

SISTER SNAKE



a novel

AMANDA LEE KOE

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ecco

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Dedication

For those who no longer hide.

Epigraph

Miraculous animals are commonplace around West Lake, made from moisture or magic. In one grotto lived a white snake who could take on the skin and shape of a beautiful woman with ease. A dedicated and fastidious practitioner of the art of self-cultivation, this snake spirit did not desire anything immoral. No one, but herself, could tell the difference between her and a human.

—*Chinese folktale, Legend of the White Snake*

* * *

Nothing I accept about myself can be used against me to diminish me.

—*Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider*

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A Novel by Amanda Lee Koe

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Before

Before they had legs, they had tails. This was way back when.

Before the buzzkill of data and doomscrolling. Before the inception of the steam engine and the stock exchange. This was more than a thousand years ago, under a majestic weeping willow whose hollowed trunk was home to an inseparable pair of snakes who had sworn to be sisters: one pure white, the other jewel green.

The willow tree afforded the two snakes an unparalleled view of the famed West Lake in their hometown of Hangzhou, a garden metropolis feted as the most beautiful city in all of China. But even a beguiling paradise grows drier than dust when you can't have what you want.

A hot kernel of desire was ripening under the cool scales of the white snake. She wanted so badly to be human. She had spent many a morning slithering under the viaducts of West Lake—Broken Bridge, which is not broken, Long Bridge, which is not long—where scholar poets liked to practice their speeches and amorous lovers stopped to cop a feel.

You may be disappointed, the green snake signed with her forked tongue, as her sister gazed wanly at passersby crossing the bridge. *At their core, humans and animals are not so different.*

Don't you want to see well enough to read a scroll? the white snake asked. To have a wrist you can slip a jade bracelet onto? To have a name, and hear your lover sigh it in your ear?

The green snake was satisfied with their way of life, as long as she had the white snake with her. Every skin had its pleasures. She loved the freedom of flexing her spine. The clarity of existing as one sinuous length,

unencumbered by clumsy limbs. The thrill of the chase, how fierce she felt when they hunted side by side. The lush ripple of spring grass along her underside.

But she knew how much her sister desired to be human, and she would try anything once. And so that fateful mid-autumn night, when the moon was at its brightest, in the year 815 in the Tang dynasty, the green snake swam to an underwater cave and obtained a lilac lotus sown by the hand of a great goddess. The lotus seeds were capable of bestowing human form and ageless immortality.

Happy Mid-Autumn, the green snake signed jauntily as she presented the seeds. *May you rise up along life's ladder.*

The white snake stared in sheer disbelief. *It wasn't just a rumor?*

Only one way to find out. The green snake split the seeds.

Tails touching, they swallowed.

Before they slid into the lake to begin their transformation, the green snake looked into the white snake's eyes and signed to her:

This body itself is emptiness. Emptiness itself is this body.

Thotty Baesians Are in High Demand

Emerald tells him she won't be drinking, but clearly her sugar daddy thinks the decision is his to make because he's paying. "Single-malt scotch for me," he says, "and, for the lady, let's see." He narrows his eyes and cocks his head, making a show of sizing Emerald up. He prefers girls with long tresses, but Emerald carries her seafoam-green buzz cut with easy panache. Heads swiveled when they walked in. "You're the fun sort, aren't you?" He winks. "Let's get you a cute little cocktail!"

"I told you," Emerald repeats, "I'm allergic to alcohol."

She smiles at him. He doesn't know what alcohol does to her kind.

"C'mon." He waves what she's saying away. Holding the menu back for long-sightedness, he's still unable to read the fine print. Grudgingly, he reaches for the glasses perched on top of his bald head. "She'll have a Sencha Daiquiri," he tells the bartender. He takes the glasses off and places a hammy hand over Emerald's. She's been fiddling with the fringed cords on the velvet armchair.

He grins. "Don't these look like nipple tassels?"

"No." Emerald says. There is a finality to her tone that throws him off. For a moment, it even makes her seem much older than she looks. He shrugs that off and grabs her hand. "Don't worry," he says, slightly sulky, "you don't have to finish the drink."

