

“Ning Cai is a wonder.” —Neil Gaiman

MANIPULATION

BOOK TWO OF
THE SAVANT TRILOGY

NING CAI

“Ning Cai is a wonder.”

—Neil Gaiman, internationally celebrated author of
The Sandman and *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*

“Ning Cai’s writing has the drama and invention one might expect from a former star performer in the world of magical illusion. Her stories unfold at pace with numerous surprising twists, all carefully planned, one feels, not to trick the reader but to entertain, which she does not only ‘in spades’, but all the suits in a deck of cards.”

—Robert Alan Jamieson, author of
Plague Clothes and *MacCloud Falls*

“A breathtaking, action-packed adventure. Maxine Schooling is the parkour-loving heroine we all need, and Ning Cai is the perfect author to bring her to life.”

—Tracey S. Rosenberg, author of
Lipstick is Always a Plus and *Writer in Residence*,
University of Edinburgh

“Smart and funny, Max is exactly the best kind of companion to travel with through this clever, high-octane thriller. After the first book, I was hooked, and this second instalment in the series doesn’t disappoint. This is Max coming into her own. More please!”

—Jane McKie, author of *Kitsune* and
Senior Lecturer, University of Edinburgh

“Maxine Schooling is the funny, curious, kick-ass best friend you always wanted, in a twisty, action-packed adventure that grabs you from the first page. Manipulation has never been so much fun!”

—Jane Alexander, award-winning author of *A User’s Guide to Make-Believe*

“This is writing with edge and awareness:
Ning Cai is the real deal.”

—Claire Askew, author of *All the Hidden Truths* and winner of the Bloody Scotland Scottish Crime Debut of the Year 2019

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EPIGRAM

Dedicated to my grandmother

Tan Swee Kiau

1922-2020

ONE

HE'S KILLING ME.

It took just one careless move on my part for things to go wrong. I should've been smarter. Should've known better. But everything happened so fast. Wind totally knocked out of me, I find his full weight on my back, pinning me face-down to the floor. I try to fight, but he is stronger. Twisting to the side, I struggle to shove him off. It's not working. He's not budging. If anything, my feeble attempts only make him laugh.

Our proximity is so close, I can feel the oil and sweat from his bearded face swipe against my raw cheek. His hot breath is in my ear, and he leans in close to taunt me. He says I fight like a girl.

But I am a girl. No apologies about that.

With a yell, I arch my back and try to kick him, but he easily blocks it. Even worse now, he tightens his hold on my neck and squeezes. I instantly feel my cheeks flush as the dull throbbing in my temples intensifies. Trying to jam my fingers into that shallow space between my throat and the crook of his sinewy forearm, I realise that it's too slippery from sweat and that space is just too tight. I can't get purchase. Can't get his arm off me. My strained muscles are trembling so hard, it looks like I'm shivering. Goosebumps prickle my skin. I don't want to surrender, but my body betrays me.

The instant he senses the fight go out of me, he shifts like a ninja's shadow. In a split-second, he's got me coiled in a deadly leglock from behind. Like a python focused on the constriction of its helpless prey, his grip under my chin tightens as he executes a rear naked choke. My fate is sealed. There is no escape now. We both know this, even as I hold back a whimper of defeat and blindly aim elbow jabs behind me. My desperate blows are useless. He's got me exactly where he wants me. My heart is racing. I'm gasping for air. White spots fill my vision and my hearing starts to go funny. It's over.

"Tap out!" I hear Luce cry.

I frantically slap my cousin on the arm. Once. Twice.

Jon releases me.

Curling into foetal position, I'm wracked by a massive coughing fit. I'm a sorry, drooling mess on the mat, but I don't care any more. Eyes squeezed shut, I gulp down air as I try to think happy thoughts: wrapping Nonya rice dumplings with Aunt Theresa in the steamy kitchen of our family restaurant; playing *Overwatch* with my best friend

CK and totally crushing it with five straight wins; learning magic tricks from Charlie, who demonstrated (even with one arm in a cast) just how easy it is to pick someone's wallet from their back pocket once you have the right technique, before making me try it on him; taking poor old limping Albatross, my Singapore special, for a walk at the dog park with Luce as we chat about anything at all.

