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ALAMEDDINE

# I, the Divine

{ A NOVEL IN FIRST CHAPTERS }

"Humorous and heartbreaking and always real." —Los Angeles Times



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**Rabih Alameddine**



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# **I, the Divine**

# Chapter one

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My grandfather named me for the great Sarah Bernhardt. He considered having met her in person the most important event of his life. He talked about her endlessly. By the age of five, I was able to repeat each of his stories verbatim. And I did.

My grandfather was a simple man

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# Chapter One

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At the age of thirteen, the age of discovery, I was moved from an all-girl Catholic school to a boys school. My father decided I needed to have English, not French, as my primary language, so he transferred me to the best school in the city. It was all boys until I showed up. They wanted to integrate it and I was the guinea pig. What a guinea pig.

I was not the only girl in the school, but I was the only one in my class, all five sections. The other girls were in the upper classes. It was life-changing culture shock.

In October of 1973, I arrived for my first day of school



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# Chapter One

Nineteen seventy-three was a strange year. I cut my hair short, which drove my stepmother crazy. The Lebanese army went nuts and started bombing the PLO, a harbinger of things to come. I left the wacky Carmelite nuns and entered an American-bankrolled school where I was the only girl in the whole class. I also met Fadi, who changed my life forever.

I had always been a little odd, which people blamed on my mother, but she was not at fault. My sisters were normal. People could not blame my father. My half-sisters turned out to be more normal than normal. Except for being gay, my little brother was probably the most normal of us all. I was the strange one.

When I was little, we had a nanny from the Seychelles named Violet. I remember her showing us a picture of her family—her parents and all her sisters. I pointed out a white girl in the picture and asked Violet who she was. She said that was her sister. Surprised, I asked how that could be. She said, “My mother went astray.” That sentence stuck with me. I had always thought my mother “went astray” when conceiving me.

I was different, but not nearly in Fadi’s league. We met my first day in class. I arrived ready for battle in jeans and sweatshirt, prepared to fight any boy who dared make fun of me. Fadi did. When he sat behind him, he turned and whispered, “If you’re a lesbian, I know just the right bar for you.” My mouth dropped. The boys were supposed to be the *crème de la crème*. How had this boy slipped through?

He was disarming. His face had a combination of mischief and innocence that to this day I find attractive. He was not handsome, but an unearthly intelligence shone in his eyes. Years later they would dull, and after the gendarmes beat him senseless, an eye patch would cover one of them. He became a shell of his former self, a walking shadow. I try to remember him as he was at fourteen, the boy who turned my world upside down.

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# Chapter 1

At the age of thirteen, the age of discovery, I was moved from an all-girls Catholic school to a boys' school. My parents had thought an English education would be better than a French one. It was the first year of integration for the school, and for the first couple of years, I was the only girl in my class. At the school, I met two people who were to become primary influences in my life: Fadi, my first boyfriend, and Dina, my best friend, who appeared at school two years later.

I met Fadi on my first day in class. I sat behind him, where his first question to me was "Are you a lesbian?" My response was swift: "Your mother's cunt, you brother of a whore." The Lebanese dialect is filled with delectable curses, a luscious language all its own, of which I was a true poet, trained by none other than my father. He thought children's use of adult curse words tremendously amusing and trained all his children in the art of insult. I grew up an avid practitioner.

Fadi's reaction was an ear-to-ear grin, hands coming together for one clap, and a look signaling welcome-to-my-world. We became fast friends, at first because he would not leave me alone. The first couple of days, I could not move anywhere without him tagging along, trying to involve me in some activity he was cooking up. We became friends and partners in crime.

Fadi was not a handsome boy, nor did he mature into a handsome man. He had a long, pale face, with medium-long black hair, eternally unkempt, slightly frizzy. Depending on how the sun hit it, you could see single hairs sprouting independently out of the mess. His nose was long, downward, not outward, like the noses in ancient Greek drawings. His chest, skinny and caved in, as if malnourished. He was cute; all in all, not a particularly erotic package, but I always had peculiar tastes, somewhat exotic. Of all the boys in class, and I could have had my pick, being the only girl, he caught my fancy. His smile was his best and most memorable feature. Appearing quite natural, it was actually meticulously studied, its apparent innocence perfected in an attempt to confuse anyone who might suspect him capable of any of the acts he committed. I fell for his façade early on. I assumed he was a gentle, amazingly intelligent, studious boy. He was all that in a way, but as Miss Nahhas, our science teacher, once said, he was also the devil incarnate.

