

# LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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# DESERT RAIN

Victoria Zagar

# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## DESERT RAIN

By Victoria Zagar

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Photo Description

A red-haired man in an Army National Guard uniform touches his friend's face tenderly. They both look agonized by the touch. There is a spark in their eyes that speaks of forbidden love and desire.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*That look he's giving me is making it so hard to leave, but I have no choice. My fingers on his chin right now is the most intimately I have ever touched him. I wonder what he would do if I kissed him? Would it be fair to him?*

*Help!*

*Sincerely,*

*Kathleen*

*PS: I prefer emotion without heaps of angst, no bdsm, no cheating, no jumping into bed (better to have no sex than superfluous sex) and please give these boys an HEA. Also slow burn and UST are awesome. :D*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** military, sweet no sex, religion, bullying, friends to lovers

**Content warnings:** HFN

**Word count:** 9,074

# DESERT RAIN

By Victoria Zagar

*Thursday May 19th 1988*

*Northern Iraq*

Strong hands shook Nadir awake in the middle of the night. He opened his eyes and saw a scene of chaos unfolding around him as he was pulled to a sitting position. His mother's voice hushed him with urgency and he cut off his sob as he saw her terrified expression; even as a child knowing that look meant life or death. She dressed him quickly and he was hustled down the corridor with other female members of his extended family.

His small legs struggled to keep up with the women and he was hastily lifted up into his mother's arms as they raced through the dusty desert village. The sound of gunfire was deafening and Nadir saw dead bodies filling the streets as he was carried to a military truck. His mother and the other women climbed into the back and the truck sped off into the night.

Nadir heard his mother crying for the first time in his life. He looked at the faces in the truck to see his father was not with them. Nadir realized that he was back in the village, one of the dead men who had won them time so they could escape from the Iraqi Army. He clutched the sleeve of his mother's dress and sobbed as the truck drove off into the night, towards an uncertain future.

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*Tuesday August 24th 2004*

*Kevin's Apartment, Greenville, Arizona*

Kevin looked himself over in the mirror. His short reddish-brown hair was neatly shaven within an inch of its life. Blue eyes shone back at him from his reflection. The National Guard uniform did look good on him, he had to admit. He looked like a real soldier. He turned around and took one last glance before walking away.

Now for the hard part, the burden that had been weighing on his soul from the moment he'd signed his life away while Nadir was in college. It was time to tell Nadir he'd received orders to deploy in Iraq.

Nadir had been a part of his life since he'd arrived as a young refugee in the eighties and enrolled in his school. At first the young Iraqi's English had been lacking, but Kevin had always had patience with him when others had not. Now, at twenty-one, Nadir was out of college and pursuing a career in journalism. Even while Nadir was in college, they had exchanged letters. Kevin had read each one and committed it to memory. Each letter had probably been more important to Kevin than Nadir had realized, but Nadir was his last friend in a fast-shrinking landscape. Most of his other friends had gone away to get married or pursue careers, but Nadir was the one who came back. There were barely any opportunities in Greenville, so he'd taken a job with the local paper.

Kevin left his apartment and climbed into his Explorer, driving the short distance to Nadir's house and parking on the street outside. He sat in the truck just thinking for about fifteen minutes, studying the house like a stalker as he mulled over the words he would use in his conversation with Nadir. *I can't tell you that I'm doing it for you, but that's the truth. I want to liberate Iraq so that you can go home, if you want to. I want to get revenge for your father and for the childhood you should have had, in your homeland.* He closed his eyes and sighed. *I have my orders. Whether I can justify them or not, I have to go.*

He opened the truck door and jumped out, standing on the sidewalk in his National Guard uniform. Doubt rose inside him for the first time since he'd completed advanced training. It took all his courage to walk up the neat garden path to the front door and ring the doorbell. The door opened after a tense moment to reveal a middle-aged woman wearing a long dress, her hair veiled by an elegant headscarf. Nadir's mother recognized her son's childhood friend and called up the stairs after her son.

Nadir's mother turned back to Kevin. "Why don't you come in?" Kevin stepped through the door and stood awkwardly in the small hallway, waiting for Nadir.

Nadir hurried down the stairs, a relatively short figure in a Metallica hoodie with long black hair tied back in a ponytail. He paused in his tracks as

he saw Kevin in his military uniform. Kevin thought he saw a tiny “oh” escape Nadir’s mouth. Nadir’s mother excused herself and made her way to the kitchen, where she busied herself with dishes.

“Kevin.” Nadir struggled to find his voice for a second and looked down at his feet. “When...?”

Kevin felt the need to justify himself rise up in his gut and the things he’d never meant to say spilled out onto the carpet as if his chest had been cut open. “I joined the National Guard while you were in college. I wanted to make something of my life. Now I have a chance to save your country. I’m shipping out this week. I thought you should know.”

Nadir shook his head, his expression reflecting the shocked disbelief at what he was hearing. He seated himself on the stairs and sat still for a long moment. Kevin shifted awkwardly where he stood. “Say something, Nadir. Anything.”

“You’re an idiot.” Nadir’s voice was barely a whisper, yet his tone was firm. He looked toward the kitchen where his mother was still obliviously working, then back to Kevin. “Iraq is not my country any more. America is my home. I thought you knew that. I thought...” His voice trailed off.

“You thought what?”