"You're okay, Max." Luce comforts me as I blink my wet eyes open and moan. "You're alive. Just breathe. C'mon, breathe."

My childhood friend disappears into a watery blur as my vision goes awry. From out of nowhere, an overwhelming scent engulfs my senses. I clap a hand over my nose but still smell it. Whose perfume is that? The fragrance is crazy intense and on the verge of giving me a migraine. It's an odd mix of intoxicating smells that I never expected to hit me in the middle of Jon's sweaty MMA gym. I pick up strong notes of basil verbena, amber wood, watermelon, cucumber...and something else that's making my stomach churn.

"Get up!" Jon shouts.

I tune out my cousin and focus instead on drawing in slow, deep breaths. The smell disappears and my urge to puke ebbs. I feel something light and fluffy land on my chest. From its fresh lemony scent, I figure someone, most likely Luce, has tossed me a gym towel. I try to utter my thanks, but a pathetic little croak comes out instead. I wince. Everywhere hurts.

"Get up now, Maxine Schooling!" Jon growls again.

Eyes still closed, I turn away and ignore him. I just want to curl up and sleep. Wake up sometime in the next century,

maybe. But then cold water is unceremoniously dumped on my face. I never saw it coming. Spluttering at the shock and betrayal, I sit up and glare icy daggers at Jon. “Rude!”

Jon squats down beside me, offering me a drink from his tumbler as I wring water from my hair. With his game face on, he’s in full-on coach mode. Using his serious “all business” voice, Jon steepled his tape-wrapped fingers and looks at me. “So, what’s your takeaway from today’s lesson?”

I drain what’s left in the bottle, relishing the feel of cool water sloshing down my sore throat. That done, I belch loudly in Jon’s face. To his credit, he remains unfazed by my impressive caveman burp. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and shrug. “That MMA is so not my thing, and I should stick to parkour?”

Joining us on the mat, Luce flashes me a smile. I return her a rueful grin before sticking my tongue out at Jon.

“Look, you can whine all you want, but we are not stopping. You are going to keep training. And if anything, we may even step things up.” Jon reaches out to tap that hateful white slash across my left eyebrow, the scar that reminds me all too well about what and whom I’d lost. “You know we worry that whoever did this might come back for you, right? And then what? If the fight goes to the ground, I need you to know what to do.”

I smack the offending hand away from my face. “Well, somebody would be a much better coach if he could just be a little more encouraging. Seriously, Jon, do you always have to win? You nearly killed me back there!”

I expect Jon to get all defensive but that doesn’t come. Instead, his upper lip curls into a smile. “You either win

or you learn.” He pats me on the head like I’m a petulant child. That makes me feel even worse, especially since my annoying cousin is only a year older.

His phone rings and he fishes it out from his gym bag. I glimpse a photo of a pouty-faced caller flashing across his smudgy screen, and can’t help but roll my eyes. I’m not a fan of Gigi, Jon’s on-again-off-again girlfriend, moreso after I caught her snooping around my house when she was a newsroom intern. But she does seem to always know how to make my cousin stupidly happy. He’s been trying to grow out his sorry excuse for a beard just because Gigi likes the look. What does he see in her? Why is he always so eager to help her do stuff? Is it because she conforms to society’s definitions and superficial standards of “pretty”? I don’t get it. Relationships are complicated.

“You’ve worked hard over the last couple of months,” he says to me, “and I’m proud of you. But you’ve got to stop repeating the same mistakes, Chilli Padi.” The use of my childhood nickname grabs my attention. “Be patient. Focus. Anticipate their first move, then strike. Don’t go running in like you did just now, swinging your arms wildly. That only makes you vulnerable. Channel all your anger wisely, okay?”

All my anger?

“Okay?” Jon repeats, bringing the phone to his ear.

“Yeah. Fine.” I shrug. “Okay.”