Fadi's intelligence was remarkable. We were both the top of our class, but the difference between first, him, and second, me, was immeasurable. He had an understanding of mathematics that bordered on genius. I excelled at mathematics but I was not even in the same league. My grades were close to his in the nonsciences, English, Arabic, French, history, geography, and civics, simply because he did not care about these subjects. He winged it in all the exams, never studying, and still he got higher grades than I did most of the time. He was a mechanical wiz. The first contraption I saw him make was a motorized bicycle. He took a motor from a scooter, attached it to an old bicycle. I thought it was such a magnificent feat, only to be more impressed when he confessed to having stolen both the bike and the motor. We became soul mates.

I remember the first time I caught a glimpse of his Mephistophelian side, early October, the

beginning of the school year. It was a hot day, the ceiling fan circulating stale air. The building was more than a hundred years old and had no air-conditioning. Fadi sat in front of me as usual. French class and Mr. Assiss drunk and trying desperately to control the class. Without looking back, Fadi told me, "Duck when I say *duck*."

"What?" I asked, confused. Assiss was rambling on about subjunctive something or other. Utterly bored, I was carving my name into the desk with a Bic pen. "What do you mean?"

"Just duck when I tell you." I noticed he was clasping something black between three fingers. It took me a while to figure out it was one of the rubber stabilizers used under each of the legs to keep the chair from sliding. The instant Assiss looked away, Fadi threw the rubber stabilizer up toward the fan, saying "Incoming," in English. Half the class ducked under their desks. When the rubber stabilizer hit the fan, it ricocheted with such force, I heard the *whoosh* followed by various other sounds as it hit the desks and walls. Assiss looked around, wondering what had happened. We pretended nothing had happened, so he pretended with us. Assiss continued with his boring lesson.

The French teacher's incessant drinking made him an easy mark and therefore Fadi's favorite target. Assiss drove an older model Vauxhall, which Fadi habitually broke into. During free periods, Fadi and I would push the car out from the spot that Assiss parked it in, roll it down the hill, and park it all the way by the lower entrance. Assiss never figured out how his car got moved.

We had three free periods a week. To this day, I have no idea what would possess a school to give a bunch of teenagers the run of the school unsupervised for an hour. Having arrived from a strict Carmelite school, where the nuns made us account for every nanosecond, I found the new school nothing short of heaven. The free periods were the time when Fadi shone.

Fadi used to brag that there was no lock he could not pick. The easiest were the numbered locks. He taught me how to do it. I had to pull the lock down as hard as possible and then roll each number until I heard a certain click. It was incredibly easy. During free periods, one of our favorite activities was opening lockers to ferret out the best lunch. Neither one of us brought lunch on Wednesday when the free period was in the morning. We looked in every locker until we came across something appetizing. When he felt playful, Fadi switched contents of different lockers causing complete chaos.

Fadi and I were both middle kids from middle-class families, and we were envious of some of the really rich kids who came to school on brand-new bicycles. During our free periods, we got to ride any of the bicycles we wanted. One day, while riding a new-model, three-speed, shiny bike, Fadi was approached by Art Haddad, who, like me, was of mixed Lebanese and American parentage, but who, unlike me, had grown up in the United States. He had come to teach at our school and see if he could "recapture his heritage." He always treated the students as equals, his American education method, and since he could not have been more than twenty-four or so, the approach was not considered offensive by the kids.

"Great bike," Art told Fadi. "Must be the newest model."

"Yes," Fadi replied. "Would you like to try it?"

The last question was followed by words like *wow, sure, gee, golly, man, thanks, incredible, holy wow, amazing, guy*, but not in any comprehensible order. Fadi told him he had to get back to class, and lock the bike in the bike rack when he was done. We left for class only to hear later that the owner of the bike had come out to find Mr. Haddad riding it. The kid had a fit. Mr. Haddad had to see the headmaster, who, of course, asked to see Fadi. Fadi said the bike was unlocked and he could not help himself. When Mr. Haddad begged him to ride the bike, Fadi specifically asked him to lock the bike so no one would steal it.

