

**DESERT  
ECHOES**

*To Jeni, Mummy, Sue, Nitz, so many names  
and memories, one friendship*



*Desert Echoes* contains content some readers may find triggering,  
including addiction, loss of loved ones and homophobia.

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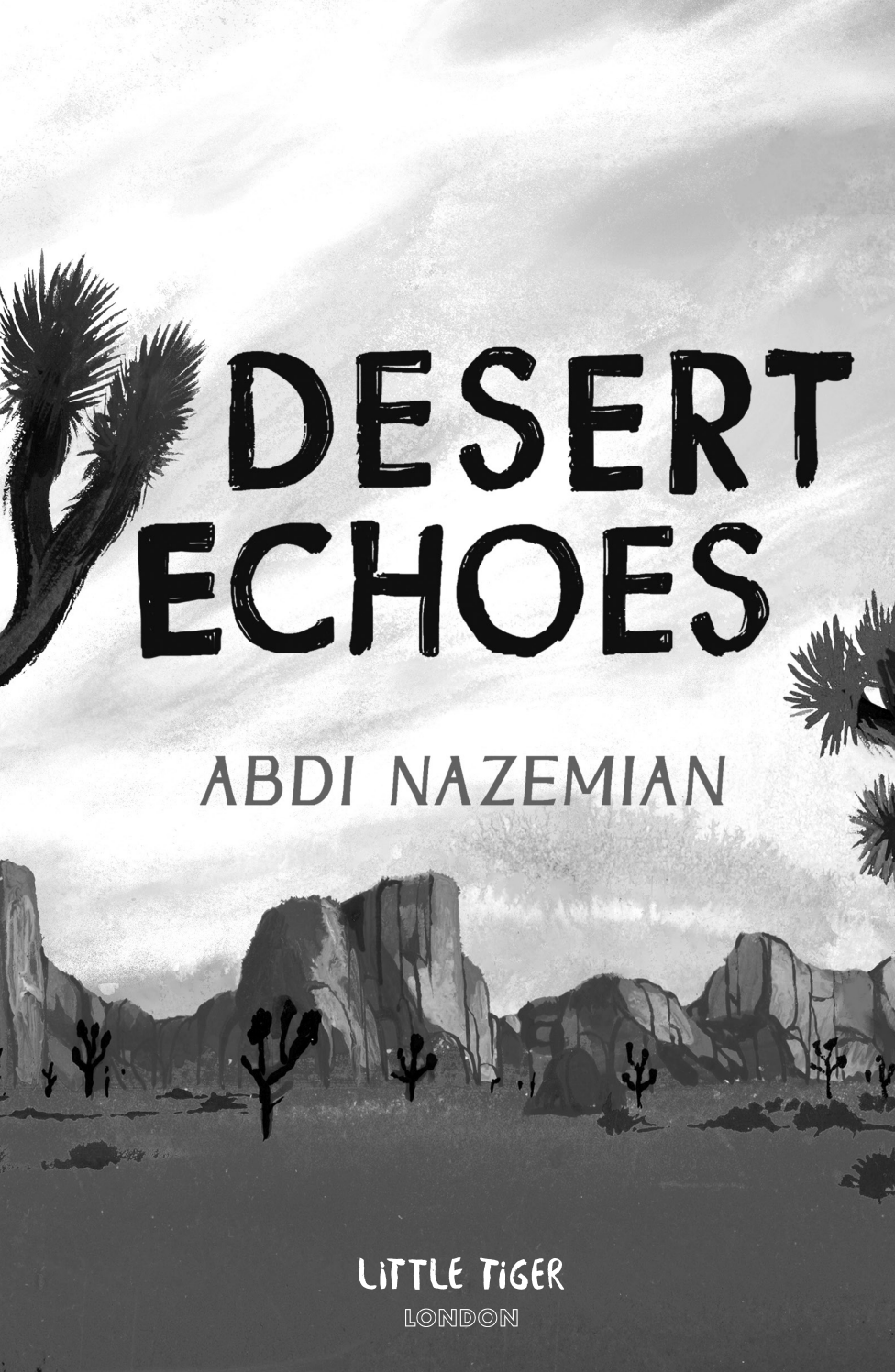
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# DESERT ECHOES

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LITTLE TIGER  
LONDON





**PART 1**



**HERE**



## JUNIOR YEAR

I'm always being watched. Sometimes, I close my eyes to escape the burden of their gaze. It rarely works. In the hallway. In the locker room. Even in public sometimes, when I'm recognized as *that* kid. Some call me the boy who lived. Some call me the boy who killed. Most call me nothing; they just whisper and stare.