“It doesn’t matter. You’ve made your choice.” Nadir stood, his eyes meeting Kevin’s. Kevin saw two wells of pain that seemed to bore into his very soul. At that moment he regretted the rash actions that had led him to sign away his life. Nadir came the rest of the way down the stairs and gripped Kevin’s arm. Kevin could feel his heat and thought that handprint might just be burned into his skin forever, the desperate grip of Nadir’s fingers that seemed unwilling to let him go.

As if suddenly aware of his mother’s presence, Nadir tore his hand away. “You must do what you must. Whatever you think is right. Just don’t say you’re doing it for me.”

The words stung and Kevin took a step back, opening the front door and letting the hot August air rush into the house. He stepped through the door, suddenly feeling the need to get away from Nadir and his painful words. An



ache emanated from his chest. He realized it had been a mistake to come here and stir up feelings he thought he'd buried long ago.

He strode down the garden path, only to hear Nadir following him. Nadir grabbed his hand and spun him around. Kevin steadied himself, only to find his hand on Nadir's face. The first traces of stubble tickled his fingertips and he wondered what it would feel like to kiss that mouth, to feel Nadir's lips on his.

*That wouldn't be fair to him, Kevin thought, pulling away from the thoughts that flooded his mind. It wouldn't be fair to kiss him and run away to a foreign war. He must never know about my true feelings for him. Even if I die out there. It's better that he never knows. His culture and religion would never allow us to be together. I never want him to have to choose between me and his family.*

Yet there was a pleading in Nadir's eyes that had the gravitational pull of a thousand suns, and Kevin felt himself pulling closer despite his previous thoughts. He came so close that he could feel Nadir's warm breath on his face before Nadir pulled away, sensing his mother's presence at the door.

"Nadir, are you going out?"

Nadir wanted to say yes, but Kevin shook his head. "I'll see you later, Nadir. I have some preparations I have to make before I ship out tomorrow, so I'd better get going." Kevin hurried back to his car as Nadir's mother drew Nadir back inside the house. Kevin felt his heart racing as he sat in the driver's seat. He turned on the ignition and pulled out in a hurry, his wheels skidding on the tarmac as he raced away, eager to escape the shadow of what had almost been and what could never be.

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*Tuesday July 7th 1992*

*Kevin's Parents' House, Greenville, Arizona*

Kevin sat down on the steps of his back porch. He was tired, a million adults having fussed over him the past few days. He was tired of being told what to feel when he just felt numb inside. Mom and Dad were dead, taken away by a horrific car crash. They'd told him the other driver was drunk.

Nadir appeared at the glass double doors, a smile on his face when he realized he'd found Kevin. He slid the door open and plopped himself down beside Kevin on the steps.

"My Dad died too," Nadir said.

"Really?" Kevin turned to Nadir and found real sympathy in his eyes, a stark contrast to the fake well-wishes he'd received from family and friends who were worried they would have to take him in.

"Yeah. Back when we escaped from Iraq. It feels like I barely knew him now. I remember at the time I felt so empty. But it gets easier." He slipped his hand around Kevin's shoulders and for the first time Kevin felt some real comfort, a warm gesture from somebody who understood. "Just feel what you feel. Don't let all those people tell you that you have to act a certain way."

"Thanks," Kevin said. "Hey, I heard that Josh's dad is ordering the wrestling pay-per-view tonight. He invited me over. Would you like to come along?"

"I wasn't invited..." Nadir withdrew his arm and looked down at his hands.

"You're with me, so it doesn't matter. You want in?"

Nadir smiled. "Yeah, I do. Thanks, Kevin."

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*Wednesday August 25th 2004*

*Kevin's Apartment*

Kevin folded a sweater and placed it into a packing box. The last of his possessions were ready to be packed into storage, his apartment given up to a new tenant. He sat down on the bed, thinking about Nadir. How close they'd come to kissing in his front yard. *Did I do the right thing by telling him about my deployment, or am I just running from him?* The TV was on in the background, the news showing details of the latest casualties in the War on Terror. *I never meant to say that I was doing it for him. What a thing to tell him. Now, if I die, all he'll do is blame himself. I never meant to burden him like that.*

The phone rang and Kevin dived across the bed, picking it up off the nightstand. “Hello?”

“It’s me.” Nadir’s voice was quiet and cautious. “Look, I’m sorry about what I said. You have the right to make your own life decisions. I support your goal. I just... I don’t want to lose my brother out there.”

*My brother.* The words at once warmed and stung Kevin. *Close, but never close enough. Brothers never touch the way I want to touch you. That’s why we’ve drifted apart.* “I know,” Kevin struggled to say. “It’s going to be okay.”

“I wondered if you’d like to hang out,” Nadir said, changing the subject. “I mean, if you’re shipping out tomorrow, I’d like to spend some time with you before you go. We haven’t seen each other enough since I came back from college.”

“Agreed.” Kevin eyed the boxes around him and mentally shrugged. There would be time for packing later. If he died in Iraq, he would never see Nadir again. He had to make time for the man while there was still a chance. “Where do you want to go?”

“I guess we’re too old to hang out at the mall.”

“Nah. Never.” Kevin chuckled. “I’ll meet you there, then?”

“Actually, my car’s in the shop. I was wondering if you could come by and pick me up?”

“Sure thing,” Kevin said. “I’ll be right over.”