I was not saintly by any means before I met Fadi, nor was I led unwillingly down a path of demon

trickery and shenanigans. I was always a mischievous child. Fadi simply inspired me to great heights. ~~My father had divorced my mother, sent her packing back to America, and married a young Lebanese woman.~~ I saw my stepmother as a family intruder and spent most of my childhood trying to make her life miserable. I was so effective that at ten, I was transferred, along with my sisters, to the strictest school in Lebanon, run by a pod of fiendish Carmelite nuns. They were so strict, the punishments so severe, even my stepmother, a firm believer in discipline, could not leave us there. My sisters and I were transferred to different schools three years later. I won the lottery. I ended up in the best school in Lebanon, one where there was absolutely no discipline, where no teacher could raise his voice when talking to a student.

The school I transferred to had an outstanding athletic program. Since it was a boys' school, and I was the only girl in class, the PE class was geared exclusively toward young males. They played soccer primarily. I fit right in. If there was one thing at which I was superior to Fadi, and, as it turned out, every other boy in class, it was the beautiful game of soccer. I had always been a tomboy and was blessed with a soccer-playing ability which amazed even those who knew nothing about the game. I showed up with the rest of the class on the soccer field for the first PE class. I was wearing the school's athletic uniform, a green T-shirt with the school's logo in yellow, white shorts with the logo in green, white tube socks, and a pair of desert boots. The last was not part of the uniform, but since my stepmother refused to consider buying me athletic shoes, let alone actual soccer shoes, I had to make do. Our PE teacher, Mr. Najjar, could not believe his eyes. He ordered me off the field screaming and hollering. In later years, I would have been able to describe Mr. Najjar as a macho chauvinist pig with the intelligence of a four-year-old, but back then I did not have the vocabulary so I simply called him an ugly-dog-fornicating-son-of-a-whore. I left the field. Fadi followed me, saying we had to go see the headmaster. He took me aside, went to his locker, pulling out a sheet of paper. Clearly, it he wrote:

To Whom It May Concern:

I hereby authorize my daughter, Sarah Mustapha Nour el-Din, to participate fully in all physical education classes. I wish her to be treated exactly like the boys. I do not wish her to be traumatized by unfair exclusionary policies. I expect my wishes to be followed or I will take appropriate action.

Sincerely,  
Mustapha Hammoud Nour el-Din

I was dumbfounded. I could not believe he would do that.

"Nobody would think this letter is real," I said.

"Yes, they will."

"It's badly written," I said, alternating my weight between one foot and another, fidgeting. "My father would have written it better."

"They will believe it," he replied. "Trust me. I've done this many times before. They always believe it."

"They might call him to check."

"Look," he said. "Do you want to play or not?" When I did not reply, he pulled me by the hand toward the headmaster's office. "It would help if you look traumatized."

Fadi walked into the headmaster's office with me. He told the headmaster he had to come because his conscience would not allow him to stand idly by as Mr. Najjar screamed insults at me. Not during

his entire stay at the school had he witnessed such repulsive behavior from a teacher, behavior sure to damage a sensitive student like me. I was shocked at his audacity, which the headmaster must have interpreted as my being adequately traumatized. Fadi proceeded to show my faux father's letter. The headmaster was livid, telling me I was to show up at the next PE class and he would take care of everything. Mr. Najjar was forced to apologize to me publicly, and I became one of the boys. I also became a Fadi devotee.

The first cigarette. In the Lebanese dialect, the words associated with smoking, verbs in particular, are *sui generis*. You not only smoke a cigarette, you can drink it. The verb *to smoke* may stand on its own, but the verb *to drink* cannot, of course, since it implies the drinking of liquids. One must use the phrase *drink a cigarette*, which sounds ridiculous in any other language. That kind of idiosyncrasy fascinated my thirteen-year-old mind. However, the particular use of the Lebanese dialect which turned out to be an embarrassment was the word *inhale*. When it comes to cigarettes, one does not inhale in Lebanese, one swallows. So, on a November day, first rain of the season, taking cover in one of the many Turkish arches embedded in the walls along the school grounds, Fadi offered me a cigarette, Marlboro, and asked, "Do you swallow?"

I replied, "Yes, of course."

I took the cigarette from his pale, nail-bitten fingers, and he proceeded to light it for me. I had seen this done many times. Everyone smoked in Lebanon. I could fool him into thinking I had done this before. I took a drag, but instead of inhaling, I swallowed.

