

“Ning Cai is a wonder.” —Neil Gaiman

METAMORPHOSIS

BOOK THREE OF
THE SAVANT TRILOGY

A woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a black leather motorcycle jacket and sunglasses, is walking away from the viewer through a thick, swirling cloud of orange-brown dust or sand. The scene is backlit, creating a hazy, atmospheric effect.

NING CAI

“Ning Cai is a wonder.”

—Neil Gaiman, internationally celebrated author of
The Sandman and *American Gods*

“The characters Ning creates are so interesting I want to lim kopi with them. This final instalment of The Savant Trilogy is yet another page-turner. I love that Ning dares to push boundaries with her writing, just as she has done with her stage illusions. She defies expectations.”

—Pamela Ho, co-author of *Adventures of 2 Girls*

“Ning Cai’s legendary warmth, wit and widescreen imagination come right through on every page. Must read!”

—Don Bosco, creator of the *Last Kid Running* gamebook series

“A fitting end to The Savant Trilogy, *Metamorphosis* is a taut page-turner, twisting in surprising ways. Like watching Ning Cai doing one of her famous magic tricks, you’re left with a gasp and a smile.”

—Felix Cheong, author of *Sprawl: A Graphic Novel*

“Heart-pounding action and a compelling plot bring this final instalment of The Savant Trilogy to a satisfying conclusion, but not without first taking you on an edge-of-your-seat ride.”

—Joyce Chua, author of *Land of Sand and Song*

“The experience of reading Ning Cai’s Savant Trilogy is akin to sitting in the front row at an intricate and deliciously complex magic show, being tested, thrilled and tantalised by one plot twist after another. True to her background as an illusionist, she deploys sleight of hand and multiple trick mirrors in this finale. Her masterful plotting keeps you guessing to the end, and then rewards you with a climax worth three books’ wait. I found myself fully invested in what happens to Maxine Schooling—her love life, her friendships, her health—as she races towards discovering the identity and motive of the Man in the Mask. The Savant Trilogy is the most exciting young adult crime fiction series set in Singapore that I’ve read, one that succeeds in reflecting Peranakan culture as deftly as it captures the language and lifestyle of Gen Z.

I thoroughly look forward to what Ning comes up with next.”

—Theresa Tan, author of *A Clean Breast*

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BOOK THREE OF
THE SAVANT TRILOGY
NING CAI

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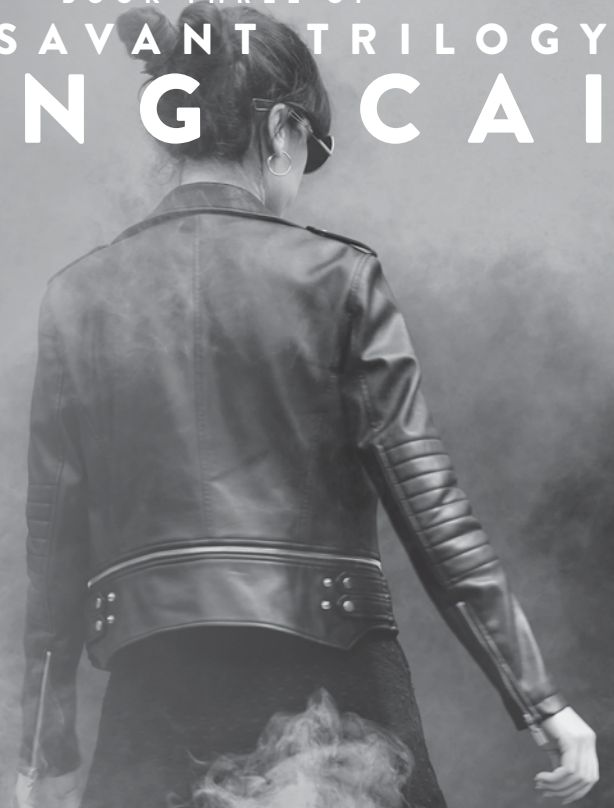
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EPIGRAM

*Dedicated to the real CK;
thank you for everything*

ONE

“DAD, WILL YOU *please* stop filming me?” I scowled at the camera in my face, throwing the stink eye at the ridiculous blue-and-purple polka-dotted cone hat that he’d strapped to his head at a jaunty angle. “Seriously. It’s embarrassing.”