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*Sunday August 22nd 1999*

*Nadir’s House, Greenville, Arizona*

Kevin was sleeping over at Nadir’s house. They watched movies together into the small hours of the night. The other kids at school liked to hang out with their girlfriends, but Kevin and Nadir were happy just to hang out together.

“My mother’s always trying to set me up with girls,” Nadir sighed. “Girls, girls, girls. As if I’ll fall off the Earth if I don’t settle down and start a family right away.”

“Plenty of time for that shit,” Kevin said.

“Right. That’s what I said.” The movie reached its peak, the hero rescuing the girl and kissing her. Nadir shifted uncomfortably where he was sitting on the bed next to Kevin.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. I’ve just been sitting for a while.” The movie credits rolled and Nadir turned off the TV. “I guess we should settle down.” His pajama pants clung to his ass and Kevin tried to avert his gaze. His mouth was dry and he covered himself with the sleeping bag on the floor before Nadir could see the start of an erection tenting in his pants.

“Good night, then,” Nadir said.

“Good night.”

Kevin laid awake sleeplessly as Nadir dozed off. He watched Nadir’s face as his features settled into peacefulness and felt a warm protectiveness rise up in his belly. He dozed for a while before he was awoken by a cry. Nadir was shifting in his sleep, the captive of a nightmare. Kevin grabbed him and shook him awake and Nadir woke with a start, grabbing his wrists and pulling him down on the bed. Their faces were inches apart as Nadir realized what was happening.

“Sorry, I had a nightmare.”

“You okay?” Kevin whispered, praying his body wouldn’t betray him. He was lying on top of Nadir, face to face, his lips inches apart from Nadir’s. One movement and he could claim those lips in a kiss. Only the sheet separated them. He rolled off of Nadir quickly, lying beside him. He moved to get up off the bed but Nadir pulled him down.

“You don’t have to sleep on the floor. There’s room for both of us.”

“You sure?” Kevin’s heart was racing, pounding a steady beat in his eardrums.

“Of course.” Nadir looked up at the ceiling before closing his eyes.

Kevin shifted uncomfortably, afraid to get too close to Nadir. At some point he must have fallen asleep, however, as he woke to find his arm wrapped around Nadir, his body pressed up close to his friend. He panicked as he

realized what he'd done in his sleep and slowly withdrew his arm, rolling away before Nadir could stir.

"Hmm? What time is it?" Nadir stretched. Kevin closed his eyes so that Nadir would think he was asleep. Nadir glanced over at Kevin and got up, grabbing his towel and heading to the bathroom. Kevin was still pretending to be asleep when Nadir returned. Nadir dropped his towel and Kevin opened his eyes a crack to see his friend in all his naked glory. He looked like a Persian prince. His silken black hair was untied and falling around his shoulders. His body, although skinny, was well-defined, his skin a rich tan color. His dick sprouted from a nest of pubic hair and Kevin felt himself swallow a lump as he imagined Nadir aroused, that cock full and hard. He was glad to be lying on his side as he felt himself getting hard. Nadir dressed and shook him awake, and Kevin responded with a sleepy groan.

"In a minute, Nadir..."

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*Wednesday August 25th 2004*

*Greenville, Arizona*

Kevin remembered their last sleepover with a smile. Seeing Nadir naked had spawned a thousand wet dreams, his favorite of which involved lying Nadir down in the hot desert sand and making love to him, but it had made sleeping over again an impossible prospect. Kevin had found himself suddenly busy until graduation, and then Nadir had left for college. All he had left after that were the letters and the occasional phone call. He'd thought about seeing Nadir on break but calls to his house revealed that Nadir had not come home, much to Kevin's disappointment. Kevin himself was busy with training and so he never made the road trip to Princeton to see his friend.

He pulled up outside Nadir's house and honked the horn, and Nadir hurried out of the house, still wearing the Metallica hoodie from before. He climbed into the passenger seat of the Explorer and Kevin shifted the vehicle into drive, being sure to check for traffic before he pulled out. It was bad enough that his parents had died in a traffic accident, but if anything were to happen to Nadir on his watch it would be too much to bear. He pulled out of the suburbs and

onto the highway, Nadir silent in the passenger seat, as if mulling over his thoughts.

“It’s been a while since we hung out like this,” Kevin said, looking for a conversation starter to break the awkward silence that hung over them.

“Three years,” Nadir replied. “I thought about coming back on spring break, but... I dunno. I felt like you were avoiding me at the end of our senior year of high school. Did I do something wrong?”

“No, of course not,” Kevin said. “Nadir, I missed you. Those letters you sent me from college were my lifeline.”

“I’ll write to you in Iraq, if you like.”

“I’d like that.” Kevin felt a smile cross his face. “Nadir, I never meant to distance myself. I just thought... that you would find some new friends at college, you know? Maybe even a girlfriend. I thought you might not need me hanging around anymore.”

Nadir shook his head with a bitter smile. “I guess I lied to you. College wasn’t as rosy as I made out in my letters. In fact, I got a lot of hell after 9/11. People calling me a terrorist, that kind of crap.”

“That’s awful. Nadir, you could have told me. I would have driven up there and put them in their place.”

Nadir laughed. “I would have liked to have seen that.” He twiddled his fingers. “Sorry I didn’t tell you. I just figured you probably had enough problems of your own, you know?”

“Nah. Life’s been boring down here. Absolutely nothing to report.”