At first, he fell for it. "You've done this before," he said. "If this were your first time, you'd be coughing like crazy."

"Of course, I've done this before," I said haughtily. "I've been doing this since I was ten." I kept swallowing over and over, drunk on my own pride for not coughing or wheezing.

He noticed what I was doing, though. He smacked me on the side of the head. "When you swallow you don't swallow, you baby." He shook his head, smirking. "I've been doing this since I was ten," he repeated sarcastically.

I could not for the life of me figure out swallowing without swallowing, so I stared at him intently, earnestly pretending not to look. "Well," I said between swallows, which were beginning to sound more like gulps, "this is how we do it in my family."

"Yeah, right. I believe that." He inhaled on his cigarette, took a long drag, and blew in my face. He laughed and I had to smile. Finally I figured out how to smoke, but it was too late. I might not have coughed hysterically from smoking my first, and what was to be my last, cigarette, but the smoke had swallowed upset my stomach. I began to feel more and more queasy until I threw up, right there in front of him. He worried about me, asking if I was all right. I was so embarrassed. I lay on the ground and teared up.

I sat up and he moved closer to me, shoulder to shoulder, extinguished his cigarette saying, "I think smoking is overrated anyway. It tastes like shit."

"I have to drink something," I said. "I have to get rid of this taste in my mouth."

"Let's get a Seven-Up." Excited to be doing something helpful. "It's good for your stomach anyway." He helped me up, even though I was feeling better.

"I have a better idea," he said. He zipped his anorak, but did not pull the hood up, running out into the rain. He stood five feet away from me, all smiles, impish as usual, calling me with his hands and eyes. I walked out tentatively. He pulled me close to him and hugged me, still smiling, hair all wet. He tilted his head backward, opening his mouth to the sky. I did the same, rain falling on my face, drinking whatever drops fell in my mouth, quenching an unnamable thirst, laughing. We hugged.

closer and drank. We were sopping wet. I looked down to see a craned neck, elongated like a swan's and my heart fluttered. He looked at me, mouth open, tongue distended to capture more. And then he kissed me. Two thirteen-year-olds who knew nothing about anything, French kissing in the rain. He wanted to swallow his tongue.

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# CHAPTER I

I was in New York last week and saw two retrospectives, Pierre Bonnard's and Rothko's. Besides noting that Bonnard could not draw if his life depended on it and that Rothko did not even try, I was stunned by a major realization. When it came to a choice between a beautiful color and the correct color, Bonnard always picked the beautiful one, while Rothko, in his great paintings, picked the correct one. I realized when it came to men, I did not pick the beautiful or the correct. I picked the wrong one. I chose David.

---

I stared out of my window onto the bleak, leafless branches of the tree in front of my Victorian flat. The late afternoon light was fading to violet. Noisy sparrows appeared, a bustle of activity before they retired for the night. January of 1992.

My ex-husband Joe had called and asked if I would be willing to fly and attend a party in his honor. His company had just promoted and relocated him to Dallas. Both he and his wife wanted me to join them in celebration, to see their new house and so forth. Joe was in constant touch with my brother Ramzi, in whom I confided, so they knew I was feeling blue.

I started to make tea, but decided against it. I took a walk to Duboce Park, a short distance from my flat. Every weekday, beginning at four in the afternoon, the park transformed into canine heaven. Barking, frolicking dogs of every breed, color, and shape raced around the grass. Owners stood in groups chatting while their pets played, sniffed, chased, and did group somersaults. I had been coming to the park every day for the last two weeks. I was dogless, but I came prepared.

The instant Sally, a collie, saw me, she bounded over, jumped with joy as I reached into my coat pocket for her biscuit. I tossed it and she caught it in midair. Mindy, a tan pug, began licking my jeans. In less than a minute, I had ten dogs to play with.

"When are you getting one?" Annette, Sally's owner, asked me. She towered over me, looking tall from my new position, flat on the ground with dogs all over me. "Get off there. You'll ruin your coat."

"It's cheap," I joked. The dogs disbursed in different directions, forgetting me as I stood up. Annette was popular with the other dog owners; a couple of women moseyed over. "Besides, you know I can't get a dog. I can barely take care of myself. I don't even have a job right now. Anyway, my cats would hate me."

"A dog does wonders."

