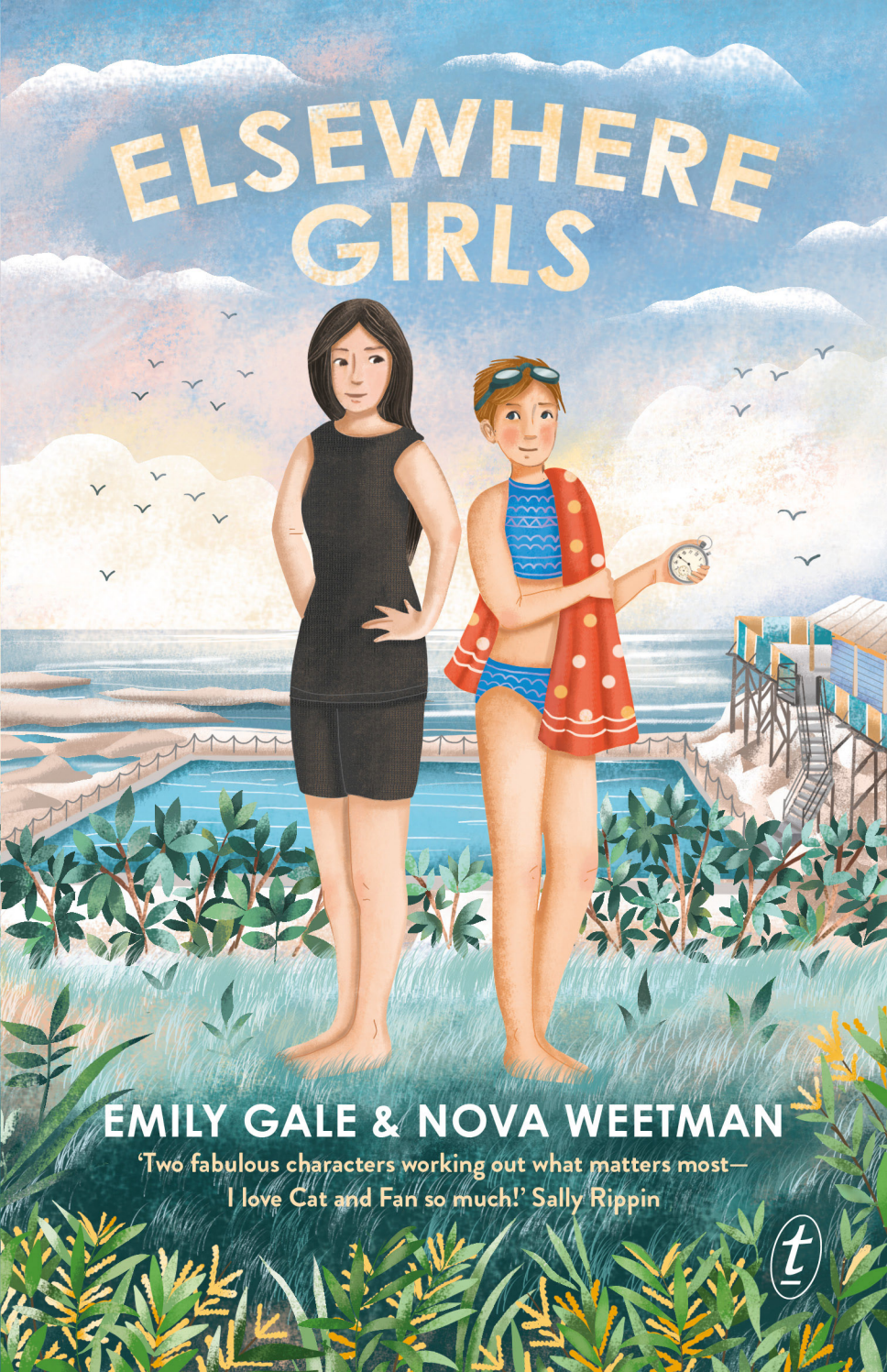

ELSEWHERE GIRLS
EMILY GALE & NOVA WEETMAN
'Two fabulous characters working out what matters most—
I love Cat and Fan so much!' Sally Rippin

1
Guilty

It's midnight and I'm alone in the kitchen eating a cold potato scallop. Coach O'Call would say something like *That's not what I expect from a scholarship girl!* because I have to be up for squad training in five hours, I'm not supposed to go near potato scallops, and—oh, yeah—it's my fifth.

