

THE UNLOCKING

Written by *Lexi Pandell*

Illustrations by *Tyson Stryg*

The sisters are dubious. Erik lowers his hand into their tank and they recoil, bunching together into a pile of writhing rope. They do not seem to know that he carries a meal inside his fist.

Aster didn't want to see the "feeding," as Erik called it, but he insisted and she didn't put up a fight. Now, she watches.

The snakes actually surprise Aster with their beauty, their scales the color of persimmons, their creamy white undersides. Identical, but for the fact that one is more slender by an order of millimeters. She tucks into the back corner of the tank, and the slightly larger one moves in front of her sister, braver perhaps, undulating cautiously. Even as Aster wants nothing less than to touch them, she admires their impossibly round, cartoonish eyes. When the snakes are still, they are almost cute. Almost. Then they slither or dart their forked tongues and something primal inside Aster recoils.

Aster doesn't know Erik. He is in the grade above her, outside her social orbit. She recognizes him only as the boy who played drums in last year's talent show. She is here because her mother got caught up in something at work and couldn't get Aster from school, so she called in a favor with Erik's mother, Emily, who she met in spin class.

Now Aster and Erik are nearly touching

shoulder-to-shoulder as he presents his gift to the two corn snakes. He is, in fact, so close that Aster imagines she can feel the heat rise off his skin.

It is strange and exhilarating for Aster to be in a boy's room with its distinct smell of musk, body odor, and cheap styling cream. A twin-sized bed covered by a comforter with a football-print pattern. Fresh laundry propped in the corner by his doting mother. Boxers crumpled by the foot of his bed, the sight of which makes Aster blush and look away. The heated snake tank placed on a special stand and filled with faux plants, arched wood for hiding, and a water dish shaped like a hollowed-out rock.

"Do they bite?" she asks Erik.

"Sometimes," he says. "It doesn't really hurt."

Erik drops the two frozen, nearly hairless mice on opposite sides of the tank. He assumes, Aster guesses, that each snake will dine on her own mouse. The corpses rest in the mulch. Their paper-thin ears remind Aster of translucent flower petals; their gnarled paws look as if they tried to ward off their fates down to the moment they were gassed and chilled in an industrial freezer. What does it feel like to die that way? Aster has to stop thinking about the mice, she feels dizzy.

She asks more questions, her words racing together. Questions, she hopes, will make her seem interested and, thus, self-assured.

"How do you know they're sisters?"

"I don't." He nudges a mouse closer to the larger sister. The light of the heat lamp casts a garish glow on his skin. Both snakes pull further away, intertwined like each other's lifelines. "That's just what the guy at the pet store told my dad."

"Do snakes usually live together?"

"They're both females, so." A shrug punctuates the sentence.



Erik watches the snakes and so it's safe for Aster to watch Erik. His slicked back hair, the bracelets on his arms from punk shows, his black t-shirt, a little scar like a teardrop on his left earlobe. Aster doesn't explicitly like Erik but, she decides as she observes him, she doesn't expressly dislike him either. Basically, if a not-terrible guy said he had a crush on her and she found out, the seed of excitement in her stomach would probably grow into something more.

Erik is decidedly not terrible.

Erik's a musician, she reasons. And he likes animals. He picks up a mouse by its tail and dangles it to entice the snakes, who stare back at him with something like snake horror. Sort of.

"Whatever, sometimes it takes a while for them to decide to eat," he says, and Aster realizes from the red crawling up his neck that his snakes aren't performing the way he expected. He is embarrassed. Aster feels something warm wind its way through her, tightening its grip. Her heart pounds.

"Hungry?" Erik asks.

"Huh?" She isn't sure if he's talking to her or the snakes.

"I was going to get something to eat..."

"Oh, okay. Sure."

He does not ask what Aster wants, just walks to the kitchen with her trailing behind. Through the kitchen window, Aster sees Emily kneeling in the garden. Emily's back is toward them as she cranes over the plants she prunes. Aster and Erik have total privacy, at least while Emily faces her garden. As an only child, Aster has never been this close to a boy, alone, who wasn't family. Aster does not know the ways of boys; she does not know what happens when no one is there to supervise.

