

the pools

also by e. lockhart

The We Were Liars Novels

We Were Liars

Family of Liars

We Fell Apart

Genuine Fraud

Again Again

Fly on the Wall

Dramarama

The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks

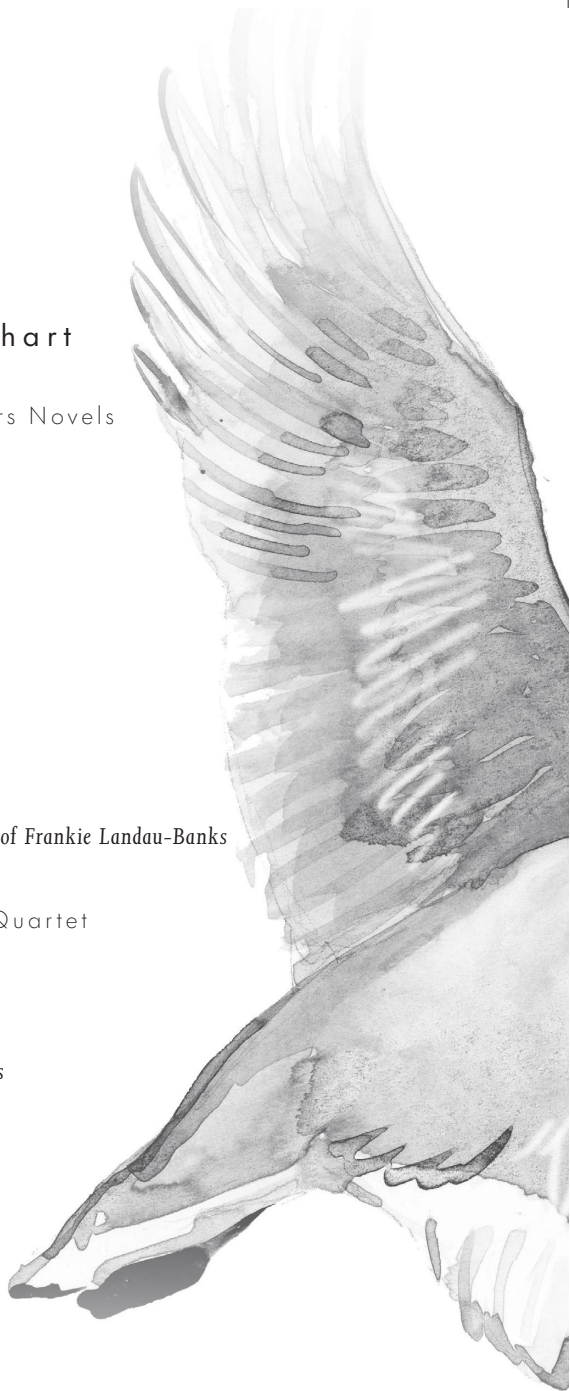
The Ruby Oliver Quartet

The Boyfriend List

The Boy Book

The Treasure Map of Boys

Real Live Boyfriends



the pools

a love story

e. lockhart

HOT
KEY
BOOKS

First published in the UK in 2026 by
HOT KEY BOOKS
an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
5th Floor, HYLO, 105 Bunhill Row, London EC1Y 8LZ

Text copyright © Lockhart Ink, 2026
Jacket art copyright © Lucy Schmidt, 2026

Published by arrangement with Random House Children's Books,
a division of Penguin Random House LLC

Published by arrangement with Random House Children's Books, a division of
Penguin Random House LLC. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in
any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.

This work is reserved from text and data mining (Article 4(3) Directive
(EU) 2019/790).

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form
or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, or used or
reproduced for the training or development of artificial intelligence technologies
or systems, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

The right of E. Lockhart to be identified as author of this work has been asserted
by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and incidents are either the products
of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-2220-1
Also available as an ebook and in audio

1

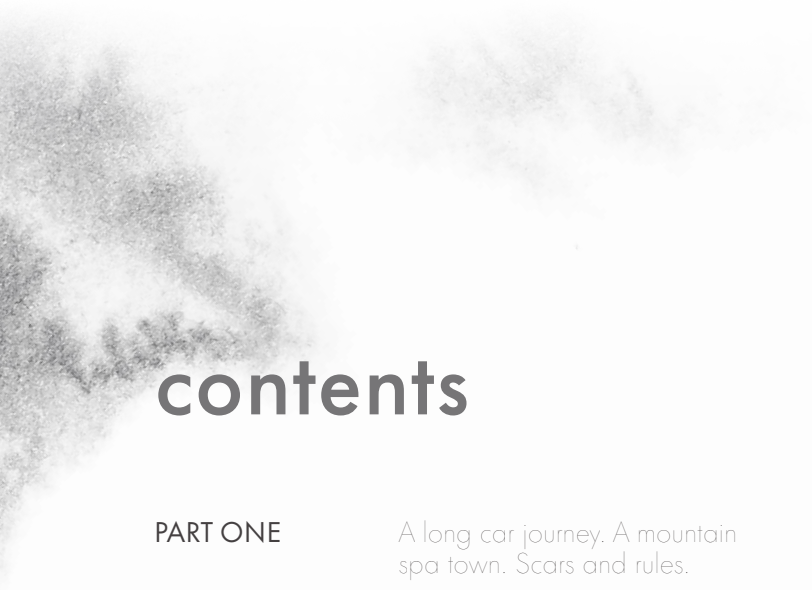
Text design by Megan Shortt
Printed and bound by CPI (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



