

SISTER SPIRIT



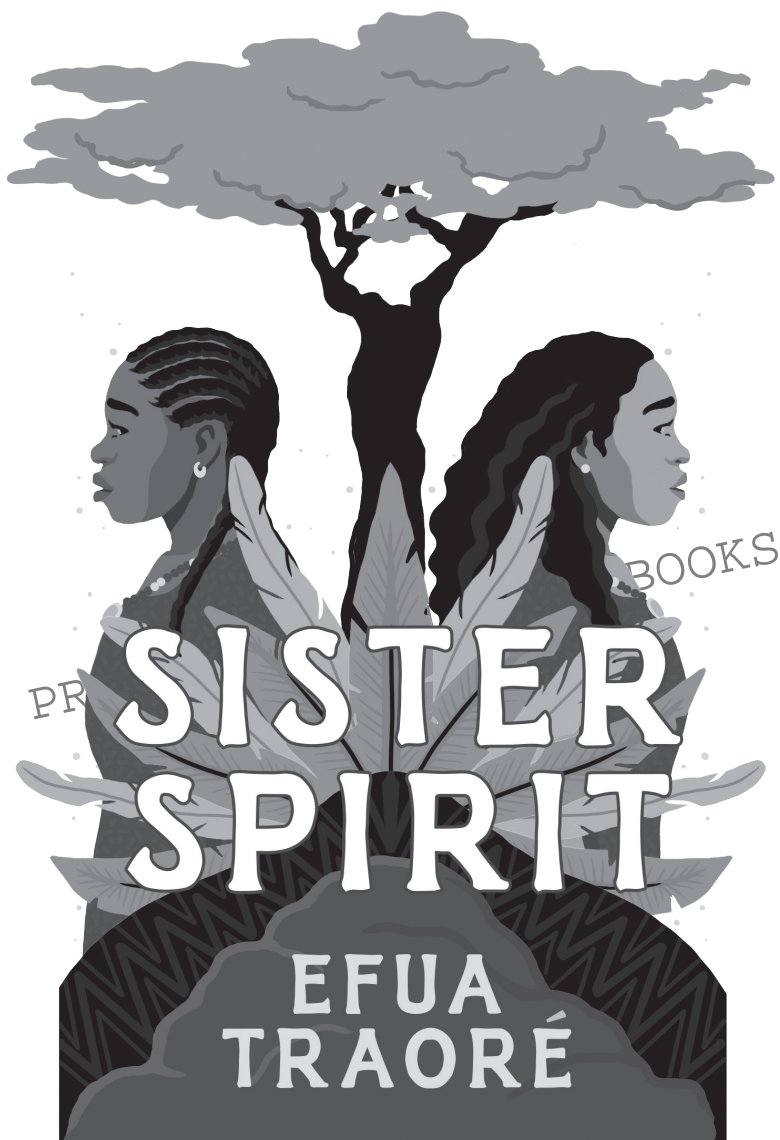
ALSO BY EFUA TRAORÉ

Children of the Quicksands

The House of Shells

One Chance Dance

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ENGLAND



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PROLOGUE

A sharp gust of wind tore at her shawl, unleashing long dark curls. She slipped in her haste to get out of the window, scraping her thigh. A bruise bloomed on her pale skin, visible even in the feeble moonlight.

Ignoring the throb, she hauled her other leg off the ledge, ripping her thin nightgown.

Gathering the ruined dress at the skirts, she stumbled into the night. The urge was so strong she could hardly bear it. Her breath came in gasps, not from exhaustion, but from a need to be quicker. She padded swiftly across the lawn, through soft moss between trees and over sharp and wicked undergrowth, not slowing, until she felt the cold hardness of rock.

She could hear it. The roar ahead.

She was almost there.

Clouds shifted, and the moon lit a vast expanse of ocean. Cliffs jutted harshly out of the landscape. The force of the wind tore at her from all sides.

Feeling the urge more strongly than ever, she lunged forward, toes curling around the edge of the cliff. And with a searing pain in her chest, she stretched out her arms, and let loose a long, heart-wrenching wail.

‘Jiiimiii...!’

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1

I glared at the poster stuck to the classroom door. It was faded, its edges discoloured, begging to be ripped off. I imagined tearing it down, strip after strip, skinning the door, until there was nothing left.

Chase your dreams.

I scoffed silently at the worn-out words.

What if your dreams were chasing you? But you had to step into them, night after night. No matter how badly it hurt to do so.

‘Tara Walther!’

I was jerked out of my thoughts by an angry voice.

‘Would you kindly give us a moment of your attention?’ Mrs Jacobs was standing in front of my desk, peering at me with eyebrows that grated together.