Erik pulls down a box of Triscuits from the cabinet. From the refrigerator, he grabs

something that looks like a canister of whipped cream, but is actually full of creamy, fluorescent-orange cheese. Erik creates tiny sandwiches with the cheese gunk and Triscuits, smushing the crackers into each other. Snacks at Aster's home are apples, nuts, baby carrots, salami. She is fascinated by how foreign his tastes are. His choice is unique in its repulsiveness.

Aster leans in closer. She notices a pulse fluttering against the soft skin of Erik's neck. She imagines touching it. She would never dare.

Erik's body follows a practiced routine. He takes the plate in one hand, pops the canister of cheese back inside the fridge, grasps two Capri Sun juice packets with his free hand, closes the fridge door with his hip. Wordlessly, he walks toward the living room TV. He settles into the couch, swipes a sandwich into his mouth in the same movement he places the plate on the coffee table. Aster sits down beside him, a couch cushion between them. She tugs at her shorts as she sits, resenting that she wore the pair that gets stuck between her buttocks and rides up the back of her thighs. Erik picks up a video game controller. As he moves, Aster catches a trace of his deodorant, which doesn't mask his scent as much as it mingles with it, the result a blend of pepper and sweetness, musk and ammonia.

"You play Halo?"

Aster shakes her head no. She isn't entirely sure what Halo is. She hasn't played any kind of video game since she spent the summer with her cousins in Michigan. Two months of long, sticky days filled with Mario Kart, Tetris, Zelda. She mostly sat on the couch and zoned out while her cousins played. Aster was so bad at the games, her fingers so dull compared to the nimble hands of her cousins, that her cousins tired of her struggle or else Aster

herself grew weary of the tiny public failures. So it is only natural for her to sit quietly and watch Erik inhabit an armor-clad space soldier. Sinister music plays in the background. Erik-as-soldier peers through a sight finder. A reptilian-looking alien appears. Erik-as-soldier shoots and shoots until the alien roars and falls to the ground dead. Erik-as-Erik concentrates on the screen like he's wearing blinders, his lips purse over his teeth, perfectly straight after years of orthodontia. Aster noticed photographs of Erik around the house, dozens of them, where his mouth is clad in torturous metal, his lips puffy around that which binds him.

Erik-as-Erik makes a squeaky sound every time Erik-as-soldier shoots. Pow, squeak, pow, squeak. Erik-as-soldier reloads. Pow pow, squeak. Erik-as-soldier switches over to some kind of machine gun. Pow pow pow pow pow pow squeak.

Aster wonders what it would be like to kiss those pursed lips. Aster's friends have kissed boys (even some girls) many, many times. In movie theaters, at the park, in the shadowy corners of the school parking lot. It is, in fact, far beyond the reasonable time for one to have been kissed, and so Aster lies about it, saying she Frenched a guy at camp.

She has never gone to camp. Her friends know this, her lie painfully obvious, but, in an act of

kindness, they nod along when they hear her recount the experience, which is actually just a description of a scene from Wet Hot American Summer.

Aster doesn't know why no one has wanted to kiss her yet. She's a little plain, sure, but not ugly. Yes, there are things she hates about herself: the stretch marks along the sides of her breasts, the way weight sits on her hips and spills over her jeans, the acne dotting her jawline. But she thinks that those are the things

that she's supposed to hate. Other girls with the same faults have found love, or at least contact with a stranger's mouth, but not her. For Aster there is only the vicious cut of the underwire in her suddenly too-small bras and growing pains in her knees as she lays in bed at night. Her body is still changing; it's hard to say what shape

Her body is still changing

it's hard to know what shape it will resolve into

and who may learn to love it

it will resolve into and who may learn to love it. It is all very unknown.

Anyway. Aster decides that if Erik wants to kiss her, she will kiss him back. Whenever he wants. Right now, even.

She looks at him wide eyed, full of hope, lets her face turn dreamy like an actress in an old Hollywood movie. Erik's eyes are glued on the screen, where Erik-as-soldier hides behind some kind of scaffolding in hopes of eviscerating a giant robot. Or something like that, Aster isn't really sure.

It's only now that Aster notices how strong Erik looks. Maybe from drumming. His muscles fight against the concert wristbands he wears on his arms, his man body swiftly outgrowing the trappings of boyhood. Aster scares herself when, suddenly, she thinks about Erik turning to her, grabbing her, forcing her to kiss him hard, doing what he wants to her.

Erik glances over at Aster, as if he's just remembered she's there. She averts her eyes, picks up a Triscuit sandwich and eats it. It's not as bad as she feared, though it's not exactly good either.