The authorised representative in the EEA is
Bonnier Books UK (Ireland) Limited.
Registered office address: Block B, The Crescent Building
Northwood, Santry, Dublin 9, D09 C6X8, Ireland
compliance@bonnierbooks.ie

bonnierbooks.co.uk/HotKeyBooks

FOR ELIZABETH



contents

PART ONE	A long car journey. A mountain spa town. Scars and rules.
PART TWO	Two different houses. A love story.
PART THREE	Winter caroling. A quarrel about secrets.
PART FOUR	A bad thing happens.
PART FIVE	A legend. A flight. A kiss.
PART SIX	An escape. A confession.
PART SEVEN	The story of the seven ravens. Poisonous nettles. Some nasty gossip. A crime.
PART EIGHT	People having parties. A dare. A hunting expedition.
PART NINE	Transformation. A visit to the pools.
PART TEN	Daffodils.
PART ELEVEN	Outside.



PART ONE

*A long car journey. A mountain spa town.
Scars and rules.*

e . l o c k h a r t

WHEN LEXIE FIRST SAW THE POOLS,
she was not afraid.

Steam drifted in friendly puffs from the surface of the water,
like an invitation.

The pools were lit from beneath, glowing in the dark of the cool June
evening.
The townspeople floated, gently kicking their legs, talking low to one
another.

Lexie wore a swimsuit and held a white towel.
She was not afraid.

She walked past pool after pool.
There were twelve in all.

She chose a small one that was mostly empty.
One hundred and ten degrees, said the sign.

She slid in.
A boy was swimming laps in the next pool over.

His arms moved in a powerful rhythm.
His eyes were invisible behind his goggles.

the pools

His wingspan was broad.
His body was at home in the water.

It was nine p.m.
Lexie was not afraid.

e . l o c k h a r t

LEXIE WEISS-GREENBERG ARRIVED IN COVINGTON JUST
LAST WEEK.

She drove a battered car.

Lexie was at the wheel for the whole cross-country drive.

Her sister Orly sat in the back with several stuffed animals, two Minecraft
figurines and a word search activity book.

Their mother slept in the passenger seat.

Lexie's mother is sick with a strange malady, layered with depression.

She's sick, and maybe the reason is her grief over Lexie and Orly's dad. He
died six years ago.

Or maybe she's grieving Lexie's failures.

Maybe Lexie's mother suffers a thousand allergies, and
maybe she suffers vitamin deficiencies.

Her back aches. Her head is sore.

She is always exhausted.

Her hands are swollen. And her feet.

Lexie is

fine,

fine,

fine.

She is silent, nowadays.

the pools

As she drove, Lexie ate powdery cheese crackers.
She listened to podcasts about true crime and pop culture.
She stopped for gas and washed her face in the stinky beige of the station restroom.
Her butt kinda hurt and she got bored of all her podcasts.

Mom, you okay to drive when we get to the next stop?

No, I won't be, honey.
My pain is acting up.
You're so good to do it.
I don't think so, honey.

Orly got tired of her word search book.
Orly got tired of an audiobook about Judy Moody.
Orly got tired of searching for the alphabet on road signs.

They slept in motel rooms, all three together.
They washed their clothes in the bathroom sinks, and once in an Illinois laundromat.

Still, Lexie was glad they were going to Covington.
She had read about the cobblestone streets in the old part of town.

e . l o c k h a r t

The town square with its ornate fountain.
The red-gold fall and the wicked-cold winter.

She had read about the pools, as well.
Hot spring water is rich in calcium and sodium bicarbonate. It helps to increase oxygen flow and improve circulation.
The sulfur in the water is antibacterial and antifungal, so it's good for your skin.
Plus, local people tell stories about the water being magic. The travel websites don't say what kind of magic, and they don't say what kind of stories. But they do show photographs of the twelve pools, some enormous and some quite small, laid out in a garden surrounded by a high stone wall.

Lexie's Aunt Ida lives in Covington—and she has a two-bedroom house.
Aunt Ida has a job and is willing to pick up extra shifts.
Aunt Ida has offered to let their family come live with her, since Lexie's mother cannot work.

Sleep three to the guest room and you can stay as long as you like, Aunt Ida told them.
Lexie should be in school, Aunt Ida said. All three of you come here.

Lexie thought the pools would heal her mother's aches,

the pools

and her mother's sore head,
and her exhaustion,
and her swollen hands and feet.

Well, she hoped they would.

e . l o c k h a r t

ORLY COULD NOT SAY

Alexandra

when she was a baby.