But the man was unrelenting. To my further chagrin, Dad moved his phone closer towards my nose as he cracked yet another one of his corny dad jokes. “Hey, Chilli Padi, do you know how pickles celebrate birthdays?”

I rolled my eyes to the ceiling and heaved a massive sigh. Then, pulling my best dour expression like I was really dead inside, I shook my head with the speed of a sloth and braced myself for what was to come.

“They relish the moment!” Dad guffawed. “Geddit, geddit?”

“Yes, Dad, I get it.” I smacked my palm to my forehead, and tried to stop Dad before he explained the punchline. “*Relish*.”

“Relish the moment?” Mom snorted as she reached to adjust his crooked bow tie. It was a handsome shade of lilac, almost as if good old Dad had made the effort to dress up for the occasion. “Oh Francis, that’s a good one.”

“Really?” I raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

Mom mirrored the action, arching an elegant brow as she turned to look at me in her pink-and-purple conical hat. “Do you *want* your dad to tell us another pickle joke?”

Seated on Mom’s lap, Danny clapped his chubby hands and laughed so hard that I could see all his missing teeth. “Pickles! Pickles!”

“Uhm, thanks, but no thanks,” I mumbled in a hurry before Dad went off again. I fought the urge to roll my eyes, still not believing how he’d managed to convince us to wear these silly party hats. “But puh-*lease*, may I blow out the candles now? Just look at all that gloopy wax starting to form on the top of my cake. Seriously, why couldn’t you guys just get me three candles like normal people?”

Twelve points of lights stared back at me, dancing above the frosted birthday cake with my name piped in flowing cursive. Mom and Dad had even managed to get the candles in my favourite colour.

I looked up at Dad and grimaced at a sudden thought. “Please tell me that these aren’t those annoying birthday candles that don’t blow out?”

Dad chuckled. “No, not this time. I promised you, remember?”

“All right, here you go, Chilli Padi,” Mom said as she handed me the plastic cutting knife. “Now don’t forget to make a wish.”

I watched the flickering flames for a moment. I’m not a big fan of cake and I’ve never quite understood the point of birthday wishes either. The very act of making wishes and sending them out to the universe also seemed so illogical and lame coming from my parents, who were respectable scientists with multiple PhDs between them. But Mom and Dad were looking at me—smiling, watching, waiting—so I decided to humour them, like how I usually just let Danny bellow the birthday song into my ear.

“Go on,” Dad urged, still recording. “Close your eyes.”

Hands clasped together, I squeezed my eyes shut and made a silent wish that one of the wrapped presents on the table in front of me was a shiny new iPhone I’d been begging my parents for since forever. Then, drawing in a deep breath till my lungs felt ready to burst, I leaned forward to blow out all my candles. Danny helped too.

As Mom busied herself with removing the dozen smoking candles so Dad could scrape away all that hardened purple wax, Danny somehow managed to wriggle out of her grasp. I watched in horror as he smashed his entire fist into a corner of my beautiful birthday cake, destroying it. Danny then turned to plant a sloppy wet kiss on the tip of my nose as he patted my cheek with his stubby outstretched fingers, now sticky with fresh chocolate cream frosting and raspberry jam.

But before I could yell at my annoying little brother, Dad’s rich baritone voice boomed across our dining table:

“Food fight!”

He promptly dotted Mom’s chin with a generous dollop of frosting before smearing some on Danny’s laughing face. Chaos ensued. Figuring that this would probably be the one and only time I could get away with something so bold, I grabbed a sizeable portion of my crumbly birthday cake and flung it into Dad’s face, making sure to smooch the mess in for good measure. With his nerdy round spectacles all smeared with jam and chocolate frosting, Dad couldn’t see. He retaliated by reaching out to tickle me in the ribs. It was a full-on food fight now and I was doubled over and howling in tears. That is, until I noticed that our curious family dog had padded over to join us, sniffing at some cake that was lying on the floor. “No, Albatross, no!” I managed to stop our Singapore Special in the nick of time, pushing away his snout before he could take a lick of chocolate.