In a couple of minutes, a thin, lanky woman showed up, a sprightly spring in her step. I recognized the leashed dog, but it took me a moment to realize it was Sandra. She released her cocker when she reached us.

“Jesus,” Annette exclaimed. “You’re looking wonderful.”

“I’m dating.” Sandra beamed. She looked as if only her heavy coat kept her grounded.

“That really works,” Annette laughed.

“We just had sex,” Sandra giggled. “I left him sleeping on the bed.” She looked ten years younger than she had the day before. Her appeased lust had softened her face, smoothed her miniscule wrinkles.

After polite time had passed, I excused myself and walked the six blocks back home, alone.

I locked myself in, clicked on the teakettle, and sat on the sofa in the big mess otherwise known as my living room. I picked up the phone and dialed Joe and Charlene.

“I would love to come,” I said. “It’ll be good to see you both.”

“I’m so happy you’re coming,” Charlene cooed. “You might even find Mr. Right. You should think about moving to Dallas. San Francisco is so depressing and morbid.”

I was actually thinking of Joe. I would go to Dallas to show my support and try to give him the approval he always sought from me.

I overbrewed my tea; drank it slightly bitter.

I called my hairdresser and made an appointment to cut and dye my hair.

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I arrived in Dallas two days before the party and planned on leaving the day after. I hated the city as much as I thought I would. All anyone could talk about were the Cowboys and their chances in the playoffs. Charlene was happy. Joe was not, or so it seemed to me, in spite of the fact that he had finally gotten exactly what he thought he wanted from a wife: she gave him an adorable boy, she did everything in their home including laundry, and most important, she did not embarrass him.

Whenever I was alone with Joe during the two days I was there, Charlene would send her son into the room with us. The first time I carried him, Charlene made sure to mention how surprised she was that I had motherly instincts. She probably used the pronoun *we* more in one day than I have in my whole life. I did not blame her. Most plain women stake their claims clumsily.

---

I decided on a short, fitted black Chanel for the reception, scoop neck, a tad risqué, but I figured one can never go wrong with black, and this dress in particular highlighted my best feature, my legs.

“I wish I had the nerve to wear something like that,” Charlene said. She wore a long pink gown with white chenille daisies. She scrunched whatever was left of her eyebrows, lifted her dress, showing a purulent cyst on her upper right thigh. “Look, I can’t wear anything above the knee until this is gone.”

Joe watched the exchange, a puzzled look on his face. I saw him shudder and put his right hand in his pocket. He looked skinnier.

---

The reception was at a downtown hotel. As usual, the first thing I noticed was how badly most women wore evening dresses. There are a few places on the East Coast, and maybe Los Angeles where women understand evening gowns. The rest of the country still has far to go. That night most



the women wore expensive prom dresses in all kinds of pastels. The second thing I noticed was that other than the help, there was not one nonwhite person in the room. These were the company executives and their clients. I began to see why Joe would want me there. I had always been his defense against American gentiles, the country club set.

David stood in the center of the room surrounded by four people, holding their attention. He was unlike any of the men who usually caught my eye. He was a little over six feet, dark blond hair graying at the temples, not in very good shape, big-boned, with a slight belly. He had high cheekbones, cherubic and baby-faced, and the light turned his cheeks a Bonnard pink. He listened intently to one of the men in the group, while the others looked at him, but his full attention was on the speaker. A man who listened was an anomaly in my life.

He glanced up at me and hesitated. At first, I did not make much of it. In that room, I looked different from all the other women. I was also standing next to Joe, the guest of honor. David kept looking back at me, though. At the first break in conversation, he excused himself and walked over to Joe and Charlene. They exchanged pleasantries, and he was introduced to me as David Troubridge, senior vice-president in charge of the Western region. He was formal until he found out I was Joe's ex.

"It's wonderful you two are still friends," he said. "I wish I could say the same about my ex." That should have been my first warning, but I never listen to warnings, mine or anybody else's.

"Actually Sarah is close to both her exes," Joe said. "She's good that way. No acrimony."

"You have an accent." David had his full attention on me. "Are you Israeli?"

Joe chuckled.

"He wishes I were," I laughed, pointing at Joe. "Nour el-Din is a Lebanese name. I am originally from Lebanon."

Joe had to chime in. "Technically, the name is Druze, so it could be an Israeli one . . ."

"An Arab woman marrying a Jewish man," David interrupted, ignoring Joe. "What did your family think?"