"Ah." Emerald deepens her stare by just a fraction. "I wasn't worried about me." If she were to turn it up a few more notches, he might start to

quiver. But it's still early, so she eases up and finishes playfully: "I'm worried about *you*, Giovanni."

Giovanni is the name he goes by on the app: he thinks the Don Juan reference is a nice touch. He'd asked Emerald to put on something form-fitting for their date, but he was still floored when she showed up at this cocktail and ceviche bar in knee-high boots and a tiny dress. All in bright-lime-and-black faux snakeskin leather. He traces a knuckle along her knee. "Is it a kink?"

Emerald is amused. "Wouldn't you like to find out?"

The bartender wields the muddler like a ceremonial mace, winking at Emerald as he stirs peach puree into rum, then tosses the shaker from one hand to another behind his back.

Everything in this bar is breezy in that dry-cleaned, coat-checked, doormanned Upper East Side way. Emerald still loves New York, but she can no longer be bothered to take part in its ritualistic repartee. Born-again cougars with tousled blowouts on a girls' night out comparing alimony packages, androgynous borderline bulimic models making out with each other in the corner booth, square-jawed banker bros spilling vodka shots as they whoosh like rockets to herald the week's gains on the stock market, out-of-towner families in overcoordinated Burberry feeling good about bringing country-club chic to the big city when really they look like plaid-gift-wrapped Christmas presents. On the walls are David LaChapelle celebrity portraits of Britney Spears and Paris Hilton, whose pop irony is derived at the expense of the subject. Mouths smiling, eyes dead.

When Emerald requested wealth verification, Giovanni didn't reveal his real name or job. He offered to show her the art he collected. He couldn't take her to the SoHo town house where his prenupped wife of many years roosted, so he drove her to a climate-controlled Long Island storage facility, unlocked his vault, and unveiled a Damien Hirst vitrine. A white lamb with black hooves, preserved in a formaldehyde-filled tank. Its mouth was open, which made it look caught off guard.

"So, what do we think?" Giovanni prompted. "Game on?"

Relatively well endowed, he'd said the same thing when he flashed his penis at Emerald in his Tesla. Size didn't matter to Emerald. It was qi that kept her fresh. She could draw that vitality out of a human's body once they were in close proximity. If she could hear them breathing, in general, that was near enough for her to get down to business. Sex was just an easy time to feed on qi because humans got so distracted, they would never notice the slightly translucent stream of breath and life force leaving their body through their nose or mouth and entering her own.

Everyone's qi tasted different. Giovanni's reminded her of burned ends and ranch dressing. By now, she knew her limits. As long as she didn't feed on any one partner for too long, the harm done to them was minimal. They might feel tired or look haggard for a couple of days, but the human body's qi naturally replenished itself if it wasn't continually and aggressively depleted.

Emerald stared at the dead lamb, wishing she could reach in to help it close its mouth. "Game on," she said, tiptoeing to kiss Giovanni, imbibing a whiff of his qi.

Their drinks arrive. The Sencha Daiquiri looks like a floral terrarium in a delicate beaker. Giovanni's whisky sits in a solid glass with copper accents. He noses the whisky as the bartender gives Emerald the lowdown on what's in hers: "Okinawan cane sugar rum, white peach, iced sencha, edible petals." Only now does it occur to Emerald that he ordered the most cloyingly feminine, oriental-presenting drink on the menu for her. The worst part is knowing he meant it as a thoughtful gesture.

"Mm," he says. "Looks like something a geisha would drink."

Emerald doesn't say anything. She reaches for his whisky. The amber glow slides down her throat. She'll feel it in her blood soon.

"Babe," Giovanni observes, "you mad about something?"

She shrugs. "This geisha just felt like having whisky."

"Take the compliment, hon." Giovanni waves a hand. Girls these days. "All I'm saying is, you possess a certain grace. An air of mystery, y'know? I would never call a white girl a geisha . . ." When she raises an eyebrow, he

backtracks. “OK, OK. You’re not Japanese. I get it, Asian chicks are *not* a monolith.” He palms the small of her back. “You said you were born in . . . Hen-zoo, China, right?”