*

We didn’t get to eat any cake that day. But what we did get was plenty of pictures. I was an absolute mess and looked it. Cake in my face, cake in my hair, cake in my...everywhere. But I didn’t care. I wore it proud, like battle scars and badges of war. It was glorious.

“Those were great times.” I grin, reliving my favourite memory. “Yeah it’s true, I mean it, even though I didn’t get an iPhone that day. But I was childish and immature and really didn’t know any better then. I’m so sorry I was such a troll.”

I raise my eyes from the picture on my phone—the epic

selfie Dad took of the four of us looking a frightful mess, birthday cake dripping down our laughing faces—to gaze at those same faces staring back at me from our family niche. Mom, Dad and Danny, forever ageless, their smiles frozen for all eternity. Running my fingers through my loose ponytail, I can’t believe it’s been a year since I woke up from my coma. But despite all the time that has passed, a part of me still can’t fully process the fact that they’re not here with me any more.

“It’s crazy how time flies. It’s the start of a brand new year and everyone’s still in a festive mood. My twentieth birthday’s also this weekend, which I should be excited about, but for me...it’s just another birthday without you guys.” I feel heaviness weighing on my heart as I reach out. Instead of the warmth of human skin, my fingertips touch cold, hard marble. I would give up everything in the world, even my own life, to be able to hug my family again. As I run the pads of my fingers across the full length of their names engraved in gold against the dark stone surface, I entertain the thought of Mom, Dad and Danny watching over me right now. I wonder what they’d say.

Danny would probably like to run through the aisles and corridors of this place, bugging me to no end because he’d want me to play his favourite game of catch or hide-and-seek. Dad would most likely try to mess up my hair as usual before cracking a joke about how much I’ve shot up in height, my head well above his broad, sloping shoulders by now. As for Mom, I’m sure she would be keen to hear all about how my exams went. Ever since I can recall, she always worried about me being way too focused on parkour instead of spending time on my studies.

“Hey Mom, remember what you told me a long time ago? That success in a future saturated with computers and artificial intelligence isn’t going to be about how well I can remember dates or facts or scientific formulae, how many languages I can speak, how well I can solve maths problems, or even how well I can play a game of chess...but education is important at the end of the day because it’s a necessary stage. Still, I gotta admit that it was weird sitting for my O-Levels so late, especially when all my classmates already went through it years ago. The results will come out soon, and I think I did pretty okay. You would have been proud of me.”

Shoving both hands into my pockets, I cough to clear my throat, which has suddenly turned dry and scratchy.

“And, uh, you guys know I’m all for education, but I haven’t quite decided yet if I plan to go for my A-Levels next or spend three years getting a diploma. It’s all pretty mind-boggling and I honestly think that it’s crazy having to chart my future right now. Seriously, why do they need to make us specialise so early? I mean, I don’t even know who I am yet as a person or where I’d eventually fit into society. Like, am I supposed to actually decide on my future career path based solely on the academic subjects I picked in school? What about passion and purpose? How about searching for excellence in life? Geez. I really wish you guys were here to guide me. Or at least tell me what you think. You’d know what to do. Right now, I’m just so confused.”

I sigh as I pull out my phone to check the time. We’re still good for another five minutes. The phone’s wallpaper, a hilarious selfie where I’m wearing a put-upon expression

with CK and Sunny pulling funny faces behind me, slowly fades to black. I put my phone away, but not before noticing a reminder that’s just popped up on my screen. I glance up at my father’s face and crack a smile.

“But I’m so grateful for Uncle Kayne. We’ve spent a lot of time talking about stuff over the last couple of months. I still haven’t entirely decided what I want, or what I think I even like...but he’s helped me do a bunch of research and even sent me the prospectuses of some universities in Australia that, I must admit, look pretty appealing. I guess it would be fun, going overseas to do a year of foundation studies before deciding what I want to eventually major in. I’m grateful for his advice and support, but I still wish you guys were here. There are just so many options in front of me, it’s all a bit overwhelming and scary. What if I screw up because of bad choices? Aunt Theresa was sweet about it as usual. She told me not to worry because, in time, things will get clearer. But even so, I can’t help but freak out. I mean, adulting is so hard, but you always made it seem like you both knew what you’re doing.”