“Not even a girlfriend?”

“There was someone I cared about, but we drifted apart.”

“Oh. That’s a shame.”

“Yes, it is.” Kevin pulled into the mall parking lot and found a spot, pulling in and stilling the engine. “So, anything you’re looking for?”

“Some new CDs. Maybe a cell phone.” Nadir pulled out his beat-up phone. “I think this one’s on its last legs.”

“I don’t even have one,” Kevin said. “Guess I don’t have much use for one now.”

“I guess not.” Nadir opened the door and climbed out, closing the door and waiting for Kevin to lock up. The SUV beeped its horn as the security system engaged, and they walked towards the mall.

“So what’s up with your car, anyway?” Kevin asked.

“Transmission’s shot. Can’t afford to get it fixed right now.”

“Well, how about this? You can borrow my Explorer while I’m in Iraq.” Kevin tossed the keys to Nadir, and he caught them gracefully.

“I couldn’t do that. Kevin, you bought that truck with your parents’ insurance money.”

“Sure, and I don’t want to sell it to some garage to make a buck off of it. I’d rather you drive it around. If I don’t come back, you can keep it.”

“Don’t say that,” Nadir said, a sudden fierceness in his voice. “You’re coming back.”

“I’ll try, but life has no guarantees.” Kevin shrugged. He noticed they’d stopped walking, that Nadir had turned to him with a sad look in his eyes. “Ah, stop that. I’ll be fine.” He patted Nadir’s shoulder. “Seriously. I’ll be coming back for that truck, so don’t you dare crash it.”

“Life has no guarantees,” Nadir mimicked with a wry smile. They started walking again and headed to the clothing store situated on the corner. A familiar face passed them and muttered something with a wicked grin.

“What did he say?” Kevin asked.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“No, seriously. What did he say?”

“He said towel-head,” Nadir sighed. Kevin marched over to the man, around the same age as they were, and spun him around.

“Peterson. So you’ve still got the emotional maturity of a six-year-old, I see. How about you leave Nadir the fuck alone?” Peterson was taller than him, but Kevin wasn’t intimidated.

“Kevin, why are you still hanging out with that terrorist, anyway?” Peterson glared at Nadir, who shriveled like a wallflower.

Kevin grabbed the front of Peterson’s shirt and thrust him into the wall. “He’s not a terrorist, and you know it. So shut your face.” Kevin let go of the man’s shirt and he fell back into the wall. Kevin marched away, back to Nadir’s side. “Let’s go.” They walked into the clothing store and Nadir started looking through shirts.

“You should have left it, Kevin. Now he’ll just be worse.”

“You’ve got to stand up for yourself, Nadir. Don’t let them say shit like that.” Kevin’s blood was boiling as Nadir quietly browsed through rock band shirts and hoodies. “What a prick.”

“You and I must be a funny sight, Kevin. An American soldier hanging out with an Iraqi Muslim? Most people would expect us to be enemies.”

“Well, they don’t know you.” Kevin leaned on the clothing rack. “You’re as much an American as anybody else here. They’re the ones missing out on your warmth and friendship if they can’t see past the color of your skin.” He reddened slightly as he said it, and Nadir smiled.

“Well, as long as you think so, I’m okay. I don’t need friends like him, anyway.” Nadir held up a shirt. “What do you think of this one?”

Kevin seized the opportunity to drop the heavy conversation. “It looks good. What about this one?”

“You think?”

“Yeah, I do. Get both. They both look great on you.”

They left the store with both shirts and hit up the record store. They browsed through CDs, comparing tastes before Nadir settled on a selection. As they left the store, Kevin felt his stomach rumble.

“I could go for something to eat. How about you?”

“Sounds good.” Nadir nodded towards a sandwich shop. “Is that okay?”

“No problem.”

Nadir picked out a salad and Kevin settled for egg sandwiches. Nadir looked at his CDs while Kevin sat eating and looking over at him. *One last,*



*happy day to spend together. A snapshot to remember when I'm fighting for his country, a reminder of why I'm fighting.* He memorized the shape of Nadir's face, his pleasant smile, his quiet taste in loud music.

They finished eating and headed home, settling into a companionable silence as Kevin drove. *I'm not ready to say goodbye yet,* Kevin thought, as he pulled up outside Nadir's house. Nadir reluctantly opened the truck door.

"Um, are you doing anything tomorrow morning?" Kevin asked.

"No, why?" Nadir pulled the door closed again.

"I could use your help moving my things into storage. I'm giving up my apartment, since there's no point paying rent if I'm not going to be here."

"Oh. Yeah, I'd be happy to help," Nadir said.

"I'll come pick you up around ten. When we're done I'll give you all the paperwork for the Explorer and it's yours."

"I'm not sure I can accept it, Kevin."

"Please, Nadir. Besides, you're just borrowing it, okay?"

"Okay." Nadir nodded. "I'll see you at ten, then." He opened the door and dropped down to the pavement level, offering Kevin a wave as he pulled out onto the road.

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*Wednesday August 16th 2000*

*Greenville High School Graduation Ceremony, Greenville, Arizona*

Nadir stepped up to receive his diploma. He took it and looked backstage at Kevin, meeting his eyes. He saw admiration and longing there before Kevin looked away. Clutching his diploma tightly, Nadir stepped off the stage. Everyone knew that he'd received a scholarship to go to Princeton for a degree in communication studies, but all he knew was that it would mean leaving Kevin behind. Kevin would no doubt move on with his life once he was gone.