Emerald used to spin profuse lies about her background. But she’s come to realize that Americans may be the last people to be able to tell truth from lies. From Hollywood razzle-dazzle to Silicon Valley Ponzi schemes, from himbotic-despotic elected politicians to charismatic cult mass suicides, Emerald finds the aspirational deceit and drama of the land of the free a convenient place for an immortal to let it all hang out. When everyone operates under the assumption that fake-it-till-you-make-it is the given, no one will be able to recognize the truth.

“I miss Hangzhou a lot, yeah.”

“Don’t you ever go back to visit?”

“Nope.” Emerald can still recall that willow tree with the hollow trunk by the water’s edge at West Lake. It seemed spacious for two snakes back then, but it would look so narrow to her eyes now. She wonders, not for the first time, if Su has been back to Hangzhou. It’s been thirty or forty years—maybe more, she’s stopped counting—since she last saw her sister in the flesh. Over time, the tight pang of missing Su has dwindled into a muted ache in her chest.

“Tell me, how old are you, really? I don’t quite buy that you’re twenty-five . . .”

That’s Emerald’s age on the app. “Now you’ve put me on the spot.”

“You’re younger, aren’t you? Just look at your skin.”

“I’m pretty ancient, to be honest . . .”

Giovanni smiles. “Sure, babe.”

Emerald almost swats his hand away when it goes up her skirt, but it’s not like she has a choice at the moment. She sits tight and smiles back at Giovanni grimly. In the past, you could live off qi and goodwill. A few hundred bucks went a long way. These days, things are different.

* * *

Six months back, Emerald's card bounced at the Sherry-Netherland. She'd been living it up in a sixth-floor suite, ordering coffee and carpaccio from Cipriani's. A couple of times, when she was too lazy to head out for qi, she hovered behind the poor sweet chambermaid and sucked a few breaths out of her when she was cleaning.

Emerald decided to call her sister for the first time in a long time. Emerald changed numbers often, but Su had kept the same number since cell phones were invented. No matter where she moved to, Su maintained the +44 British number, even if it incurred roaming costs. This time Emerald didn't even have any money left to top up her prepaid card. It was almost impossible to find a pay phone, but finally she stumbled upon a booth at Penn Station.

It took Su a long time to pick up the phone. She didn't say hello.

"You ran out of money, didn't you?"

"Hey." Emerald was hurt. "Can't I call to say hi?"

It was true, however, that every time Emerald called Su, she needed something from her.

How was any of this her fault, though? There are so many things that humans have decided they need in order to survive. Money. Property. Status. If survival isn't an issue, getting ahead comes into play. If you do get ahead, then you start mulling over your legacy. There's no end to all the striving. None of it makes sense to her, even after all these years. In the wild, you hunt when you're hungry, find a rock to hide under when you want to rest. You do what you feel like doing, when you feel like doing it. There's no one to answer to but yourself.

When they were snakes, they were as close as two willow boughs on the same tree. But being human is a torrid world of complications, and after the canker of centuries, it was easier now to let Su think the worst of her, to assume she was an irresponsible brat who didn't care about anything but having a good time.

The last time she'd called Su up, eight years before in Macao, Emerald owed the Venetian Casino ten million patacas. Su smoothed it over in forty-

eight hours. Some slippery dude from Su's suite of wealth managers direct-deposited \$50,000 into Emerald's account so she could start over. "I'm not going to do this next time, Xiaoqing," Su warned. "You're never going to learn if I'm always bailing you out." Emerald knew it was ungrateful on her part, but she found Su's tone condescending, given the amount—it was fifty grand, not five hundred grand, which would have better warranted the moralistic undertone.

Maybe she didn't want to learn, she wanted to say. Moderation was too human for her. Besides, it wasn't like Su couldn't afford it anyway. Su had taken to this gainful aspect of being human in a way that Emerald would never have been able to, even if time had been turned back. Women were not allowed on the trading floor of the London Stock Exchange in the 1850s, but Su bought Lloyd's stock at an inflated price from an illegal broker in Change Alley.

