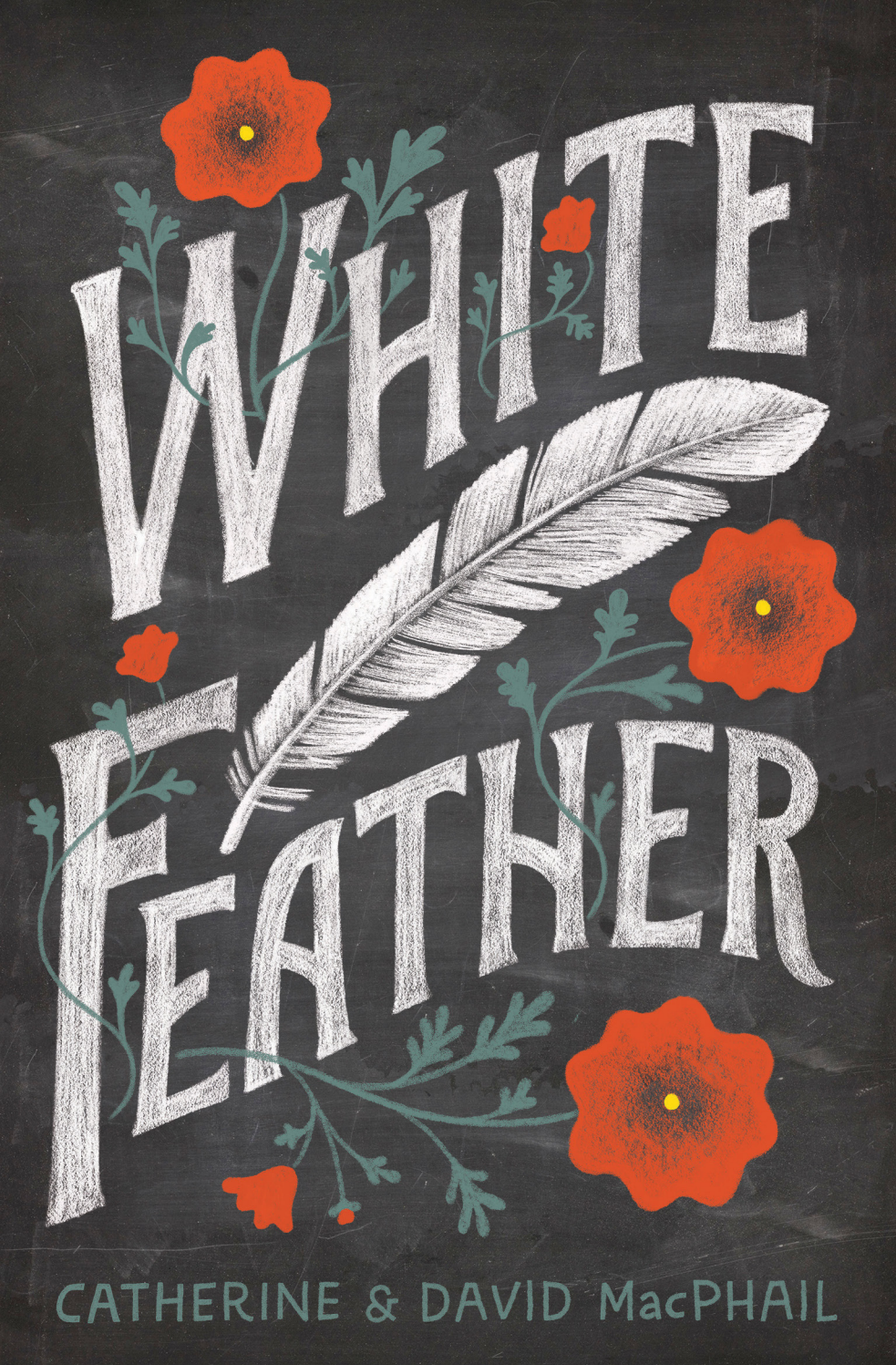
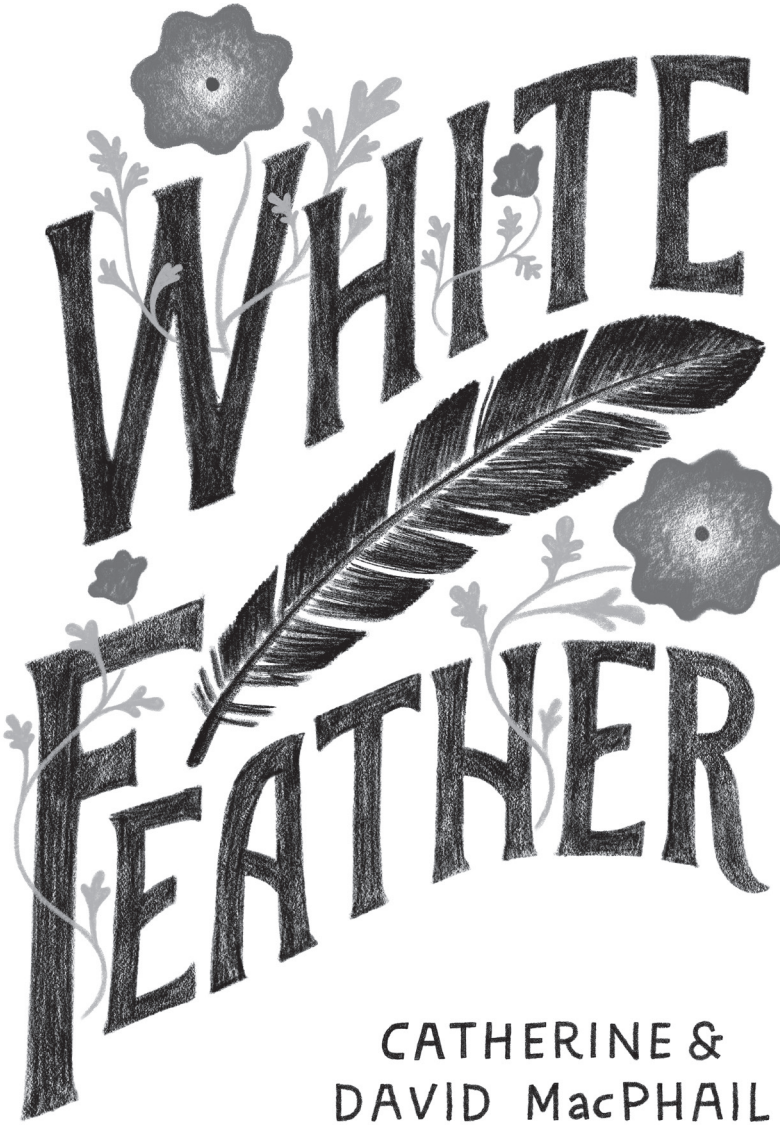