I know the consequences, they circle me as I chew, chanting like bullies. *Indigestion! Weight gain! Poor performance in the pool!* But as I suck the grease and salt off my fingertips, a rumour starts to spread that I'm going for lucky potato scallop number six.

Rumour confirmed.

Bite taken.

I promise this is the last one.

Coach O'Call's laminated food list gives me the evil eye from the fridge. There's a *Yes!* column of foods that should make up most of my diet and a *No!* column that

sounds like heaven. Potato scallops aren't even on it. They must be worse than bad. The snack of outcasts and criminals.

Cat Feeney, you are charged with the crime of not taking your swimming scholarship seriously. How do you plead?

I stare out into an imaginary courtroom.

Coach O'Call and Dad would take turns being the prosecuting lawyers: *Isn't it true that you binge-watched Netflix instead of getting an early night before your training session?*

My sister Maisy would race to the witness box to give evidence against me: *Cat doesn't deserve a scholarship. She only pretends to eat salad!*

Mum's away a lot for work so she'd FaceTime to let the court know she's on my side: *I blame the potato scallops! FREE CAT FEENEY!*

I could argue that it's not my fault that we had cold potato scallops in our kitchen in the first place; it's because Dad runs the mini-mart downstairs and cooks more than he can sell.

I could argue that other thirteen year olds commit crimes a lot worse (*actual* crimes).

I could argue that I didn't ask to come to Sydney, that I never wanted to leave my old life in Orange behind, and that I didn't even want a swimming scholarship at

stuck-up Victoria Grammar.

I creep down the narrow hall towards the room I have to share with my sister, past Dad's bedroom (he's snoring, Mum's at work), past the bathroom (I should brush my teeth but I keep going). In our room, Maisy's in bed on the far side, wearing a sleep mask. Perfect, salad-loving Maisy, who would never eat six potato scallops at midnight. She makes me want to be bad. Before I know it I'm improvising a terrible dance in her honour: I jump and jerk and kick up my feet, then I bend over—bum-wiggle bum-wiggle—*whoops!* A fart.

Sorry, Maise. Dancing isn't the best idea after salty cold potato.

In bed, I stare at the blank wall on my half of the room. It's been months since we moved but my stuff is still in a box in the corner, along with Aunt Rachel's junk (she's an eBay addict). Swimming trophies, medals, posters, strips of photobooth pictures of me with my friends back in Orange. I can't make the room mine because I don't want it to be. I feel flat and lonely now. I miss home so much.

Last year Dad's building company went broke and we lost everything. When my Aunt Rachel offered him her shop in Surry Hills because she was going to live overseas, my parents decided on a fresh start in Sydney. So Dad's a shopkeeper now, and we live upstairs where

it's poky and dark. Dad's doing his best but the shop is small and grimy and a lot of the people around here turn their noses up when they walk past.

Mum is allowed to escape all the time because she's a flight attendant. Maisy, who's in the year below me, is all 'Orange who?' She loves our new school and since she made the swimming squad a few weeks ago she's been painfully cheerful.

I'm the only one who doesn't like our new life. And that's the worst for a few reasons. I fought for the swimming scholarship even though I didn't really want it, just to be a winner. But now what? Coach O'Call wears a black stopwatch around her neck that times us to one-hundredth of a second. So much depends on these tiny fractions of time.

One hundred times less than a second.

Less than a blink of the eye.

I see those stopwatch numbers climbing in my dreams.

My scholarship is the only reason that Mum and Dad can afford to send us both to Victoria Grammar. And after losing everything, the scholarship letter was the first thing that made Dad light up. He cried happy-parent tears. Killer.

So I plead guilty, of course (back in my imaginary courtroom). No matter how angry or sad I get about

leaving my old life behind, guilty is the way I feel when I don't behave like a scholarship girl.

My tummy gurgles like a blocked sink. It's less than five hours until I have to be in the pool.

2
Laps

By the time Mina trounces through the turnstile towards the changing rooms with her hair ribbons and her school uniform, I've swum over a hundred laps. I wish she'd hurry so we'd have time for a race. Ma doesn't like it when I'm late back. Swimming has to fit in around all my chores: there are rabbits to skin, floors to scrub, clothes to mend—and that's just on Mondays.

Heading back across the belly of the baths, I start swimming breaststroke. It's not my favourite stroke, but I want to improve my times. My arms pull through the water. My legs shoot me forward.