Time is a natural multiplier. The value of that bundle of shares had swelled into something astronomical. Over the centuries, Su continued to make judicious investments that snowballed her vast holdings across offshore accounts. In spite of this, Emerald knew Su still made careful projections of how long her assets would last, taking global inflation and such into account. Emerald didn't get any of it. Stock exchanges—now, cryptocurrency and non-fungible tokens—why would humans invent unreal shit like that? Su had long urged Emerald to have a "diversified portfolio" and to exercise "financial prudence," which made Emerald want to barf. But Emerald wasn't too worried as she let Su lecture her over the phone; Su had a hard mouth but a soft heart.

"Where are you these days, anyway?"

Su paused. "I'm still in Singapore."

"Really?" Emerald's voice went up by half an octave.

Emerald moved cities every two or three years. It broke up the monotony of millennia. She couldn't root in one place for too long. Flux suited her best. Emerald did the math: Su must have been in Singapore for about a decade by now. The last time Emerald called, Su was already living there. In the

same time, Emerald had torn through Macao, Guanajuato, and Trieste before arriving in New York. It was her second time living here. The first was during Prohibition.

She could feel Su bristling over the line.

“It’s wonderful here,” Su said, a little defensively.

Emerald was deciding on what sum to request when she noticed a homeless man, asking for change by the turnstiles in a Yankees jersey, staring at her. “You have that regal kind of beauty,” he declared, “just like Henry’s first wife Zainab. It’s a shame he had to divorce her.”

Over the phone, Su remained cold. “I meant what I said the last time. For your own good.”

“You can’t be serious, Jie. I’m calling from a pay phone. I’m down to my final dollar.”

“You are the daughter of kings!” the man boomed.

Su wasn’t relenting. Emerald started to panic. “I can’t just waltz into a Wall Street gig or a Flatiron tech start-up. People like us don’t have shit like credentials, degrees, internships—”

The line beeped. The call was ending. “Wait!” Emerald dug in her pockets. They were empty. The man came over. She drew back, but he was picking two quarters out of a deli cup. He slid them into the pay phone. *Thank you*, she mouthed to him. He gave her a cool shrug.

“Start with waitressing,” Su was saying. “They pay under the table.”

“I’m not going to be a waitress, it’s a waste of time—”

“What have you ever done with your time anyway, Xiaoqing?”

Su was being unreasonable. “How about you?” Emerald exploded. “Do you think your long line of deceased husbands and your Stepford-wife aesthetic will make you hate yourself less?”

The line went dead. “Fuck,” Emerald muttered. She hung the phone back on the hook.

“Ooh, that was harsh,” the man commented. “We should all be kinder than necessary, little lady.” He gave her a sage smile. “Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about.”

In the week that followed, Emerald lowered her metabolic rate as much as she could, taking the 1 train after hours to feed on the qi of club kids, drunk drifters, and graveyard shift workers. Back in the wild, snakes could go months without eating. She wouldn't starve just yet. By night she rested in the twenty-four-hour McDonald's on Broadway; by day she visited the New York Public Library flagship down by Bryant Park, comforted by its warm chandeliers and dark wood reading rooms.

New York was a hotbed of niches and weirdos. With patience, persistence, and a bit of luck, you could find anything you wanted. It took Emerald less than a week of hogging free Wi-Fi kiosks at the library to find this under Craigslist sublets: "Free temp stay in G'point studio: Gay Pop Surrealist painter seeks femme life-model bff as he preps solo show. Day bed + healthy meals, this is not a scam I am wholesome AF!"

His name was Bart, but he wanted Emerald to call him Bartek. "I have Polish ancestry," he sniffed. She told him she'd spent some time in Warsaw. He'd never been there, but he was saving up for a big trip to connect with his roots. He reminded her of the bunch of dreamers she'd lived with in a student hall in Mokotów in the 1980s, how they'd started up an avant-garde café/bookshop/gallery in their basement after martial law saw the closing of numerous public cultural institutions. Bartek was working on a queer biblical rococo lowbrow series in which he spliced male and female body parts into hybrid forms on the canvas, like the X-rated gay love child of Jean-Honoré Fragonard and Mark Ryden. He had a word tattoo emblazoning his left palm:

THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST IS TO MAKE REVOLUTION IRRESISTIBLE

"Toni Cade Bambara," he told Emerald. "I really believe that." He nodded at his ramshackle easel and modestly sized canvases. "I wanna start an antibinary revolution with my paintings."