He felt like crushing his diploma and tossing it into the crowd, but he stood firm, watching Kevin receive his. Kevin stood next to him, but they didn't exchange so much as a whisper. Conversation had been strained ever since the fateful sleepover. A summer break they should have spent together would

instead be spent packing and preparing for a new life. A life without Kevin in it.

Nadir turned his eyes to the ground and pretended the tear welling up in his left eye was all about pride.

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*Thursday August 26th 2004, 4:00 p.m.*

*Kevin's Apartment*

"I think that's all of it," Nadir brushed his hands together to wipe off the excess dust. The apartment was empty save for a couple of folding chairs, which they sat down on.

"Thanks for your help," Kevin said. "I don't know how I would have done it all by myself."

"No problem. That's what friends are for."

"Say, you want to get something to eat? I was thinking of ordering in, but I know you can only eat certain things. Is a cheese pizza okay?"

"Sure." Nadir twiddled his thumbs while Kevin went to find the menu and number of a delivery place.

"Can I borrow your cell phone?" Kevin asked. "I packed up my regular phone."

"Of course." Nadir handed his cell phone to Kevin, who called and placed the order.

"So, I guess that's it then," Nadir said, looking around the empty apartment with a wistful expression. "Here we are, adults now. You're going off to war and I'm meeting a girl later. I wish we didn't have to leave it all behind."

"A girl?"

"Yeah, my mom's setting me up with a girl from the mosque, Nadia. Her father is bringing her over to meet me tonight." Nadir looked down at his hands. "My mother is growing impatient. She expects her only son to get married and start a family. I guess it's time."

"Hey, it's only time if that's what you want, Nadir. Don't get married because your family expects it. I want you to be happy."

“Thanks.” Nadir swallowed a lump in his throat and was relieved when the doorbell rang. Kevin rushed to the door and paid the delivery guy, bringing back with him a delicious-smelling pizza box. He and Nadir reached for a slice at the same time and Kevin found his fingers meeting Nadir’s.

“Oh, you were first,” Kevin said, but his hand lingered. He laid his hand over Nadir’s and gave it a gentle squeeze before letting go. “Promise you’ll take care of yourself.”

“You as well,” Nadir said. “Especially you.” He rested the slice of pizza on a piece of kitchen paper. “You never did tell me the real reason you joined the National Guard.”

“I guess not.” Kevin shook his head. “I just blew all my chances in this town. You were always the best thing about this place, Nadir. I didn’t want to go to college and I don’t have good job prospects. The National Guard offers me decent pay and a little bit of respect in this town when the job is done. It’s the best choice I have now.” He shook his head. “Nadir, answer me one thing. Why did you come back here after graduating from Princeton? You could have worked for one of the big media outlets. Why come back here and work for the local paper?”

Nadir fell silent, then bowed his head. “I didn’t graduate, Kevin. I dropped out.”

“What? Why? But you sent me all those letters from Princeton...”

“I had a friend up there mail them out. I didn’t want you to know that it didn’t work out for me. You seemed so proud when I got the scholarship. I didn’t want to disappoint you. I already disappointed my mother. Truth is, the bullying became too much. I couldn’t take it anymore. I even thought about suicide. So I came home and moved back in with my mother, and didn’t even let you know I was back until college would have been over.”

“Nadir, you should have told me—called me—come to visit. I would have helped.”

“I know that now,” Nadir said. “Seeing you put Peterson in his place was satisfying, I have to say. But we drifted apart, you know? After that sleepover, things just weren’t the same between us. I still wonder what I did wrong, what I did to make you run away from me. We were still friends, still talked, but

you seemed to become just another person I had to please. That's why I sent the letters, sounding happy with my college life. I wanted you to be proud of me. I didn't want to let you down."

"Nadir, you've never let me down." Kevin finished up a slice and reached for another. "You didn't do anything wrong at the sleepover. I was just... a little embarrassed."

"Embarrassed? Why?"

"Ah, man. This is hard to admit, but that morning... I wasn't sleeping. I saw you naked. It shouldn't have been a big deal, I know, but I was embarrassed about it. So there. I'm an idiot and got all freaked out because I saw my best friend naked. What else is new?"

"I'm sorry," Nadir said. "I never meant to—"

"Don't be silly," Kevin said. "The problem was mine, not yours. It was just one of those rough moments of adolescence, figuring stuff out, you know?"

Nadir nodded. "Do you have a ride to the airport?"

"Yeah, I booked a taxi." Kevin stood. "I shouldn't keep you any longer. You have that thing with Nadia later on. Good luck, Nadir." He pressed the SUV's keys into Nadir's hands and closed Nadir's fingers around them. He let go and embraced Nadir in a big bear hug. Nadir's arms squeezed him just as tightly and he found it hard to let go.

"Be safe out there." Nadir's voice had a raspy quality to it. "I'm just borrowing the truck."

"You bet." Kevin said. He watched Nadir leave with a lump in his throat, hearing his Explorer pull out onto the street with squealing tires. He plonked himself down on the chair and put his head in his hands.