‘Sorry, Mrs Jacobs,’ I mumbled, shielding my notebook. The entire page was covered with sketches of the young woman on the cliff. The dream had long

since taken over my nights. It now threatened to take over my days. I closed my notebook with a sigh, trying to get the images out of my head.

Someone sniggered and I looked up to find Mrs Jacobs still staring at me. 'We were at genealogy and family history. The history of your surname. Did you get that?'

'Oh, ehm ... yes, Walther is an old Germanic name, as far as I know.'

A collective giggle rose up. Hot blood rushed to my face, flushing my cheeks. I knew I didn't look Germanic with my curly afro and brown skin. In fact, there was no resemblance between me and my parents. But that was not surprising, since I was adopted.

Mrs Jacobs let out a gasp of exasperation. 'I wasn't asking for an answer now, I want a one-page essay and a family tree of four generations next week. It is the class homework.'

'Oh!' I lowered my head, realising my mistake.

Recently, I'd become so sensitive about 'being different'. I knew why. It was the dream. The more I dreamed of her, the more I wanted to know who she was. Could the woman possibly be my—

The metallic ring of the bell sounded. Chairs pushed back abruptly and everyone began grabbing their books.

Maxine caught my eye. She was heading over with a rueful half-smile. I knew I could count on her not to

have sniggered. She would not say anything about what had happened, and we would have lunch and talk about everything and nothing. About TikToks, the next book on our shared TBR pile or season four of our favourite anime. Anything but our feelings. Then we'd walk home together, as we'd lived on the same street since we were little. That's how it had always been.

I didn't know how else to be. How do you talk about your feelings when you don't even know yourself?

Before Maxine reached my desk, I snatched up my notebook and my school bag and ran.

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2

I tried slipping noiselessly into the house, but Mum called out, 'Hello, hon! Back so early?'

'Yeah! There was nothing good for lunch and I wasn't hungry,' I lied.

'I don't have anything ready yet.'

'I'm not hungry!' I called back, flinging my rucksack in the corner.

Previous generations of Walthers in stiff white collars stared down at me from the photos on the wall. I thought of our annoying family-tree homework and cringed.

I was definitely not submitting that one.

Agnes and Ludwig Walther looked disapproving so I glanced at Grandma Lisbeth and Grandpa Matheus, who I preferred anyway. I had memories of their cosy place surrounded by green hills, the scent of fresh scones wafting through a tiny kitchen with red-and-white

checked curtains. Grandma's arms holding me while she read aloud in her quiet voice. Dad and Grandpa taking me fishing. Had I felt more at ease as a child? Had I worried less about who I was? These wisps of memories felt so carefree.

I glanced at the photo of me sitting on Dad's lap and Mum leaning in with a smile. They looked ... proud. I must have been about four. I studied my face, trying to see past the sharp contrast of my brownness and full black hair and my pale, blond parents. I was smiling in the photo. So there must have been a time when I felt happier. But since the dreams began, my memories had become muddled. Most of the time, I felt numb.

'Should I cook up some pesto noodles?' Mum called. 'Goodness, Margie, she said she's not hungry! Could you please stop shouting across the house, I'm trying to work!' Dad's voice close by made me jump.

He was sitting at the dining table, his long, thin frame hunched over a mass of papers that spilled around him. Dad was an architect and often worked from home, turning the living room into a mess of construction plans, laptop and pencils.

Dad's greying hair half-covered his thick glasses, much too long in Mum's opinion.

'Hey, Tara, everything okay?' he asked, looking over his glasses and stretching out an arm. Normally we weren't hugging types but maybe he sensed something.

A craving for the safe comfort seeping out of the photos overcame me and without replying I walked over and folded myself into his embrace.



I sat up in bed gasping for air. This time the dream had felt so real.

Taking deep, ragged breaths, the wet, cold cotton of my pyjamas peeled off like a disgusting second skin.

My insides felt like a tight fist. The shadows in my room still resembled grey rock jutting like knives around me.

Suddenly the floor gave way and a gust of wind rushed in. The familiar roar of waves smashing against the cliffs tore through the air and an abyss loomed in front of me. I screamed and grasped the sides of my bed. But instead of soft mattress, my fingers scratched hard rock.

And there she was, a few steps ahead, arms outstretched to the darkness beyond.

Then a bright light and a rush of warm dusty air blinded me and the scenery rushed past like a fast-moving train. I held on to the sharp protruding rock, my insides jerking, as dark woods became lush green jungle and dank earth turned to red sand.

Everything went still. The rock beneath my sweaty palms felt warmer, smoother, more rounded. The grey