

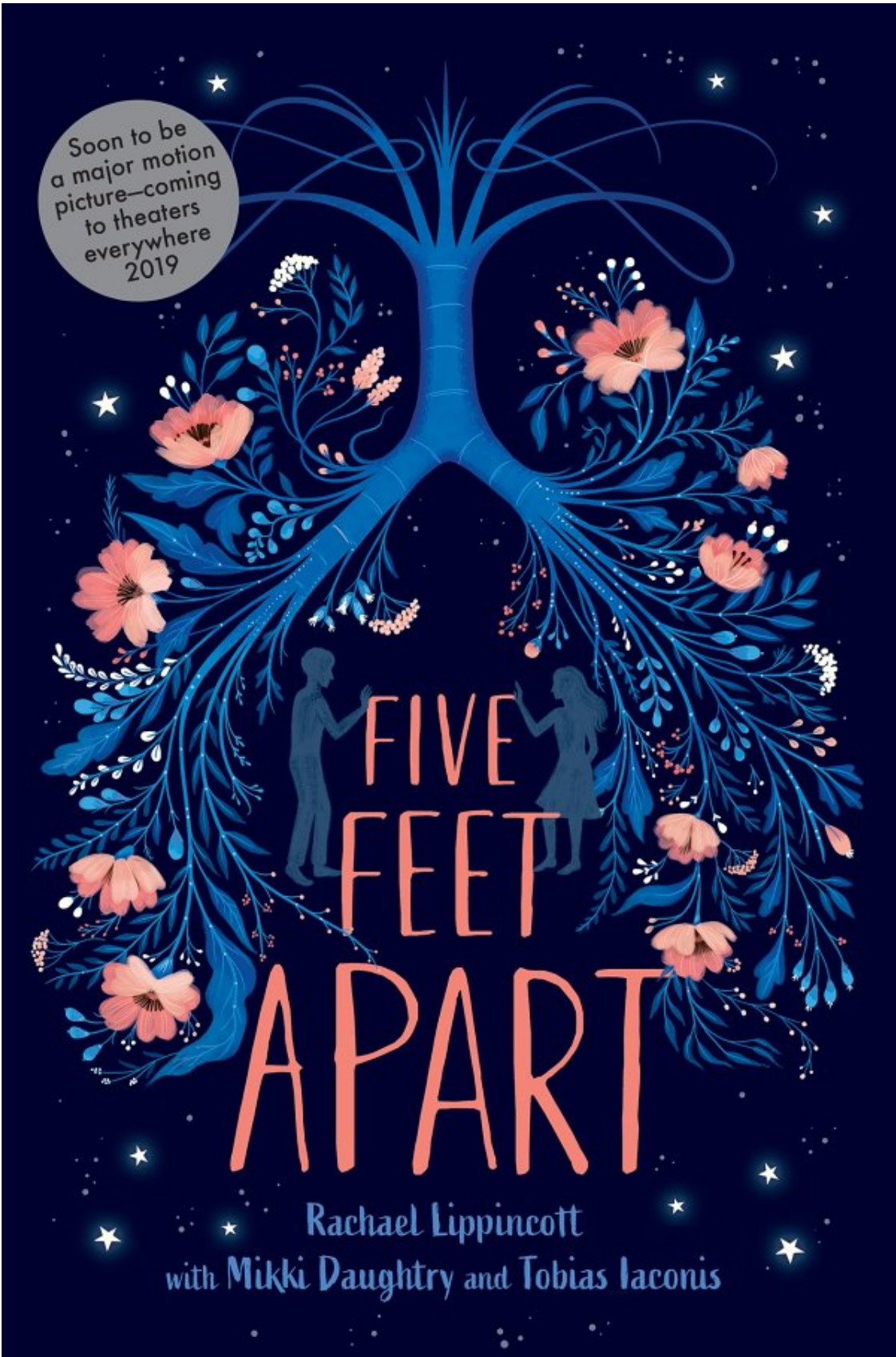
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with Mikki Daughtry and Tobias Iaconis

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SIMON & SCHUSTER **BFYR**

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

For Alyson
—R. L.

We dedicate this book, and the movie, to all the patients, families, medical staff, and loved ones who bravely fight the battle against cystic fibrosis every day. We hope the story of Stella and Will helps to bring awareness to this disease and, one day, a cure.
—M. D. and T. I.

CHAPTER 1

STELLA

I trace the outline of my sister's drawing, lungs molded from a sea of flowers. Petals burst out from every edge of the twin ovals in soft pinks, deep whites, even heather blues, but somehow each one has a uniqueness, a vibrancy that feels like it'll bloom forever. Some of the flowers haven't blossomed yet, and I can feel the promise of life just waiting to unfold from the tiny buds under the weight of my finger. Those are my favorites.

I wonder, all too often, what it would be like to have lungs this healthy. This *alive*. I take a deep breath, feeling the air fight its way in and out of my body.

