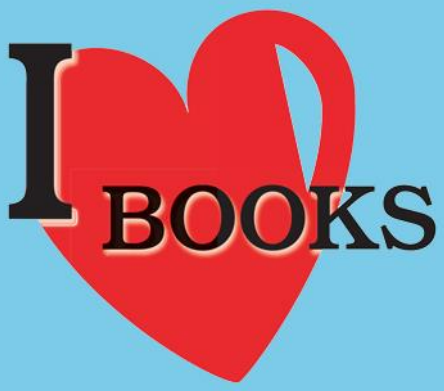


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Opening extract from

Tender Earth

Written by

Sita Brahmachari

Illustrated by

Kate Forrester

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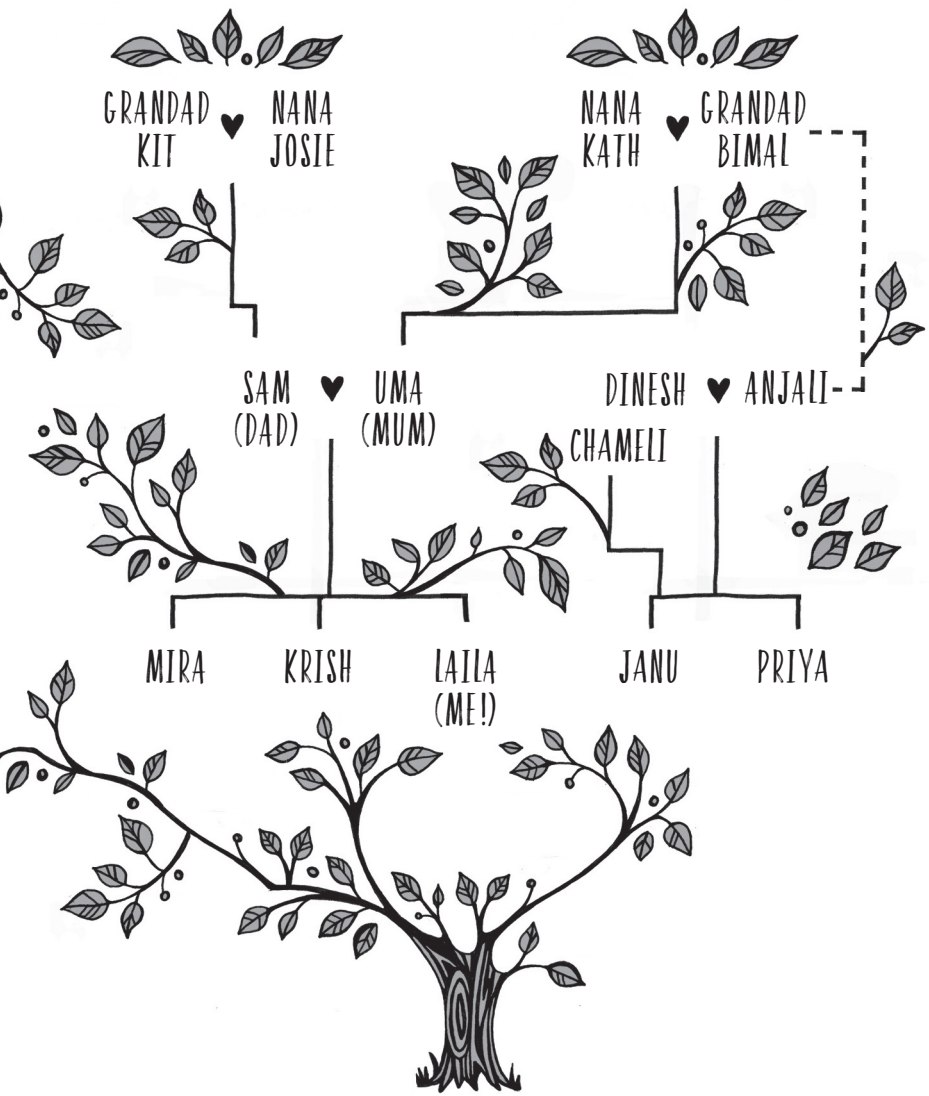
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SOME BRANCHES OF MY FRIEND TREE



AND MY FAMILY TREE



Dear Reader,

How do we find our voice? *Tender Earth* is the story of how one girl, her friends and her community come to find theirs.