Orly said Lexie instead.

So now Lexie is always Lexie.

Lexie, watch me.

Lexie, I'm hungry.

Lexie, play with me.

Lexie, come here.

Lexie, I'm gonna catch you.

Lexie, look at my funny face.

Lexie, I have to pee.

Lexie, can I get in your lap?

Yes, I'm watching.

Yes, let's eat something.

Okay, I'm coming.

Uh-huh. I'm coming.

No way, you can't catch me!

Your funny face is so, so funny.

I'll take you to the bathroom.

Of course you can, Orly. Come, come.

the pools

AFTER THE DRIVE,
while their mother and Aunt Ida talk in Ida's kitchen, Lexie and Orly walk
around the block.

They find a corner grocery and Lexie buys them both lollipops, the kind
with bubble gum in the middle. Then they find a playground and Lexie
pushes Orly on a swing.

Higher, Lexie!

'Kay, here goes!

Even higher!

Whoop!

I'm flying. I'm gonna just take off and go in the sky.
I'm a bird.

Don't leave me, Orly!
We're going to have so much fun in Covington.
We're going to swim, like, every day.

I'm just teasing. I won't really fly away.

e . l o c k h a r t

LEXIE READS ABOUT THE TOWN HISTORY

in a Covington tourist pamphlet she finds in a rack at the coffee shop.

In the nineteenth century,
people traveled over the mountains to stay in the grand hotel at the center
of Covington.
People drank the sulfurous water at breakfast and at teatime, making faces
at the taste.
They soaked their unhappy bodies in the baths.
They believed in the cure of the waters.

But not now.

The grand hotel still stands at the center of town,
the steaming pools are still majestic under a series of stone arches.
But few people travel over the mountains.
Few believe in the cure.

the pools

NOWADAYS,
the people of the town swim
after work and
after school.
They swim
in the early mornings
and late at night before bed.

People swim in the winter, when the pools are surrounded by snow.
People swim in the rain, when the cold drops on the hot water make a
symphony.

Parents with kids—the pools instead of the playground.
High schoolers, too—the pools instead of the bowling alley, the diner,
or the coffee shop in Covington Square.

No one thinks anything of going for a swim.

It's like breathing.
It's like eating.

e . l o c k h a r t

THAT JUNE NIGHT, AT THE POOLS ALONE,
Lexie listens to the chatter one pool over from the one where she is soaking.
It's full of people her age. Several of them wear T-shirts that say Covington
Spartans.
Spartans Basketball!
Spartans Field Hockey!
Spartans Cheer!

Everyone is full of Friday-evening energy. With only a single week left in
the school term, most of them are a little manic. Nostalgic for the year
that's almost behind them.

Will you buy us taco chips?
Help me, here, the thing unzips.
I didn't do the reading.
Hey, the reading's freaking boring.

Then he kissed me
Then I kissed him
Then she kissed her
Then it all went . . .
Ah ah! Hah hah!

Wait, don't tell me.
Do NOT tell me.

the pools

Shut up, really?
Tell me now!

He's a roach and we all know it.
And so she said, okay, then show it.
I would never. Please, I swear it.
Trade me that and you can wear it.

Then he kissed me
Then I kissed him
Then she kissed her
Then it all went . . .
Ah ah! Hah hah!

We should all skip school on Monday.
Watch this clip, then watch the replay.
That's the homework, Grant, I swear.
I hate my parents. It's unfair.

Ah ah! Hah hah!
Wait, don't tell me.
Do NOT tell me.
Shut up, really?
Tell me NOW.

e . l o c k h a r t

LEXIE IS STILL LISTENING WHEN
the boy who was swimming laps heaves himself out of the water.
He pulls off his goggles.
He has marks around his eyes from where they pressed into his skin.

His skin is olive. He's breathing hard.
He drips on the tile. He doesn't get a towel.
He runs his hand through his wet hair to get it off his face.

Lexie puts her arms on the edge of the pool.
Can I ask you a question? she calls.

Sure.

Are we allowed extra towels?

Yeah. Whatever.

But is there, like, a limit?

No.

You just go and take them? As many as you want?

As many as you want.

the pools

Okay, then.

If I get in trouble, I'm blaming you.

Chester.

What?

That's my name. So you know who to blame.

Lexie is surprised when Chester lowers himself into the pool she is in.
He is hardly wearing any clothes.

Well, neither is she.

Neither is anyone.

Come join me in this pool, why don't you? she says, after he's already
sitting next to her.

e . l o c k h a r t

CHESTER THINKS

Lexie is
extremely pretty.

He likes the
strong shape of her nose and
the dark froth of
her damp hair, cut short like she's from a big city.
He likes the way she asks for all the details of the towel situation.

He has surprised himself by getting in the water next to her.
It's something people do all the time at the pools—you start talking to
someone and you get in the same water they're in.

But he doesn't know this girl.

It feels like he got in involuntarily.

Like his body just decided that he should be closer to her, and
his brain followed a step behind.