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*Thursday August 26th, 8:00 p.m.*

*Greenville Airport, Greenville, Arizona*

Heavy rain clattered on the taxi's roof as it headed along the freeway towards the airport. Kevin fiddled with the straps on his backpack. There'd always been a part of him that believed he'd never make the trip, but that piece of him became smaller and smaller as Greenville disappeared into the rearview

mirror. The National Guard was his future now. He was traveling to Iraq where he'd shoot people who looked a lot like Nadir on the pretext of liberating a nation. He tried not to think about it as the taxi pulled up to the curb. Kevin pulled out the fare and paid the driver with a reasonable tip before opening the door and heading out into the rain. A strong wind had kicked up, blowing the rain into his eyes as he headed for the terminal. He was relieved to go inside and see the hustle and bustle of people, and forced away the knot in his chest by focusing on what he had to do. *Check in at the ticket desk. Find my terminal. Wait for my flight.*

Kevin kept looking behind him at the doors to the terminal, knowing he was hoping for Nadir to arrive and talk him out of leaving, but he knew it was a lost cause. Nadir had a future of his own to attend to, and Kevin was just holding him back. Wasn't he? He thought about Nadir dropping out of college and felt a deep sadness that his best friend, his brother, his soul mate hadn't had the trust to confide in him. The letters from Nadir were in his backpack but they felt empty now, comforting lies that he'd held onto for so long. *I never wanted to be someone you had to please, Nadir. I would love and worship you if you had absolutely nothing to offer.*

"Next, please!" Kevin was pulled from his reverie to find he was at the front of the ticket line. He turned around to see some irritated looking passengers glaring at him before he realized he was being summoned forward. He handed his ticket to the lady sheepishly with his driver's license.

"That'll be Gate 14B," the lady said, and Kevin was done. He took one last glance at the double doors. *It's time to let go and move on*, he thought, and joined the line for security screening.

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### *Meanwhile, at Nadir's House*

"This is Nadia." Nadir's mother introduced the young woman, who wore a headscarf and traditional clothing. She was shy and demure as her father stood over them watchfully at the kitchen table. Nadir pulled out a chair for her and she sat down, and then took his place at the other side.

"So, tell me a little about yourself," Nadir said. Nadia recounted her life story and education, how she felt she would be a good wife, but how she also

wanted to pursue a career of her own. Nadir tried to concentrate but found his mind wandering to Kevin at the airport. Wind and rain battered the house, an appropriate analog for the storm in Nadir's heart.

“Are you listening, Nadir?” Nadir's mother interjected, and Nadir realized he hadn't heard a word Nadia was saying. All he could hear were Kevin's words. *I want you to be happy.*

He stood up. “Please excuse me.” He left the room and started to put his coat on. His mother followed him out into the hallway.

“Just what do you think you are doing, Nadir?”

“I have to go to the airport. I have to stop Kevin from getting on that plane.”

“Kevin? Nadir, you have more important things to think about than your friends! Your future wife could be sitting in that room! I went to great pains to arrange this meeting. The least you could do after dropping out of college is to find a good wife!”

“I don't want a good wife.” Nadir grabbed his keys from the hook and opened the front door. The wind and rain buffeted him and he pulled the door closed, running to the SUV parked in the driveway. His mother opened the door to follow, but he was already in reverse, racing out onto the street. He was halfway down the street before his mother had even reached the end of the yard.

*I have to hurry, Nadir thought, racing to the freeway. His plane could leave any time. I have to tell him the truth. Even if he decides to leave anyway, I have to let him know before it's too late.* The rain poured down on the windshield and the wipers darted back and forth, wiping the screen as clear as it could manage before the next torrent covered it. The wind threatened to pull the vehicle into oncoming traffic but Nadir wrestled with the steering and kept himself going.

He found himself slowing down as he saw red and blue lights up ahead. Traffic was backed up due to an accident, and he found himself beating the steering wheel in frustration, imagining Kevin's flight taking off before he was even halfway to the airport.

The accident was eventually cleared and traffic started moving again. Nadir sped the rest of the way to the airport, leaving the Explorer curbside and rushing into the terminal. He was soaking wet, cold and tired, but he was determined to find Kevin, to say something, anything. *Anything to stop him from walking out of my life forever.*

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*Thursday August 26th 2004, 10:00 p.m.*

*Greenville Airport*

“All flights are cancelled due to gale-force winds. Please see the ticket desk for rebooking and layover options.”

Kevin almost smiled, but realized his wait would be spent alone. *If Nadir was coming, he'd be here by now.* He left the gate and headed back to the main terminal, past the throngs of cranky, dispirited people who had just learned they would not be getting home tonight. He joined a mile-long line for the ticket desk, one eye on the door again. *Stop that. Nadir isn't coming. It's over. You had your one chance to tell him how you felt and you blew it.*

He didn't notice the wet figure entering the terminal right away, his long hair drowned and hanging back in a wet ponytail. The young man's jacket was soaked, his expression one of pain and frustration. He looked around desperately, fixing his eyes on a man in uniform and realizing it wasn't Kevin before spotting him in the ticket line. His expression changed from frustration to one of hope as he rushed forward.

Kevin noticed a wet figure running towards him and recognized Nadir at once. His heart rose in a vision of ecstasy as he realized that Nadir had come for him. Nadir rushed into his arms. Kevin caught him and spun him around like a lover, laughter in his smile as he set Nadir down on his feet.