Slipping off the last petal of the last flower, my hand sinks, fingers dragging through the background of stars, each pinpoint of light that Abby drew a separate attempt to capture infinity. I clear my throat, pulling my hand away, and lean over to grab a picture of us from off my bed. Identical smiles peek out from underneath thick wool scarves, the holiday lights at the park down the street twinkling above our heads just like the stars in her drawing.

There was something magical about it. The soft glow of the lampposts in the park, the white snow clinging to the branches of the trees, the quiet stillness of it all. We nearly froze our butts off for that picture last year, but it was our tradition. Me and Abby, braving the cold to go see the holiday lights together.

This photo always makes me remember that feeling. The feeling of going on an adventure with my sister, just the two of us, the world expanding like an open book.

I take a thumbtack and hang the picture next to the drawing before sitting down on my bed and grabbing my pocket notebook and pencil off my bedside table. My eyes travel down the long to-do list I made for myself this morning, starting with “#1: Plan to-do list,” which I’ve already put a satisfying line through, and going all the way down to “#22: Contemplate the afterlife.”

Number 22 was probably just a little ambitious for a Friday afternoon, but at least for now I can cross off number 17, “Decorate walls.” I look around the formerly stark room I’ve spent the better part of the morning making my own, once again, the walls now filled with the artwork Abby’s given me through the years, bits of color and life jumping out from clinical white walls, each one a product of a different trip to the hospital.

Me with an IV drip in my arm, the bag bursting with butterflies of different shapes and colors and sizes. Me wearing a nose cannula, the cable twisting to form an infinity sign. Me with my nebulizer, the vapor pouring out of it forming a cloudy halo. Then there’s the most delicate one, a faded tornado of stars that she drew my very first time here.

It’s not as polished as her later stuff, but somehow that makes me like it more.

And right underneath all that vibrancy is . . . my pile of medical equipment, sitting right next to a hideous green faux-leather hospital chair that comes standard for every room here at Saint Grace’s. I eye the empty IV pole warily, knowing my first of many rounds of antibiotics over the next month is exactly an hour and nine minutes away. Lucky me.

“*Here it is!*” a voice calls from just outside my room. I look up as the door slowly creaks open and two familiar faces appear in the small crack of the doorway. Camila and Mya have visited me here a million times in the past decade, and they still can’t get from the lobby to my room without asking every person in the building for directions.

“Wrong room,” I say, grinning as a look of pure relief washes over them.

Mya laughs, pushing the door open the rest of the way. “It honestly could’ve been. This place is still a freaking maze.”

“Are you guys excited?” I say, hopping up to give them both hugs.

Camila pulls away to look at me, pouting, her dark-brown hair practically drooping along with her. “Second trip in a row without you.”

It’s true. This isn’t the first time my cystic fibrosis has taken me out of the running for some class trip or sunny vacation or school event. About 70

percent of the time, things are pretty normal for me. I go to school, I hang out with Camila and Mya, I work on my app. I just do it all with low-functioning lungs. But for the remaining 30 percent of my time, CF controls my life. Meaning when I need to return to the hospital for a tune-up, I miss out on things like a class trip to the art museum or now our senior trip to Cabo.

This particular tune-up just happens to be centered around the fact that I need to be pumped with antibiotics to finally get rid of a sore throat and a fever that won't go away.

That, and my lung function is tanking.

Mya plunks down on my bed, sighing dramatically as she lies back. "It's only two weeks. Are you sure you can't come? It's our *senior trip*, Stella!"

"I'm sure," I say firmly, and they know I mean it. We've been friends since middle school, and they know by now that when it comes to plans, my CF gets the final say.

It's not like I don't want to go. It's just, quite literally, a matter of life or death. I can't go off to Cabo, or anywhere for that matter, and risk not coming back. I can't do that to my parents. Not now.

"You were the head of the planning committee this year, though! Can't you get them to move your treatments? We don't want you to be stuck here," Camila says, gesturing to the hospital room I so carefully decorated.

I shake my head. "We still have spring break together! And I haven't missed a spring break 'Besties Weekend' since eighth grade, when I got that cold!" I say, smiling hopefully and looking back and forth between Camila and Mya. Neither of them returns my smile, though, and both opt to continue looking like I killed their family pets.

I notice they're both holding the bags of bathing suits I told them to bring, so I grab Camila's out of her hand in a desperate attempt to change the subject. "Ooh, suit options! We have to pick out the best ones!" Since I'm not going to be basking in the warm Cabo sun in a bathing suit of my choice, I figure I can at least live a little vicariously through my friends by picking out theirs with them.

This perks them both up. We eagerly dump their bags out on my bed, creating a mishmash of florals and polka dots and fluorescents.

I scan Camila's pile of bathing suits, grabbing a red one that falls somewhere between a bikini bottom and a single piece of thread, which I know without a doubt is a hand-me-down from her older sister, Megan.