"They didn't approve."

"I can imagine. Do you work for the company?"

"No," Joe said, trying to include himself one more time, "but she could. She's a good engineer." He stepped closer to me.

"Was," I said. "Was an engineer, but not a good one." I took a sip from my drink, but kept my eyes locked on David's.

"Why did you give it up?"

"I found out I hated it. I would call myself an academic engineer. I was good at solving problems on paper, but hadn't a clue when it came to the real world. Anyway, I could not function at all in such a structured environment."

"And what do you do now?"

"Professional divorcée," I said, thinking it a clever reply. His face registered confusion, followed by disappointment, which he tried quickly to mask. I lost him. He looked at Joe, wished him well in his new job, said his very-nice-to-meet-yous to Charlene and me, and withdrew.

---

I was sitting in the airport lounge waiting to board when I felt someone behind me. David smiled when he came around and sat next to me.

"Fancy meeting you here," he said. "Where are you going?"

Home, I told him, to San Francisco. That was where he lived as well. We were both surprised, each

assuming the other was a Dallas resident. He suggested we sit together on the plane and said he would take care of it. He returned from the counter with a new boarding pass. It was next to him, in first class.

We talked the whole flight. I did more of the talking than he did, a pattern that would prove typical. I told him about my first marriage, my second, the relationships in my life. I brought up my brother, I told him about my son. In that confined space, with an avid listener, I poured out my feelings, my fears, my hopes. I felt heard. He asked all the right questions, wanting details of the story. He told me about his marriage, his life in New England before he moved west. He spoke about his divorce. He was caught cheating. No, it was not the first time. He had no children. How did I feel about abandoning my son?

I told him about Kamal, about the crushing choices I had to make, how much pain being without my son caused. I told him about my inadequacies as a mother, as a wife. He attempted to stem my tears with platitudes and admissions that he had not been the greatest husband either. By the time we left the plane we were holding hands. We kissed in the cab. We made love on the stairs in my flat, surrounded by luggage, with my cats watching.

In bed, where we were to spend the next three years, we talked and explored each other. His caresses were gentle, intimate. He asked me the most interesting questions. He was all ears and hands. We talked as he caressed my breasts. I found out more about him, about his work, how he became the youngest vice-president, his style of management. I was captured by everything about him.

He did not spend the night, saying he was unable to sleep well anywhere but in his own bed. He also left a little frustrated because he could not bring me to orgasm. He felt inadequate, even though I told him it was the best sex I had ever had.

---

David was more mature than any of the other men I had loved. Whereas Fadi, my first lover, Omar, ex number one, and Joe, ex number two, were emotional, David was reserved. Physically, they all had Semitic features, while David was as waspish as you could get. But more important, while all my previous lovers could make me laugh, David could make me cry as well.

---

For our second date, he showed up at my door carrying a smile and two bags of groceries. He was going to cook since I had told him I was not very good at it. His unkempt hair fell on his forehead. He wore khakis, a yellow merino sweater, his brown shirt had the top button undone, the left collar tucked beneath the sweater, light brown tufts of hair sprouting from the hollow beneath his Adam's apple.

He placed the groceries on the kitchen counter, took me in his arms and kissed me. "Won't it get bad?" I asked. He led me to bed.

He washed the vegetables in the kitchen, standing barefoot, in his khakis, shirtless, beltless, and underwearless. "You should stock your kitchen better," he said. He went through my cabinets. "Oh my God. You don't even have a lettuce spinner."

I gave him my best helpless smile, shrugged my shoulders.

"You don't know what a spinner is, do you?" When he admonished, his voice rose a little higher. He shook his head in consternation. "It's a good thing I came prepared."

I studied an arabesque of sun-induced freckles on his back, walked up behind him, kissed them, tried

to connect the dots. He reached behind and spanked my butt. "Not while I'm cooking."

"What are you making?"

"Can't you tell?" He handed me a computer printout with recipes for tabbouleh, fried potato and coriander salad, and fattah, a dish of minced lamb, baked pita, garlicked yogurt, and sautéed pine nuts. "A full-fledged Lebanese dinner."

"Have you done anything like this before?"

"Nope. I just checked the recipes on the computer." He turned on a burner under the deep fryer. "I had trouble figuring out what to choose, what goes best with what. I wanted to ask you but I thought that would spoil the surprise. I ended up choosing this. I know it's two salads, but I thought the fried potato salad sounded more like a vegetable dish."