“Good. I’ll see you back home.” Jon claps me on the shoulder before turning round to speak to Gigi; he’s all smiles the moment he hears her squeaky, high-pitched voice. The first thing Jon does is to apologise for not answering sooner, before whispering sweet nothings to appease his

girlfriend, who is most probably throwing yet another one of her irrational hissy fits. I can't help but roll my eyes again.

Is this what it means to be a couple? Having to act all lovey-dovey like you're in a sappy K-drama? Who came up with these stupid rules for modern-day romance anyway? Why is my cousin like this? What happened to the smart boy I grew up with? I walk away, not wanting to hear any more of their upchuck-worthy conversation about who misses who more, or who loves who more. Eurgh.

Luce offers me a look of pity as I touch the tender red skin around my neck. I can't wait for Jon to start his national service. Like Charlie, he'll soon be enlisted into the army to serve our country's mandatory two years of NS. Fingers crossed, hopefully Jon will forget about our training sessions since I'm pretty sure he would rather spend precious weekends with that annoying girlfriend of his.

"Oh man, look at the time." Luce points at the clock hanging above the signed Anderson Silva UFC poster. "It's almost eleven. We gotta hustle."

"What? No time for a hot shower?" I grumble. My Chindian friend shakes her gorgeous curls, eyes apologetic, mouth set in a firm line.

I cast a quick glance over my shoulder. Blushing at something Gigi has said over the phone, my cousin wouldn't even notice if I waved goodbye. Or if I collapsed right now from anaphylactic shock in the middle of his workplace. Luce joins me in judging him as we watch Jon make a bashful kick before spinning around, shyly giggling into the phone pressed against his sweaty, beaming face. Wringing the water out of my hair, I redo my damp ponytail and mop

up beads of perspiration, before dropping the used towel on Jon's gym bag accidentally on purpose.

"Kim Sia Court." I shut the door of the taxi, taken aback by the strong whiff of fresh pandan leaves that assaults my nostrils. Do these pungent green bundles really help keep cockroaches away? Luce looks at me and wrinkles her nose.

The driver folds his Chinese newspaper and starts the meter. As we leave the mall and head down River Valley, a classic by Xinyao pioneer Yan Liming begins to play over the radio, and the driver sings along. The melancholic melody of "Shui De Hua" reminds me of Charlie, who introduced me to this genre of local Mandarin folk-pop. Unfortunately for us right now, the elderly man at the wheel is no troubadour. Luce and I exchange pained looks.

Deciding not to suffer in silence at the back of the taxi as he butchers the song, I lean forward and ask him to switch to an English radio station. He grudgingly does so, but not without calling me an ang moh gui under his breath. Being labelled a "foreign devil" perplexes me, since I'm Singaporean and mighty proud of it. Also, his comment strikes me as odd since I've always thought I look more like Mom, inheriting her delicate Asian features. But I do have Dad's statuesque height and blue eyes.

The driver zips through radio stations, even one playing the sick beat of The Weeknd's latest song, before finally stopping. To my chagrin, there's no music playing, but

instead a droning conversation about the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill, newly tabled in Parliament to fight against fake news in Singapore, before it shifts to mundane chat about how today's millennials (I suspect they really mean us Gen Zs or young people in general) have gone too far with tasteless gags and irresponsible antics, in the constant chase for social media likes and followers.

The radio presenters, who sound like grumpy boomers, then start to grouse about the latest stunt by Nikko Phua, a social media influencer who apparently faked her own death in the wee hours this morning. The controversial video she uploaded attracted over three million views, surpassing the likes of other local "key opinion leaders" like Xiaxue, Yoyo Cao and Benjamin Kheng.

Nikko apparently got someone dressed like a B-grade horror movie ghoul to attack her for more views and likes. But the YouTube video was deemed too disturbing, so the social media platform took it down and even suspended her account. Of course this didn't stop the video from circulating through other channels. Her fans even re-uploaded the footage on Vimeo, with vloggers filming their impassioned commentaries alongside Nikko's original clip. As of yet, Nikko hasn't released a statement of apology, and unhappy netizens are enraged that valuable time and resources have been wasted; she even got the police and SCDF involved to make it look authentic.

"Seriously, I can't imagine how bored some people must be to share such pointless stuff." I yawn, stretching my arms in the confines of the taxi.