I pick at the dry scab on my elbow from the last session I had with Jon at the MMA gym. It was a close fight, with my cousin winning the match after he managed to squirm out of my chokehold and get me in a painful ankle lock.

“The one thing that I do know for certain right now is that I’m *really* enjoying my work at Ace Investigators. Yeah, it’s that little PI agency which Uncle Glen started with CK after he left the police force, and then the two of them got me onboard as a partner before roping Sunny in. We’ve been pretty busy helping the CID solve cold cases over the past

few months and...well, it's kinda ironic, but even though I've got an obvious knack for solving mysteries, sadly I still can't solve...my own."

I chuckle ruefully and kick at a clump of dirt near my feet. There's no denying it. Deep down, I'm still vexed and frustrated that my own private investigations about who murdered my family in cold blood and landed me in hospital have pretty much gone nowhere.

"Anyway, I had to cancel my vacation plans to Australia because we were in the middle of closing a case. I'd expected Uncle Kayne to give me an earful because I pulled out at the last minute, but he was incredibly understanding about the whole thing. After listening to my explanation, he wasn't even mad or disappointed or anything. He even told me that I was being silly when I called to apologise and say that I felt I'd let him down. I know he had an epic holiday planned out for us, but instead, he reminded me to take it easy and then sent me a care package in the mail. There were so many things inside that huge wicker basket, even the delivery person had difficulty carrying it. Oh, and there was a big jar of Vegemite in there, Dad. I'm pretty sure you would have loved it."

A sudden draft blows in, messing up my long hair and sending goosebumps across my chilled skin. I pull out a stray leaf that got caught in my tangled fringe and realise it's actually a white petal from a withered chrysanthemum flower. For some reason, it reminds me of a painting I once helped Danny with for school: an image of Mom's crystal vase filled with blooming chrysanthemums in shades of white, yellow, orange, lavender and red. He was so proud

when his teacher pinned up our artwork. I drop the errant flower petal on the ground and watch the wind carry it away. Shoving my hands back into the pockets of my jeans, I hang my head low and sigh again.

"Okay, so now, the not-so-good news...it's Albatross. I'm afraid our dear old boy hasn't been doing too well. We've been using the prescribed eye drops for his cataracts but at yesterday's check-up, the vet told me that his eyesight has got a lot worse and he's almost blind. But I guess the saving grace is that at least Albatross hasn't lost his senses of smell and hearing. It's incredible how he knows it's me even before I open the front door. And the moment I step into the house, I realise just how warm the floor is from his lying there, waiting for me to come home. He's such a sweetheart. Despite his bad leg from that gunshot wound, Albatross is still the best bodyguard ever. Truly."

I pause, racking my brains for what else to update Mom, Dad and Danny on. But before I can share the exciting news about how NASA astronauts Jessica Meir and Christina Koch conducted the first ever all-female spacewalk outside the International Space Station just over two months ago, a big step forward for girl power, my sensitive nose picks up the fresh, earthy scent of petrichor, a sure sign that it's about to rain.

Lightning flashes and as a deafening crack of thunder booms overhead, I notice Luce standing next to me. Except it isn't actually the real Luce. I yelp and then catch myself, trying to ignore the figment of my imagination. Luce makes a sound of approval as she nods her sharp chin towards my family's columbarium niche. "It's so uncanny how much



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’s 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 has 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 final book in the bestselling YA mystery trilogy about a teenage savant on the trail of her family's killer, from the multitalented Ning Cai, international magic celebrity and author.

Since teen savant Maxine Schooling awoke from a coma to the news that her entire family had been murdered, she has lived the following year under the shadow of that unknown killer. Even as she aided criminal investigations in Singapore, and reconnected with a tight network of family and friends, she has never felt completely safe. Now the Man in the Mask has returned, and Max must rely on her courage, resourcefulness and eidetic memory to survive.

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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