"Jesus. When you said you'll deal with dinner, I thought we were going to order a pizza."

"Order a pizza?" He pretended to be offended. "I make my pizzas from scratch using my very own pizza oven."

"Well, can I help with anything?"

"Why don't you chop the tomatoes?"

I did as I was told only to be rebuked again. "No, no, no. You're squeezing them. Leave it be. Why don't you open the wine?" I took out the wine bottle. "You're domestically disabled," he joked.

"This is Lebanese. Chateau Musar. I love this wine. Where did you find it?"

"At my favorite wine shop. I already tried a bottle just to make sure. It's quite good. Have to say I was surprised."

He chopped the tomatoes with the speed of an accomplished chef. His fingers, though long and thick, seemed delicate, feminine even, like a doctor's, or a surgeon's to be more precise. I began to entertain erotic thoughts again. The knife traveled deftly over vegetables.

"You went to so much trouble," I said.

"Say thank you."

"Thank you."

"You can thank me better by getting a knife sharpener. You don't have one."

"And a spinner."

"And a lettuce spinner. Come to think of it, I'll get them. I'm not sure I trust you in a kitchenware store."

As the scent of sautéed minced lamb wafted in the air, my cats, Descartes and Pascal, began to meow. David bent down and stroked them. Descartes licked his hand. David scooped some lamb into a saucer and set it on the floor. "I got more than enough lamb," he said.

I sipped my wine. I noticed the delicate hair on his arms. "One could fall for a man who cooks," he said.

"One could." He smiled.

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In those early days, I was oblivious. I wanted nothing but to be in his arms. I wanted

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# Half and Half

A MEMOIR

Sarah Nour el-Din



# A MEMOIR'S CAST:

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Mustapha Nour el-Din:	My father
Janet Foster:	My mother
Saniya Nour el-Din:	My stepmother
Hammoud Nour el-Din:	My grandfather
Amal Arouti:	My sister
Ashraf Arouti:	Amal's husband
Lamia Shaddad:	My sister
Samir Shaddad:	Lamia's husband
Rana Nour el-Din:	My half-sister, unmarried
Majida Salameh:	My half-sister
Alaa' Salameh:	Majida's husband
Ramzi Nour el-Din:	My half-brother
Peter Westchester:	Ramzi's lover
Kamal Farouk:	My son
Omar Farouk:	My ex-husband
Joseph Adams:	My ex-husband
Charlene Adams:	Joe's wife
Dina Ballout:	My best friend
Margot James:	Dina's lover
Fadi Arna'out:	My first lover
David Troubridge:	My lover

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# Chapter One— The Beginning

I had a fairy-tale childhood complete with the evil stepmother. She arrived at our house a young girl. Only fifteen years separated us (twelve between her and Amal, the eldest). She decided early on she did not like me and set a course of discipline that would last until my teenage years. She was strict with my two sisters as well, but she was a Nazi with me.

I did not do well in a disciplined environment, not in my stepmother's house nor later with the nun at school. I had an independent streak not easily vanquished, though my stepmother tried. My father and uncles used to teach us girls all kinds of pornographic swear words and laugh hysterically when we repeated them. When my stepmother arrived, she found them offensive and demanded a stop to all foul language. My father's compromise was to have us use swear words only when my stepmother was not around. My sisters never slipped. I did. I liked the shocked look on faces when I came out with a delicious curse. When she was not around, I received a hilarious response. When she was there, I got hot peppers. But still I slipped.

She was always upset that I never did what she asked. I was a precocious child, and all I ever wanted was for people to explain why they wanted me to do something. She never would. She always demanded and I wondered why. For every why, I received a smack. I never stopped asking.

Since I was the youngest until my half-sisters were born, I was the house slave. My stepmother was constantly demanding things. "Get me a bottle of water, Sarah." "My slippers from under the bed." "Get me the blue jar of face cream, Sarah. The one on the nightstand. Make sure it's the blue one and not the green one, Sarah. Not the green one." I brought the green one back and got smacked.

Every night, I walked on her back because I was the perfect weight. She had walked on her mother's back when she was my age, so I had to do it. She moaned with each step I took, and I imagined breaking vertebrae, my small feet making tiny indentations on her back. Skin turning pink.