Right now, two sophomores lock eyes on me walking through the bustling school doors. I can almost hear their accusations over the sound of the morning bell and the stomping feet. I hold on to Bodie to steady myself. He's on his phone, showing me some video he finds hilarious. It involves a frenzied French bulldog, a whole lot of bacon, and a sped-up version of a song I love when it doesn't sound like it's sung by Alvin and the Chipmunks. I don't laugh.

"You okay?" Bodie asks as he sends the video to Olivia Cole, who will undoubtedly love it.

"Yeah." He's my best friend, so he knows I haven't been okay for almost two years now. Olivia sends him a GIF of Nicki Minaj laughing. Bodie puts his phone away, satisfied.

We sit in the back of our homeroom. When we arrived as first-years, we were always early to class so we could claim the first row, and I know that if it weren't for me, Bodie would still sit front and center. He's remained an overachiever. I used to be one too. Top of my class. Perfect grades. All the extracurriculars I could cram into my day. My mission used to be making my mother proud with a perfect report card. Now my mission is finding Ash. Nothing else matters.

I pull out my phone to check for new posts on the online grief forum I've come to rely on. I usually check before school, after watching a few minutes of the countless hours of Ash videos I filmed back when he was still with me. But there was no time for my usual routine this morning because I snoozed my alarm too many times and my mom wasn't around to wake me up. She was already at some property she and Bodie's mom are trying to sell, staging it with rented art and furniture to make it look flawless for prospective buyers. My mom is an expert at making the chaotic seem perfect on the outside.

"What are you doing?" Bodie leans over for a glimpse of my screen.

I shift away from him. "Just some research to figure out which author I want to write my English paper about."

"You still haven't chosen your author? The paper is due before Thanksgiving and we're well into

November.”

“We’re three days into November, Bodie. I’ll get it done.”

“I mean, sure, but will you get it done *well*?” The old me would’ve been the first to complete the assignment. Bodie’s paper is already written. He chose Anthony Bourdain, which was easy for him since he’s already read all his books. Bodie didn’t even know who Anthony Bourdain was until he died and our parents made us watch the episodes of his show where he travels through Iran sampling the food. But since then, the guy has become Bodie’s hero. Bodie doesn’t want to be *just* a chef. He wants to be a brand. “So who are you considering?” He moves a little closer, trying to see my screen. I quickly shut the phone down.

He knows I wasn’t researching authors. We’ve been inseparable since kindergarten. He can tell when I’m lying through the kind of secret body language nobody else catches. “I’m taking you to the library after school to choose an author,” he says firmly. “You’re supposed to write about their entire body of work. If you don’t pick someone soon, you’ll never do a good job. Unless you choose someone who only wrote one book, I guess. Didn’t Emily Brontë only write *Wuthering Heights*? Pick her. Your thesis can be that she was the OG one-hit wonder!”

“Well, it’s not like she wouldn’t have written more books if she hadn’t died so young, right?” I feel the



ache inside me grow, wondering if Ash is still alive, if he's out there somewhere, still writing poems and making art. I would give anything to read a new poem from him. See a new drawing.

Bodie is momentarily silent. He wants to talk about homework and stupid internet videos and our moms. Not Ash. Not untimely death. Finally, he says, "This is important, Kam."

"Not that important in the grand scheme of things," I say flatly.

"It's your junior year transcript," he argues. "It's the most important year for college applications. And colleges are going to be looking at your transcript really closely because we're taking a gap year."

"You always say that admissions departments love kids who take gap years. That it makes us look cool and sets us apart."

Bodie laughs. "We *are* cool. And we're already set apart because we're gay-ass Iranians and, like, how many of us are there in the world?"

"According to the former president of Iran, zero," I say with a shrug. "According to me, at least two confirmed cases."

"Confirmed cases!" He cackles. "That's genius."

"Possibly three if we're counting your dad's cousin who dresses up as Googoosh every Halloween."

Bodie's face brightens. This is the version of me he likes. "Amu Behzad! We'll definitely visit him during our gap year. He lives in Mexico City now.

Imagine what I could learn there.” Our gap year plans, which our parents don’t know about yet, revolve entirely around Bodie’s desire to study different cuisines before applying to culinary school, which his parents don’t know about yet either.

I smile. “I very much look forward to eating your barbacoa.” I can’t imagine life without Bodie. I guess that’s why I’m planning on following him on his culinary quest. It’s not like cooking is my passion. It’s not like I have a passion.