“Nadir. You came.” Further conversation was cut off by Nadir's lips on his, a kiss that tasted like desert rain, hot and fresh. He returned the kiss with equal fervor, not caring that many pairs of eyes were fixed on them. Nadir was kissing him and if anybody had anything to say about it they could answer to him.

Eventually Nadir broke off the kiss and pulled back slightly. Kevin wiped the rain from Nadir's face and lifted his chin, getting a good look at the man he loved and who apparently loved him.

“Say something.” Nadir started to shift uncomfortably. “Tell me you won't go.”

Kevin felt a pit open in his stomach. “I have to. I signed up. It's not as easy as just quitting.”

“Call your commander. Tell him you're gay. Under the rules of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, he'll have to discharge you.”

“Really?” Kevin felt hope rising up within him. “Nadir. What are you going to do about your mother? Your community? Your religion? They won't accept this.”

“We live in America. They'll have to accept it.” Nadir took Kevin's hand in his. “Please come with me.” He started to pull Kevin towards the terminal exit.

“Where are we going?”

“Outside. Too many eyes here.” The automatic doors slid open and Nadir pulled Kevin out into the rain. He unlocked the Explorer and they sat inside.

“Do you love me?” Nadir asked.

“Stupid question. Of course I do, Nadir. Why didn't you tell me sooner?”

“Fear. I've never been as scared as I am tonight.” Nadir's hands were shaking and Kevin took them in his.

“You're worried about what your mom and your religious community will think?”

“Yeah. I can't be the only Muslim who's ever come out as gay, but that doesn't mean they'll take it well. My mom...” He shook his head. “I can't even imagine how disappointed she'll be. I can't help it, though. I can't be the person she wants me to be. I can't just let you walk out of my life.”

“Nadir. It'll be okay. We'll work it out.”

“I have to go home. I have to tell her the truth. Will you come with me, Kevin?”



“Of course I will,” Kevin said. “I’m driving, though. You’re in no state.” He leaned over and kissed Nadir again. Kevin got out of the truck and they switched sides. Kevin started up the vehicle and pulled away into the night, Nadir at his side.

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*Friday August 27th 2004, 12:00 a.m.*

*Nadir’s House*

“Nadir? Where have you been!” Nadir’s mother rushed to the door as Nadir entered, Kevin following behind him.

“Did Nadia and her father leave?” Nadir asked, looking around.

“Yes. Her father was very angry. You have an apology to make.” She looked up at Kevin. “Now, are you going to tell me what all this is about?”

“You should sit down.” Nadir took his mother’s arm and guided her to a chair, where she sat. He gestured to Kevin to sit as well, and Kevin took a spot on the edge of the sofa. Nadir paced the room nervously, looking for the words to tell his mother.

“I’m gay.” Nadir looked straight at his mother’s face, looking for any sign of her reaction. Nadir’s mother closed her eyes as if hearing a piece of terrible news, then opened them again and looked at Nadir.

“Nadir, open your eyes. Look at me.”

Nadir’s eyes were brimming with tears when he opened them to look at his mother’s face. She stood up and embraced him tightly.

“Nadir, I always knew you were different somehow. Now I know why.” She paused for a moment. “You are my son. I love you as you are.” She let go of Nadir and turned to Kevin. “I assume you are the object of my son’s affections.”

“Yes, Mrs. H.,” Kevin said, shriveling under Nadir’s mother’s gaze.

“Nadir, leave us please. I would like to talk to Kevin.” Nadir nodded and hurried into the next room, closing the door.

“You have known Nadir for a long time. You know he is sensitive.” Nadir’s mother leaned forward in her chair. “You will have to make sacrifices

if you are to be with him. Nadir cannot be “out” in the way you might want to be. If the others at the mosque knew of his sexual orientation, they would torment him until he took his own life. You must keep his secret, Kevin.”

“I understand. It’s okay. I can do that. For Nadir, I would do anything.”

“Would you? This path will not be easy. I will still have to arrange his meetings with potential brides. Even if he won’t be married, he has to at least seem interested. Or they will suspect. If you are to live together, it will have to be officially as roommates. As you get older, it will be harder to hide. You must protect him, Kevin, against any who would hurt him. You cannot leave him here and run off to the military. If you can’t be there for him, it would be best for you to leave.”

“I’m not going to Iraq,” Kevin said. “Not now. I can call my commander. Gays aren’t allowed in the military, so I can probably get discharged.”

“And the rest?”

“I’ll do whatever it takes, Mrs. H.” Kevin stood up. “I’ve loved Nadir for a long time. I never knew he would be able to return my feelings. So whatever I have to do, it won’t be a sacrifice if I can have him in my life. I can keep my mouth shut, and I was never a big fan of pork anyway.” He flashed Nadir’s mother a winning smile.

Nadir’s mother smiled wanly before becoming deadly serious again. “Did he tell you about the bullying at college?”

Kevin nodded. “I know. I know what would happen if people found out he was gay. I know he wouldn’t be able to take the persecution. So I’ll keep him safe. I’ll never let anything happen to him. I swear it.”

Kevin looked behind him to see the kitchen door was open. Nadir shyly walked in and took Kevin’s hand in his. Kevin knew that Nadir had heard the whole conversation from the look in his eyes, the shining light of love and admiration directed at him. Kevin had to hold himself back from seizing Nadir and squeezing him in a protective embrace right then.