"I know, right?" Luce shakes her head. "It's all attention and shock factor. It's so totally lame and immature."

The first time I watched the loud-mouthed personality was about six months ago while recuperating from a stab wound given to me by a deranged criminal with major daddy issues. Stuck in bed with my thigh all bandaged up, I was mindlessly scrolling through YouTube when I came across one of Nikko's high-jinks, her penchant for dramatic make-up and tattoos on full display, where she pretended to stick her little sister's hamster into a blender.

Her shenanigans were as annoying as her over-the-top American "Valley Girl" accent, which, according to the haters who posted comments, Nikko had picked up after a one-week vacation in Los Angeles, sponsored by a budget carrier that had engaged Nikko to publicise its new direct-flight route. I felt bad for the poor sister who, for a moment there, really believed her pet had met with a cruel and violent death.

"Your phone's buzzing," Luce points out, returning me to the present.

It's a text from Charlie. But instead of reading his message, I look out the window, watching a pinched, elderly trishaw uncle struggle to peddle two gawking tourists busy taking selfies as vehicles whizz by.

Luce regards me. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." I nod. "No." I change my mind. "Maybe." I grimace.

"Let's be honest." Luce gives me a knowing look. "It's about *him*, isn't it?"

I chew on my lip and consider the question. Truth be told,



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ning Cai is the author of *The Savant Trilogy*—a young adult series beginning with the bestselling novel *Misdirection* (longlisted for the 2016 Epigram Books Fiction Prize)—as well as the Singapore Literature Prize-shortlisted memoir *Who Is Magic Babe Ning?* She is also the co-author of three additional books: a travel account (*Adventures of 2 Girls*, with Pamela Ho), a middle-grade novel (*Magicienne*, with Don Bosco), and a creativity self-help guide (*Game of Thoughts*, with John Teo).

For over a decade, she was known as “Magic Babe” Ning, a multi-award-winning stage illusionist and escape artist known as “the sexiest woman in magic”. Lauded for her death-defying acts and record-setting feats, Ning performed for Middle Eastern royalty and showcased her brand of deadly sexy magic to an international audience on stage and on TV. She was also the guest entertainer for Royal Caribbean and Celebrity Cruises, performing for thousands on the high seas. After a brief period of retirement, she returned in 2017 as the mentalist Ning: Mind Magic Mistress.

Besides being engaged as magic consultant for various projects, she has starred in popular Mediacorp TV shows such as *Meat and Greed* (Channel 5), «吃饱没? 3» (*Eat Already? 3*) (Channel 8), *Love in a Time of Change* (Channel NewsAsia) and *Record Breakers* (Okto). A TEDx speaker and committee member of the Singapore Council of Women’s Organisations’ Women’s Register, Ning has led writing workshops both in person and on Zoom, and is no stranger to the annual Singapore Writers Festival. Recipient of a 2018 National Arts Council Arts Scholarship, Ning earned a Masters with Distinction in Creative Writing from the University of Edinburgh. She now resides in Europe with her spouse and their little boy. You can find her on her website NingThing.com.

The long-awaited second book in an exciting YA mystery trilogy about a teenage savant on the trail of her family's killer, from the multi-talented Ning Cai, international magic celebrity and author.

Six months after helping the CID capture the Singapore Spectre—a stage magician and serial killer—Maxine Schooling is once again roped into a murder investigation. This time, an unrelated group of people is being killed by what witnesses can only refer to as a vampire. At the same time, Max meets a former colleague of her parents, who can potentially give her clues to whoever killed her family and put her in a coma.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Recipient of the prestigious Arts Scholarship from the National Arts Council, Ning Cai is a graduate of the University of Edinburgh with a Master's in Creative Writing (Distinction). She is the bestselling author of *The Savant Trilogy*—a YA crime series starting with *Misdirection* (longlisted for the 2016 Epigram Books Fiction Prize), which spent six weeks on *The Straits Times* bestsellers list—as well as four other titles, including the Singapore Literature Prize-shortlisted memoir *Who Is Magic Babe Ning?*

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