Some of you may have heard of the Levenson family before, through my stories *Artichoke Hearts* and *Jasmine Skies*. I have been asked many times by readers to write another tale in what I suppose has now come to be a family of books. Stories have to come to the writer – they have to grow in you over time.

And at last this story came. In it the baby of my first novel, *Artichoke Hearts,* is now twelve years old and, as the youngest member of her family, it's now time to find her voice . . . and discover what she'll use it for.

With my own children, and when I meet readers at events, we often discuss how difficult it is to know how to respond and act to things that we witness in the news and experience every day in our own lives: words and actions that disturb, cause fear, make us angry, upset, anxious or disempowered. Sometimes it feels hard to decipher the difference between truths and lies.

Tender Earth is set on this earth that Laila and her family and friends are born into and are now tending. Their journeys, from birth to growing up, contain mysteries, dreams and hard realities, and the young

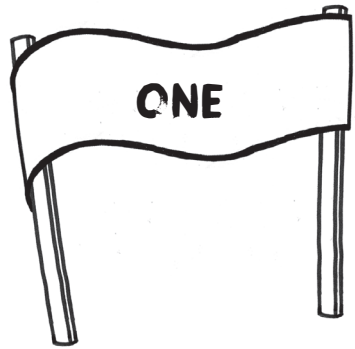
people in my story have many questions that they're searching to find answers for.

I hope that stepping into the shoes of these characters, as they walk the same tender earth as you, helps *you* to work out what paths you will walk, what banners to hold up and what words you might choose to write on them.

Love,

Sita x

P.S. I have to thank our neighbour Billie for helping us with the creature (to be revealed in Chapter One) that really did turn up in our kitchen – sometimes, as they say, the truth really can be stranger than fiction!



There's a snake in our kitchen.

'There's a snake down here!' I shout.

No one even answers.

It's slithering slowly across the floorboards, skirting the cooker.

'Funny!' Mira calls from her room.

'There. Is. A. Snake. In. The. Kitchen!' I shout again.

Krish jumps down the stairs, taking the steps in threes.

'What's "a snake in the kitchen" code for?' He laughs – and then freezes in the doorway.

'Mum! Dad! Mira!' he yells at the top of his voice. 'There's a snake in the kitchen!'

'That's what I said!' I shrug and watch it heading for the radiator.

Krish is busy videoing it on his iPhone.

'Jokes!' He laughs, and within seconds his Facebook page is pinging with likes and comments. Mum and

Dad haven't even made it downstairs yet.

'This thing's going viral!' Krish laughs.

'Some help you are!'

What would it actually take for someone in this family to listen to me?

Dad and Mira appear in the doorway. Dad's on his phone too. 'What's this video on Facebook about?'

I point to the snake . . . Its head is now snuggled up in the warmth of the radiator, so I bend down to get a closer look.

'Don't touch it, Lai Lai – it might be poisonous!' Mira warns. As if I was actually thinking of hugging it or something.

'What's going on?' Mum appears behind Mira.

I point to where the tail of the snake – I suppose snakes are *all* tail . . . anyway, the end bit of it, not its head – is sticking out. Mum's mouth falls open.

'Lai Lai, come away from it right now!' she orders, then turns to Dad. 'Sam! Please get that thing out of the kitchen!' She looks at him like *he's* responsible for putting it there.

'What do you want me to do, Uma? I'm not touching it till I know if it's safe!'

'I think *it's* more frightened of us, Dad.' I watch it coil up further behind the radiator.