Emerald had not lived with a housemate in a long time, let alone a millennial painter who believed he could make a mark on the world with his

art. She found Bartek’s chaotic coalition of irony, optimism, flippancy, and anxiety infectious and adorable. He was so oblivious that she could easily have fed on his qi every now and then, but she decided not to do him dirty. He cared for her, cooked for her. Bartek was vegetarian, and his chickpea alfalfa salad made her more, rather than less, hungry. For a couple of weeks, the poor-but-sexy artist life was fun—she could even pick up good cuts of raw beef that had yet to reach their expiry date when they went dumpster diving at the Bedford Avenue Whole Foods—but it soon wore her down. Maybe it was cute for a twentysomething, but Emerald only *looked* the part.

Bartek was the one who told Emerald about the sugar app.

He’d been fishing for his own daddy, but the showing had been poor. “It’s taking a toll,” Bartek complained as he temporarily disabled the app. “Y’all bi girls have it so much easier.” Emerald, who’d dated men and women interchangeably since the seventeenth century, was too tired to get into a pan-femmes-are-queer-frauds squabble with a gay art boi. Bartek was looking at himself on his phone camera. “My hair’s too limp. Maybe I should get that K-pop root perm?”

She pictured it. “Go for it, you have the right jawline.”

“You think so?” he fished, but he was already googling “best Korean hairdresser” on his phone. “Hon, I love having you around”—he nudged Emerald’s knee with his foot as he scrolled Yelp reviews—“but for real. You can do so much better than my dump. Just *look* at you!”

Emerald was in one of Bartek’s thrifted tees, which he’d cropped and reattached with safety pins à la Vivienne Westwood, and not feeling particularly hot, but she appreciated the sentiment.

“Thotty baesians are in high demand,” he said to her a little sternly. “Ride that yellow fever bullshit and profit off it, sweetie! Stop AAPI Hate billboards in Times Square aren’t gonna pay for skyrocketing rent, am I right? Emmy, I bet it’ll take you all of five minutes to snag a midlife crisis Midtown normie who thinks sriracha is exotic. Girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do . . .”

* * *

Emerald's cheeks are flushed by the time she and Giovanni leave the bar. In his experience with coquettes who can't hold their liquor, if Giovanni puts enough overpriced cocktails into their bodies, they'll seamlessly segue to a room upstairs in the Plaza. Emerald finished his whisky and capped it with a martini. So much for a girl who said she wouldn't be drinking.

He steadies her as she totters about in her heeled boots—best to make sure she looks sober, so it won't seem too predatory when they check in. But Emerald makes a detour for the exit as they walk into the lobby. “Let's take a walk in the park!” Her voice is bright.

“It's half past one in the morning.”

“Are you my *daddy*—or are you my *dad*?” Emerald giggles, tugging him by the elbow.

Outside, the night air is balmy. A porter bids them a pleasant evening. She lets go of his arm, pattering down carpeted stairs, jaywalking across Fifty-Ninth Street. Cars honk, but they stop for Emerald. They do not stop for Giovanni—he tries once, twice, then sheepishly waits to cross at the light. She passes the fruit-laden bronze nymph topping Pulitzer Fountain as he tries to catch up. When Emerald reaches the sidewalk, she looks over her shoulder to make sure he's following—then vaults over the granite perimeter into Central Park.

“Whoa,” he calls out. “Wait a sec!” He breaks into a jog, already beginning to perspire. When he looks over the stone perimeter, it's not flat grass or a flower patch, but a ten-foot drop on an incline.

Emerald waits for him on the path, not a scratch on her.

“Shoot, did I mention?” She skips ahead. “I'm not wearing underwear . . .”

Giovanni throws his tie over his shoulder and jumps the barrier, skidding down shrub and soil. They're at the southernmost edge of the Pond. He can't see Emerald, she's too far ahead. There's no one else around. He's never been to Central Park at night. The greenery is the same, surely, but it feels incalculably wilder. Fresh water babbles. A nightjar makes its churring song.