On my fourth lap of breaststroke my left ankle is grabbed. I hear Mina's laugh, so I wrench my leg free and power to the end of the pool as fast as I can. The fingers of my left hand touch the rough stone edge, and Mina slams into the wall alongside me. She bursts out of the

water with a grin and pushes her hair back off her face.

'Bit slow today, Fan,' she says.

I pull a face at her because this is what she does: turns up late when I'm starting to get tired and then teases me. I try not to fall for it, but swimming is the one thing I never find amusing.

'Dad said you've been here all afternoon,' she says.

'Longer than you anyway,' I tell her, tucking my hair behind my ear.

'Trying to get in some training so you will beat me on Sunday,' she says cheekily.

I splash water into her face. 'I don't have to train to beat you.'

'You do so, Fanny Durack. You have not won a single race this year,' she says.

I wish it wasn't true. It's not like I haven't been training harder than anyone. 'I'll beat you, Mina Wylie. Just you wait.'

I push my toes into the squelchy seaweed on the bottom of the baths, wishing a giant wave would come and drag Mina out to sea. Then I wouldn't need to beat her.

'I'm only late because I had to go to school. You're so lucky you don't have to,' she tells me.

'You're so lucky you don't have to scrub the floors or skin the rabbits.'

Mina pretends to shudder. '*Ew*, skinning rabbits.'

I lean in close and drop my voice. 'Actually I like skinning rabbits. Peeling the furry skin down around their warm bodies and then twisting and pulling them free.'

Half laughing and half squealing, Mina pins me by the shoulders and pushes me under. I throw her off and burst up and out. I've long forgiven Mina for her life of leisure, but I still like winding her up. All she has to do is learn needlework and swim. And she struggles to take that as seriously as her father would like.

Mina likes saying that Mr Wylie built these baths especially for her. Imagine having a father who could afford that. My family scrape together the entrance fees for my races. Mina lives just up the hill in a large house in Coogee with a view of the sea, but I have to travel all the way from grimy Surry Hills by tram. On a bad day it can take hours and that means Ma's wrath if I miss the chores. It's hard but it's worth it. Even on a cold day when the air is crisp and the sun is hidden, the water is clear and salty, and nobody tells me to stop training if a man is swimming in the baths too. At any of the other baths I can only train if it's a women's swimming morning, because the NSW Women's Swimming Association thinks that men should not see us in our bathing suits. They say it's immoral. I say it's swimming.

'Race you back, Fan!'

Before I can answer, Mina's gone, her strong arms churning through the water. I take off after her.

I rush in through the front bar of our pub. It's crowded with men drinking beer and talking loud. My long hair is still damp from the water, and some of the men gape as I pass—women are not often seen in here. I'm not fussed by their comments, because I'm still imagining the cheers of the crowd on Sunday as my hand touches the end of the baths before any of the others. As I weave through the men, Da fixes me with a cross look, but it fast disappears. He rarely stays angry. Unlike Ma, he wants me to swim. He glows with pride whenever I do well. He even clips all the mentions of my name from the pages of the paper and pins them up behind the bar.

'You're late, Fan,' he shouts over the din.

'Sorry, Da. I was swimming so fast that I forgot the time,' I shout back.

He raises an eyebrow, and I know what it means. I nod. 'Really, really fast, Da.' I don't mention that Mina beat me easily. But it was her second lap for the day, and at least my hundredth. Mr Wylie has purchased a new-fangled timepiece that marks our times in the pool as accurately as the ones they use at carnivals. Mina doesn't like her father timing me. She wants to be the

only swimmer who knows her daily times.

Da smiles broadly. 'Shame you're so determined in the baths, but not so in the kitchen.'

'I'm going, I'm going,' I tell him, ducking through the narrow gap in the bar. I give him a kiss on his rough cheek and I hurry upstairs. The smell of rabbit cooking is so strong that it makes my stomach rumble with hunger.

The noise of my family is bubbling over in the tiny rooms where we live, and I try to get past the kitchen without being seen.

'Fanny Durack, you come back here,' shouts Ma.

I lean my head around the edge of the doorframe, hoping she'll find my funny face amusing.

'Where've you been then, Fanny?'

'Swimming,' I tell her.

'I never would have thought it. Here I was thinking poor Fanny's downstairs mucking out the swill, and all this time you were at the baths.'

'The tram was late, Ma.'

'Seems that particular tram is often late when it's carrying you. And Kathleen had to do the dinner. Again,' she says, stirring the large pot that's simmering over the coals of the oven.