Aster contemplates inhabiting this world alongside Erik. She pictures more afternoons like this. Aster can come to Erik's house after school, eat mediocre cracker-based sandwiches, watch him play video games, maybe kiss or hold hands. Maybe he will teach her how to master Halo; maybe she will learn how to hold his corn snakes. She will go to school with the snakes in her backpack, scaring her friends when she pulls them out. "They're sisters, they belong to my boyfriend," she'll say confidently as the snakes wind around her arm. When her friends ask if the sisters bite, she will say, "Sometimes. It doesn't really hurt."

If Erik were in her grade, she doesn't know how they would match up, status-wise. As it is, he is certainly above her on the totem pole. Even if he's not that cute, he is older. That counts for a lot. Her friends would be jealous; they might even expose her lie about having kissed someone at camp. But, by that point, it will be irrelevant to Aster, having found love. Emily comes through the back door. It slams behind her and Aster jolts upright. She is not doing anything bad—she and Erik are not touching, a couch pillow still divides them—but she feels as if Emily can read her salacious thoughts. Emily strips off her gardening gloves and takes off her wide-brimmed hat.

"Erik, I have to run to Safeway to grab something for dinner. I'll be back in 15, okay?" Aster's lungs constrict.

"Okay, mom," Erik says, his eyes never straying from the screen.

Then Emily leaves.

Now would be the time, Aster realizes. If it's going to happen, it will happen now.

And, by some miracle, as the front door clicks shut, Erik pauses his game, saves it, turns off the TV. Blood rushes in Aster's ears. Erik seems to know she will follow, and she does, as he takes the empty plate and places it in the kitchen sink, blasting off a bit of the dried cheese gunk with water and leaving the rest for some adult to fully clean later. He heads upstairs to his room.

They step inside and Aster gazes at his bed. She realizes: If she sits down and he sits down next to her, maybe it will happen. So she sits on his football-themed bed. (Does he, in fact, play football? Aster doesn't think so, but she isn't sure. There are so many things about this boy, she realizes, that are a mystery.) She looks up at him. But he is not interested in joining her; he stands in front of his snake tank, peering inside. Of course, she thinks, feeling so stupid. He came in here to check on the snakes.

"Did they finally eat?"

He does not respond, he does not even move.

"What is it?" she asks and gets up to see what he is staring at and he turns to stop her but it is too late. She has seen.

The frozen mice rest on the floor of the tank, wetting the mulch around where their bodies have thawed, like they took a swim and have been sunbathing under the brilliant, false light of the heat lamp. So the sisters have not eaten the mice, and yet one of the snakes is barely recognizable. Her body distorted, lumpy, and bloated, like a fleshy person shoved inside a too-small jacket. The little patches along her

back look comically small, her scales stretched to capacity. At first, Aster thinks she is dead, but then the snake's head twitches.

The other snake is nowhere to be seen. She is not wrapped around the rock-shaped water dish, not hidden beneath the fake foliage, not tucked under the wooden structure. The missing snake, Aster realizes, is inside her sister.

She can't tell which sister has been devoured. The slight differences in size and disposition that once vaguely set the sisters apart are now meaningless.

Aster later learns that snakes are supposed to be lethargic after a big meal, but suddenly the cannibal sister seems distressed. She waggles her tail frantically and taps her nose against the sides of the tank. Her wide, unblinking, eyes communicate an unanswerable question: "What did I do?"

"Oh, shit," Erik says. He runs a hand through his hair. "That was my bad. I was supposed to

defrost the mice first, and take the snakes to a different tank to feed them."

Aster stares at him. She wants to respond, but finds that she cannot, she does not know what she could possibly say. She envisions how the sororicide must have played out, the snake leaping at her sister, snatching her, strangling her, and unlocking her jaw to slowly choke her all down.

"Not much we can do, I guess, until my dad comes home," Erik says. He releases a breathy ha-ha, a sort of laugh. "He's gonna be pissed." Aster covers her mouth and stumbles back to her seat on the bed. Erik walks toward her and, with her eyes at crotch-level, Aster sees that his pants are tented. Or maybe it's her imagination. He slides next to her and puts a hand on her knee. His hand is damp. He's trying to reassure her, or he's trying to silence her, or he's trying to entrap her, or he's trying to seduce her, Aster does not know.

Aster hears keys at the front door and runs.