I got revenge. Taking her shoes was my favorite. Once I figured which pair was her preferred, I would throw one of them down the garbage chute and listen as it clanked down the six floors and landed in the garbage containers with a tiny thud. No one ever looked in there. I always threw out one of the shoes, not the pair. That way she believed she had lost a shoe as opposed to someone having stolen them. I also liked to empty half of her perfume bottle down the toilet. When Violet, our nanny from the Seychelles, passed by her, my stepmother would smell the air. She was never able to put anything on Violet, of course, and I don't think she believed Violet was capable of doing the things she was doing. Nonetheless, she sent Violet packing within a couple of years of her taking over our house. When she did that, I declared war.

I put Bic pens in her coat pockets to bleed. I placed a live mouse in her apron. I dethreaded the hem of her skirts. But my favorite act of mischief, for which unfortunately I was caught, involved the sachets. My stepmother made sachets by cutting old mosquito nettings into small strips, stuffing the

with lavender, and tying them up in a bag. These she would place between the freshly laundered sheets in the linen closets; the sheets, when taken out and placed on the beds, carried the aroma of lavender. My father loved that. One night, I went into the linen closet, took out the bags, and placed them in the cats' litter box. The next night, I put them back between the sheets in the closet. My stepmother was furious. My father was the one who beat me for that, with the belt of course, in the bathroom.

I was a natural tomboy, and, knowing it annoyed my stepmother, I refused to wear dresses. I was frequently filthy, and I was better at games than any of the boys in the neighborhood. I did not wear makeup at all until I was fifteen, when I met my best friend, Dina. My stepmother taught my sisters Amal and Lamia, household duties, such as cooking and sewing. I could not stand it. When she tried teaching me to embroider, I pricked my fingers until they bled. She never tried again.

She turned my father against me. I was his favorite daughter, his Cordelia. He always considered my uniqueness enchanting. After years of her nagging, he began to see me as a lost cause, an embarrassment to the family. The final disappointment for him was my skill at soccer. I had played the game as a child, on the streets with the boys. My father never considered this the problem my stepmother did.

However, during the years after the 1970 World Cup Finals, my stepmother was able to convince my father I was wicked. I watched the championship game with my family and saw the Brazilians tear the Italians apart. I did not know who the players were and actually thought Instant Replay was the best player because his name kept appearing at the bottom of the screen every time something really great happened. All I really knew was the Brazilians made coffee and Italians pasta. But then I saw Pele pass the ball to Jairzinho for one of the goals and experienced a soccer epiphany. From that moment on, I knew how the game was supposed to be played, and that knowledge marked the beginning of my spiraling descent into disgrace.

I was a scrawny child, neither fast nor strong. But I developed impeccable control with a soccer ball and was blessed with something intangible, soccer vision. I could see plays developing long before they happened. I always knew where to be, where to send the ball. Even in the small, disorganized street games, without a pair of tennis shoes to call my own, it was apparent to any bystander that I was special. And that I was a girl.

One day, my stepmother looked out from the balcony, saw me down on the street playing, and had a nervous breakdown. She refused to speak to anyone, took tranquilizers, and locked herself in her room. My father slept on the couch. The next day, when she allowed my father into the room, they had a long conversation. All three of us, her stepdaughters, not her daughters, ended up in a half-boarding school, *Carmel St. Joseph*. The school was only four streets away from our house, but we slept there five nights a week. We left for school on Monday mornings and came back on Saturday afternoon. We had to wear uniforms. The nuns had been warned about me and behaved accordingly. I was treated as a troublemaker and I did not disappoint. I was not allowed to play soccer or any other sports at school. I had to watch while the other girls played volleyball or basketball, considered acceptable sports for girls, but not for me.

Luckily, my stepmother's meddling in my life ceased, or more accurately decreased, with the birth of Ramzi, my father's first son and the reason for his marriage to my stepmother. I was eleven. Both she and my father stopped caring about the girls and showered all their attention on the newborn son, the boy who was the sole reason for my father's, and all his forefathers', existence. Apocryphal stories abound about that "blessed" event. It is said that my mother, Janet, whom my father had divorced and sent back to New York because she could not deliver him a boy to carry on his name, wailed for one whole month beginning the instant the infant Ramzi himself wailed for the first time. It is said my father cried. All I know is that I was relieved.



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