WHITE
FEATHER
CATHERINE & DAVID MacPHAIL


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DAVID MacPHAIL

Barrington Stoke

To Mum

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CHAPTER 1
Coming Home

It was over. After four long years, the war was finally over. Flags were flying. The band was playing. The whole town was celebrating as the soldiers marched past. The boys were coming home from the war.

But not all of them.

Not Charlie.

Tony stood at the back of the crowd, pressed against a wall. He tried his best to keep his tears from falling. He was a man now, almost sixteen. Men didn't cry.

Charlie.

Tony's big brother, his best pal, wouldn't be coming back. Charlie was lying somewhere in France, in a field of blood and mud. Lost for ever.

I shouldn't have come to the march, Tony thought. *I should have stayed at home with Mother.*

Tony's mother refused to believe her eldest son would never return. It was all a mistake, she said. Charlie wasn't dead. He had come home, she insisted. He was already home. She'd seen him with her own eyes.

Tony would never forget that day. His mother had been waiting for him at the front door when he'd come home from work. "Charlie's back," she'd said, and she'd dragged Tony into the kitchen.

There was no one there.

"Charlie was sitting right here a minute ago," Tony's mother said.

She ran her hands along the back of the wooden chair by the fire, as if she could feel Charlie there still. "I didn't even hear him come in," she told Tony as her face glowed with the joy of it. "I came in the back door with the washing off the line, and there he was, sitting there, so handsome in his uniform. My boy."

And all that day she'd waited for him to come back again, to sit in the chair by the fire, and she'd waited every day since. She never gave up hope.

Even when the news came, Tony's mother refused to believe it. She insisted it was a mistake, that the Army had confused her son with another woman's boy.

Tony hadn't just lost his brother. He had lost his mother too.

The boom of the big drums passing close by jolted Tony out of his dark memories. The crowd cheered.

I should have been with him, Tony thought. *It would never have happened if I had been there, with my brother*. Tony was a year younger than Charlie, but they'd always looked out for each other. Tony would have protected him. He would have found a way to save Charlie.

Yet he knew in his heart there was no point going over it. Nothing Tony could do would change anything. The cheers rose again, and Tony's heart bled with sadness. He wished so much he hadn't come. There was no place for him here.

He'd go now, before anyone in the crowd recognised him. He would slip into the shadows and head home. But as he moved, Tony saw a woman approaching him. Wasn't

it Mrs Aubrey, Charlie's old teacher? At first he thought she was going to brush past him without a word. Her eyes never met his. But as she came close she reached out and pushed something into Tony's hand. Only then did she glance at him, with a look that was as cold and hard as the iceberg that sank the *Titanic*.

Tony knew even before he opened his hand what Mrs Aubrey had given him.

A white feather.