“Then I’ve said what needs to be said.” Nadir’s mother swept across the room towards the exit to the kitchen. “I’ll leave you alone to say good night.” She entered the kitchen and softly closed the door behind her.

Nadir led Kevin to the front door. Kevin reached for the handle, but Nadir's hand rested on his, stopping him. Kevin withdrew his hand as Nadir's hand reached up to explore his face. His fingers slowly brushed Kevin's stubble and Kevin felt himself inhale sharply at Nadir's tender touch.

"Will you be all right in a hotel room by yourself?" Nadir looked at him with a yearning expression that made Kevin bite his lip as he thought of the implications. But Nadir's one eye was on the kitchen door, weighing up what his mother had said.

"I'll be fine," Kevin said. "We have to be discreet. No checking into hotel rooms together. We'll have time for everything, Nadir; there's no hurry."

Nadir reached up and kissed him with a kiss that spoke of need and desire. Their tongues met and wrestled with each other and Kevin gasped for a breath as Nadir ground his body into him. Kevin pulled away, his hot breath teasing Nadir's ear as he struggled to find his thoughts. He was hard as a rock, every nerve in his body singing with his need for Nadir, his desire to take his dearest friend to the hotel with him and make him his lover at last. His lips found Nadir's again and he kissed him like he was an oasis in the desert, drinking in the flavor of desert rain as his hands tangled in his wet hair. His hands moved down his body to rest on Nadir's hips and brushed over his warm ass.

Nadir glanced at the closed kitchen door. Kevin got the message and let go, his entire body complaining at the absence of its other half.

"I guess I should go." It was almost a whisper that passed Kevin's lips; an admission of his dirty thoughts, the wish he could stay the night and take Nadir upstairs.

"I'll see you tomorrow." Nadir's tone was all business but the sparkle in his eyes was a promise of all the things that were to come. Kevin's cock twitched in his pants and Nadir reached for it, tracing its outline in the khaki fabric. Kevin had to bite his lip to stifle a gasp. Nadir laughed but his eyes spoke of a barely leashed desire. Kevin swallowed the lump in his throat and opened the door. The warm night air rushed in, speaking of the outside world and all the things they would have to hide from it.

“Good night, Nadir. I’ll call you tomorrow as soon as I get the apartment back.” Kevin stepped outside. Nadir stood behind the door, watching Kevin as he walked back to his truck and drove away.

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*Friday 27th August 2004, 2:00 a.m.*

*Greenville Inn, Greenville, Arizona*

Kevin plopped his bag down and sank into the soft mattress of his hotel room bed. His mind was spinning. Just a few hours ago he thought he would never see Nadir again, now Nadir was his. He closed his eyes and felt Nadir’s hands on him again, and his cock rose to meet the occasion. He teased himself like Nadir had teased him, gently touching the outside of his pants, feeling the hard bulge from the outside of the fabric. He had to admit that the pants certainly flattered him. He wondered if he’d be allowed to keep them.

His erection floundered as the thought of the military came back to him. He fumbled in his bag and pulled out his deployment papers, reaching over to pick up the hotel phone and punching in the phone number listed on the contact sheet. His heart was beating in his throat as the phone on the other end rang over and over. Just as he was about to give up, a gruff voice answered on the other end.

“Yes?”

“This is Kevin Madison. I can’t take that flight. I can’t ship out to Iraq.”

“That’s too bad, son. You’ve completed basic and advanced training. Barring a serious reason—”

“I’m gay.” The words spilled out of Kevin’s mouth. “I’m in love with a man. My best friend.”

“You do understand that under Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, you’re looking at a discharge?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’ll have to attend a hearing, but in cases like these it’s usually straightforward enough. You’ll receive a letter in a few days with more instructions.” The commander sounded resigned, and Kevin knew he had won. The rules were the rules, after all.

“Thank you, sir, and good night.” Kevin put down the phone and exhaled a sigh of relief. He had to fight the urge to call Nadir and instead rolled over on the bed. He looked up at the ceiling, clutching a pillow in his arms as if it were Nadir. He thought about all the long years he had yearned for his friend, all the missed moments, stolen touches over the years.

*Now he’s mine. We can build a life together. Yesterday I was ready to give my life for my country. Now I can give it to Nadir.*

Kevin laughed as he squeezed the pillow tightly. He laughed until he was out of breath, tears rolling down his cheeks, then rested his head back on the pillow and looked up at the ceiling. A million images flashed before his vision; finding a place to live together, sharing everyday life with Nadir, and of course the thought that teased him the most, making love to the man who had fueled a thousand erotic fantasies.

He rolled onto his side, contentedness filling him up inside. He felt himself growing hard, but there was no urgency to it. It could wait until tomorrow, like the rest of the world. Emotionally exhausted, Kevin closed his eyes and awaited the dawn of a day filled with promise, the first day of the rest of his life with the man that he loved.

**THE END**

## **Author Bio**

*Victoria was born in the United Kingdom but immigrated to the United States at age 21. She's bisexual, happily married and still shouts in a British accent.*

*She's been reading and writing m/m and f/f romance pretty much non-stop since 2006, after dabbling with short stories since childhood. She decided to release her sci-fi m/m romance novel *Written In The Stars* in June 2012 and launch herself into the exciting world of self-publishing, which has been an incredible journey of learning and self-improvement.*

## **Contact Info**

[Email](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)

[Website \(Infinite Love GLBT Fiction and Reviews\)](#)