“I’ll make it extra spicy just for you,” he says.

He’s waiting for me to keep the banter going, but I don’t. My fingers twitch for my phone. I pull it out and get back to that forum. To see if someone left me a message about where Ash is. One day, I know I’ll find him. Maybe that day is today.

“Give me your phone right now,” he demands.

“What, no.” I quickly lock the phone.

“Give it to me.” The phone lights up when he snatches it. On screen is my wallpaper picture of Ash in bed, his long red hair flowing past the confines of the screen like a waterfall. The radiance of Ash’s crooked smile, glowing through the screen, illuminates Bodie’s face like an ethereal spotlight. Not that Bodie needs a spotlight. People look at him almost as much as they look at me. Not because they think he killed someone, but because they can’t resist his beauty. He didn’t always have the square jaw, the full lips, the height. Once upon a time, we were both

awkwardly cute kindergartners, and then awkwardly pubescent tweens. No one at our high school saw Bodie when he had acne, when he tragically tried to grow his first mustache, when his voice would crack. Now he's the guy girls are describing when they say all the hottest guys are gay. Bodie taps my old password into the phone, but it doesn't work. "You changed your password?" he asks. I don't say anything as I grab my phone back. "Don't lock me out of your life, Kam." I want to cry because I don't want to shut him out. I need him more than ever. But I also know that he wants me to move on, and I don't know how.

Homeroom begins with one of Mr. Silver's morning speeches laying out the day's goals. I can't focus. I grab a bathroom pass from the teacher's desk and rush to the bathroom. I have exactly six minutes. The teachers who actually care about us, like Mr. Byrne and Ms. Robin, don't enforce the six-minute bathroom policy. They believe in giving us autonomy over our own time. But Mr. Silver is not one of those people.

I find an empty stall and lock it. The back of the stall door is etched with doodles and words, most of them pornographic or hateful, or both. These are the wall carvings that would tell future generations everything they need to know about who we are right now, in November of 2023. The hateful pornographic messages will disappear soon enough, cleaned up by the janitorial staff, and then they'll reappear in new

variations. I take solace in this fact. If gross bathroom scrawls can reappear, then so can Ash.

I sit on the toilet and unlock my phone. I go straight to the grief forum and scroll. Two guys enter the bathroom. I don't recognize their voices but I feel disgust as I hear them talk about some girl they want to fuck. Sometimes I want to escape this school, this city, this whole world. It all feels so shallow.

I put my earbuds in and blast Lana so loud that it silences the guys talking about tits. When Lana sings, Ash is with me. If I listen to her enough, he'll come back. Maybe it's magical thinking, but these are the kinds of games my mind plays with itself.

I have a new forum message from someone who calls themselves Youdiditasshole. *You were the last person to see him.*

True.

*You conveniently remember nothing.*

True, except nothing about it feels convenient.

*Did you bury him? Eat him? Burn him? ...*

Why would I hurt the person who lit up my life? But then I remember that they're right. I can't say for sure that it wasn't me who killed him, and I have to know it wasn't me. I can't move on until I know I'm not the one who hurt the boy I loved.

*Whatever you did to him, someone will do to you someday.*

Deep breath. I steady the shake in my body. I could send this message to the police, but they're always cranks. No one has tried to kill or kidnap me ... yet.

Besides, if I've learned one thing in these years, it's that the police won't do anything to help.

*Just wait. You'll be murdered, eaten, buried. Just wait, terrorist faggot. You'll see.*

I feel my blood boil like lava. Maybe I should respond. Thank them for making me feel alive with rage, which is better than feeling emotionless. I delete the message and close my eyes. Ash's face comes back to me in the darkness. His smell, a mix of tea tree oil shampoo and sweat. The residue of acrylics and watercolors always on his fingers. The taste of his thin lips, his slender fingers, his neck. His bright voice, always full of energy, always rolling like thunder, even when it was sharing secrets with me. He told me there was lava in Joshua Tree. He pointed to the volcanic rocks that rose high over the desolate desert landscape. He used words I had never heard before. Understood things I never could. Science. Nature. Cinder cones and magma and geology. He told me those cinder cones began erupting almost eight million years ago. The things Ash loved were timeless. Eternal. Just like he is. I'll find him, and when I do, he'll tell me I'm not responsible for his disappearance.

I open my eyes to another message, this one from Your-FriendEmily. We write each other at least once a month. Her daughter June disappeared twenty years ago, in a place called Devil's Den State Park. She sent me articles about it. Photos of them together through