'I'll make it up,' I say, knowing that will involve a lot of work because my sister Kathleen detests skinning rabbits.

‘And your hair is wet. You’ll catch your death. I’m not caring for this swimming business, Fanny. It’s taking you away from your chores and your family.’

Behind me, my younger sister Dewey slides her hands around my waist and leans in against my back. ‘You smell like the sea,’ she says quietly.

Dewey is the sweetest member of my family. Not yet thirteen and kinder than kind. The others are a mixed bag. John’s the eldest, then there’s Thomas—off seeking his fortune at the moment—then Kathleen and Mary, my brother Con and me in the middle, followed by Dewey, Mick and little Frankie. One bedroom for the girls and one for the boys—not to mention one *rule* for the girls and something else entirely for our brothers.

‘Be gone with you both,’ snaps Ma. ‘Go and help Kathleen bring up the wood.’

I spin around, pulling a silly face and making Dewey laugh. We run down the stairs, and I tell her how fast I was today and how I could have swum to England.

Outside, Mick brings the axe down as I burst through into the tiny yard. The log splits. I wait for him to step back.

‘My turn.’ I reach for the long wooden handle.

‘You’ll cut your leg off,’ yells Mick, trying to reach it before me.

‘Or yours,’ I yell, raising the axe and letting it fall

down hard on another log, while Dewey cheers me on. I split wood as well as any boy, but Kathleen shakes her head at me.

'Put it down, Fanny,' she says. 'Chopping wood is not a lady's job.'

'How fortunate that I'm not a lady!' I say lightly, but I drop the axe and help her collect the chopped wood in her skirt, because I don't like to upset Kathleen. She works harder than any of us girls. And she often does my chores too. I have other thoughts in my head of swimming and competing that don't involve being a lady.

'I'll do the fish on Sunday,' I tell Kathleen. 'And the washing. I promise.'

She looks up at me and I see a smudge of dirt under her eye. 'And?' she says.

'More? Really?'

She nods, keeping her smile under control.

'Fine then, and I'll brush your hair.' This is the worst trade, because we have to do a hundred strokes every night.

'Deal,' she says, grabbing a firm hold of each side of her skirt and heading back up the stairs with the wood.

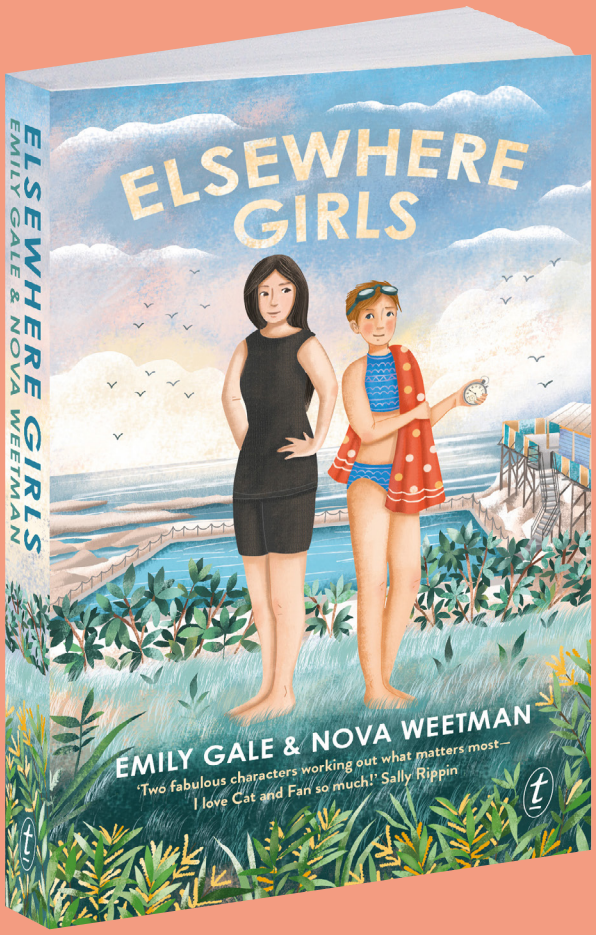
'She played you for a fool,' calls Dewey over the sound of the axe.

'I'll be swimming on Sunday,' I say with a laugh. 'I

think I played her!'

'I heard that,' calls Kathleen from the top of the stairs.

I wink at Dewey, and she grins at me. Sunday can't come fast enough.



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