'Good job I bagged it on video!' Krish loses interest and walks away.

'Where are you off to, Krish?' Mum asks. She's still hovering in the hallway, looking slightly green.

'Out of the reptile house!' Krish laughs, shaking his head.

The phone rings and I go to pick it up because it's obvious no one else is going to. It's Nana Kath.

'What's all this I'm seeing on Facebook about a snake in your kitchen? Is this one of Krish's practical jokes or something? He'd better not get up to any of that when he comes to stay with me!'

'No, Nana . . . it's real,' I tell her.

'I can see it's real,' she says, 'but how on earth did it get there?'

'Lai Lai, tell Mum I'll call her back.'

'Ask your dad if he's driving up on Saturday or Sunday with Mira and Krish.'

'Nana wants to know if you're going Saturday or—'

'Tell Nana we can't talk right now!' Mum's doing that gritting-her-teeth talking like it's *my* fault Nana won't get off the phone.

'She—'

'I heard,' Nana butts in. 'I suppose a snake in the kitchen *is* a bit alarming. Come and live up North with me and Krish, Laila! Hang on a minute . . . Hello, Betty, you've come at just at the right time – my Uma in London's got a snake in her kitchen! I know! Good idea, I'll ask them. Betty here says you should call the RSPCA.'

'Dad's trying to get through to them now,' I tell Nana.

'Good! Well, all I know is, never in all my life have I ever had a snake in my kitchen!'

I can hear Betty laughing in the background.

I wish Nana would give it a rest about moving to the country. She's got it in her head that it's 'a security risk' or something living here in the city. We all make a joke of it, but it actually makes me feel a bit nervous when she goes on and on about it.

'I think they have quite a few snakes in the countryside too, Nana,' I tell her.

'*Please* will someone get this snake out of the kitchen?' Mum sounds as high-pitched as our smoke alarm.

'I hope it's not a bad omen. Snake in the garden of . . .'

'Nana thinks it might be a bad omen,' I repeat.

'Just hang up!' Mum whispers. I don't know why she does this clenched-teeth whisper because you can hear her better than when she speaks normally.

'Please don't go, Laila. I'm not missing out on this!'

I leave the phone on the dresser so that Nana Kath and her friend can listen in.

'Can everyone just calm down? It's somebody's escaped pet. Probably harmless. I've read a few articles about this in the paper,' Dad informs us, contemplating the radiator. 'Someone will have left a cage door open.

Now, can everyone pipe down? I can't hear myself think.' He tucks his mobile between his chin and his ear. His face twists into a scowl as he's transferred straight to hold.

The call-waiting music finally ends and Dad explains the situation. There's a pause while he listens to what's being said, then . . .

'No, this is not a prank call . . . I agree it's a bit unusual, but there IS a snake in our kitchen. No, we don't know what kind. Yes, that's correct, that is our address . . . Contained? Well, it is at the moment . . . behind the radiator. Tomorrow!? You can't send anyone before then?' Dad's pacing up and down now. 'Nine o'clock first thing . . . OK . . . OK, if that really is the earliest you can come.'

He hangs up.

'You have *got* to be joking, Sam,' says Mum. 'What are we supposed to do till then?' She looks like she's about to blow.

'She suggested we should sit and watch it.' Dad shrugs.

'Helpful! And then what?'

'Look, I don't know, Uma!'

'Well, I've got packing to do,' Mira says, and heads for the hallway.

'I'll help you!' Mum follows, walking past the phone where Nana's still giving her friend Betty a running commentary.

'Didn't you hang up, Laila?'

'Nana wanted to stay connected . . .'

Mum listens in for a bit and sighs. I can hear Nana clearly from where I'm standing next to Mum. I think she's speaking loud for Betty's benefit.

'Is that you, Uma? I was just telling Betty about your snake . . . I've had to bring her a glass of water – she's nearly choked laughing! Says it's the best Saturday night she's had in ages!'

