even should she have begun the journey as I was to do, she would not come of age before she arrived.

It was a cruel jest to play on both of us. Myriam’s mother was still alive, unlike my own, and I was sure that the Caliph would have informed her of any move to remove her daughter from her. I doubted he would agree for Myriam to make the journey in my place. She was still so young. But when it came to the wishes of the first wife, we were all at her mercy, including the Caliph.

I studied her hard, unyielding face. Her brows arched cruelly over her eyes, shadowing them and throwing the already dark orbs into more darkness. She had been a beautiful woman, but jealousy and spite had altered her features. She still stood tall, taller than I, despite having been in an accident many years ago, the same accident that had taken my mother from me.

Her hands were crippled, useless and unwieldy, curling cruelly in upon themselves, resembling claws more than something that should be at the end of human arms. We all feared her, feared her spitefulness and her jealousy too, because, in her mind, we were all to blame for her injuries, and no one else.

But rumor spoke often of how she had plotted to remove my mother, bribing the coach driver to spook the horses that they would ride that day, in order to throw my mother, hopefully injuring her fatally. But the incident hadn't gone exactly according to plan, and the horse that had thrown my mother, had also knocked the Amirah to the ground, in the path of the runaway coach, which had run over her hands and arms, shattering every bone in them, rendering her hands useless.

The surgeons had advised my father to remove her hands, but she had screamed blue murder vowing that if they removed them, she would kill herself at the first opportunity. So they'd splinted, bandaged and stitched as best they could, and she had healed, somewhat disfigured, but more spiteful than before and with far more influence over her husband than was good for either of them.

I stood looking at her, knowing she waited for me to beg, but beg I would not. There was no point anyway, she wanted to see my response and make a last ditch attempt to twist her knives further into my soul. But I was getting out from under her, and I was determined to make sure that I did nothing to risk it.

“Of course, he refused. But there is still no one to go with you,” she eyed me speculatively. “However; I have decided to send Hind with you, as a companion on your

travels. This will ensure that you are well supported when you arrive.”

I'd almost uttered a word. I'd almost given her what she wanted. But I had caught myself.

“Are you not happy with my decision?” Her brow raised.

I bowed my head, falling low into a curtsey, “Your wish is my command, Mother.”

“You play the game well, Aminah, better than your mother,” she smirked. “You should do well in Spain.” She rose and swept from the room, leaving me with the knowledge that I would have to watch my back on every step of my journey as I travelled.

Hind was the handservant of my stepmother, and I knew that even if I were not under the Amirah's feet, desperate and unhappy, that she, my stepmother, would ensure that I never knew happiness in my life.

As she left the room, I breathed a sigh of relief, stepping down from the pedestal that had been my prison for what felt like half the day, and left the room through the same door as those before me. I headed to my room for peace, quiet and my waiting lunch.

My mind was in turmoil, knowing that I would have to be on my guard from now on, yet never able to anticipate from where an attack would come.

I entered my room only to be bowled over by my energetic half-sister, in a flurry of hair and giggles.

“Finally...” she gasped. “What took you so long?”

I kissed her smooth, round cheeks, and held her tight. I was determined to survive whatever my stepmother would throw my way, and she would. I had to be

stronger than ever, because my life, literally, depended on it.

A TIME FOR CRYING

I was truly the daughter of my father. Why? Because I resembled my mother so much, that my father had chosen to keep me. When his spiteful wife had insisted that I should be sent to my family in Uruk, because she hated me, my father had refused. So she had chosen another tactic, subservience.

She took me under her wing, if one could call it that, and no one could protect me from her. She never beat me; she was never able to do so. But she tortured me, mentally, and I learnt young, that her schemes would cost me more than my life, because to live without sanity is far worse than not being able to eat and drink every day.

I learned her tricks, and managed to navigate the treacherous paths that she laid for me, daily. I was so agile at navigating this path, that it became second nature. I hated myself. I'd learnt to be seen and most definitely, never heard. For to pull her eye towards you would be asking for trouble, and trouble like that no one would ask for willingly.

I sat contemplating what I would do should Hind attempt to fulfill her mistress's wishes, knowing that the likelihood of such a happening was a definite thing. I

could only try to foresee what that would be, and prepare myself for it.

Myriam talked incessantly while I ate. She prattled on about everything concerning the wedding, from the henna party we were to have the next day, to the sweets, music and finally, what she would wear. She quizzed me on all the garments that I'd tried on, barely stopping for breath, until I described them all down to the last intricate detail, even though she knew she would see them all the next day as they were packed into the trunks that would be going with me.

She asked me what I thought of the sweets and food that we would be plied with the next day, throwing herself around the room as she imagined her simple heart's desires, questioning me a hundred times on my own preferences. I laughed at that, as she and everyone else, knew my love of candied dates.

I wasn't a large person. As I'd said, resembling my mother in form and stature. I was neither tall for a woman, nor so short as to still be considered childlike. My body was lithe and long-limbed like the cheetahs that my father kept in the Animal Garden that was attached to the palace. However, to listen to the speeches of my stepmother, no one would believe I had any redeeming features, my body being neither wide hipped nor big busted, as was the desire of families in the Hijaz.

Their attempts to fatten me like the sacrificial calf fell far short of the mark. No amount of food could make me gain an ounce more than I'd had since the day I turned sixteen.

I had a long, fine neck, dark auburn hair that cascaded down my back in loose curls reaching well below my waist; an oval shaped face, which was