'Well, so glad we could provide the entertainment! I can't talk now – I'll call you in the morning.' Mum puts the phone down. 'Lai Lai, bedtime!'

As *if* I'm going to sleep after this!

So me and Dad sit on the sofa and watch that the snake doesn't go anywhere, though I have no idea what we're supposed to do if it decides to. Well, *I* watch the radiator and listen to Dad snoring till Krish crashes back in with a mate and jolts Dad awake.

'What! Has it moved? What's going on?'

'Here – it's behind the radiator,' Krish explains to his friend. 'Dad, this is my mate Ed – he knows stuff about snakes; he's doing a BTEC in reptiles.'

'Of course he is!' Dad laughs.

'No! Serious!' Ed says, looking a bit offended.

'I don't want you getting bitt—' Dad stands up and walks towards Ed, who has pulled on a pair of gloves that go right up his arm like the ones Dad uses for

clearing brambles. Now Ed's carrying a plastic cage over to the radiator, ready to contain the snake.

'You just need to know how to handle them,' says Ed, lying on the floor on his back and squinting up behind the radiator. 'Aww, poor thing! It must be terrified.'

He starts to sort of tickle it slowly, as if he's a snake charmer, and he puts on a voice like he's talking to a toddler. 'Come on now, I won't hurt you . . . have you been out in the cold? You must be starving. Found a nice warm place behind there, though, haven't you? Not stupid, are you?'

Ed's shining a torch under the gap in the radiator and slowly, as if it really is listening to him, the snake starts to uncoil itself and twist around his long glove.

'Step back, Lai Lai!' Dad orders me.

'Nice markings. I think it's a corn snake.' Ed sounds quite excited. 'A young one by the look of it. Won't harm you at all . . . someone's pet come through the pipes probably.'

'Like Slytherin,' Krish jokes.

'Harry Potter's given snakes a bad name,' Ed says, without even a faint glimmer of humour. Like he's a defender of snakes or something!

'I think it's fair to say they had a bad reputation a little bit before that!' Dad says drily.

Ed ignores him and stands up slowly, holding the snake just behind its head. Now that it's all coiled up,

it doesn't look as impressive as it did winding across the floor.

'Want a hold?' Ed asks me.

I stretch out my arm but Dad gets between us and holds open the cage.

'Leave it to me. I'll bung some signs up, see if anyone claims it,' Ed says as he leaves.

'Cheers, mate!' Krish laughs and shows Ed and the snake out, then punches the air, as if *he's* the hero of the day!

'What! *You* didn't do anything!' Mira says to Krish as she comes back downstairs in her PJs.

'I don't see any of *your* mates springing to the rescue, Mira.'

'Come on, you two!' Mum calls from upstairs. 'We've only got a few days left in each other's company. How about some brotherly and sisterly love?'

I call Kez. I think at least it'll be something funny to tell her, but of course she's already seen it. I didn't even know she was Krish's friend on Facebook. I don't think I'll bother getting an account when I am finally allowed one – it would be good to have some news that you could tell your best friend without them already knowing it.

I lie in my bedroom, drifting in and out of sleep. It feels weird lying on the mattress on the floor now that Dad's dismantled my high bed. It seems like such a

long way between the floor and the ceiling, with so much empty space above me. Mira and Krish are still on their mobiles, chatting to their mates. This is how I go to sleep mostly, listening to one side of their conversations. It's relaxing, like being tuned into a radio where you know everyone who's speaking.

These are the last words I hear Krish say:

'I know, surreal, right? Only in our house!'

I'm staring up at the ceiling, smiling my way through a replay of the whole night. Maybe these sorts of things do only happen in our house, but I love this place exactly as it is. It's the house I was born in. I don't want anything about it ever to change. I don't want our noisy, random Saturday nights ever to stop happening. I don't want to be the only one left here with Mum and Dad. I want everything to stay the same.