

Fifteen-year-old Angel Morning Lee grew up in a children's home, never knowing her parents. Her only escape is performing tricks with an old magic set.

One day she is given a scholarship to an elite school for girls. There, she not only becomes close friends with Pammy, a strange schoolmate with a disturbing secret, but also has to fight the abuse of power all around her. She must find the courage to follow her own heart.

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*Written by a real-life magician (Ning) and a gifted storyteller (Don), this dystopian Young Adult novel will appeal to fans of the Hunger Games and Divergent series.*  
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#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

NING CAI is a world-acclaimed magic performer with four world magic records under her belt. As her stage alter-ego 'Magic Babe' Ning, the celebrity magician has showcased her unique brand of magic, illusions and escapology to an international audience and has been watched by millions on television. Ning is the author of three non-fiction books: *Adventures of 2 Girls*, *Who is Magic Babe Ning?* and *Game of Thoughts*.

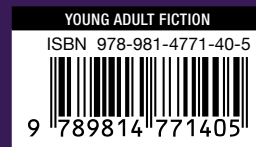
DON BOSCO is an award-winning writer and publisher. His stories are inspired by Asian legends and pop culture.

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Ning Cai & Don Bosco

Magicienne

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is having hope in the impossible.

Ning Cai & Don Bosco

For Review Only

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For Review Only

Dedicated to all who dare to imagine

## 1

One on the right. Two on the left.

When I was really young I stayed in a big and shadowy house with two old women and they always told me that I should never let the wicked win.

They said that even under the most hopeless conditions you should at least fight.

This is what I see in you. Not at first, but definitely after what happened.

That house where I used to live is gone now, torn down. Also the two old women are no longer around. They disappeared around my fifth birthday.

You know about this already because I told you.

When you're young you can just get by playing your own lonely games. But later you learn that life is supposed to be something really serious. That we're all connected. Right and wrong. The powerful and the weak. Truth and lies.

Secrets.

When I first came to Modern College, you were the only one I could talk to. Even though most of the time I couldn't find the words.

Sorry.

I hope that things work out for you. That you don't misunderstand me. That you never lose faith in us.

I told you some things, but not this. I was just four years old when they picked me up after my bath, the two old women who looked after me. They carried me downstairs to where they had their secret little room.

One held me down. The other pressed a cold and wet cloth against my face. I passed out. When I came to again that night, my shoulder was all wrapped up.

I had a fever. I was delirious. For three days. Then they unwrapped my shoulder. Imagine my reaction. There it was, that red butterfly tattoo.

You saw the messed up version. Remember your look? You were so shocked when you saw it for the first time, what's left of it, slightly faded and disfigured, in the changing room after swimming class.

I'm not a tattooed party girl. I'm the survivor of a dark childhood.

Also, I'm the one saved by you.

If you could see me now, you might think I'm your long lost twin. What your hair used to be, that's my hair now.

There's so much I never want to forget. Which is why I'm writing this.

At the rate that I'm going, we'll soon have enough here for a book. But I'll never let anyone else read this. Everything is for your eyes only.

That last time we were at the East River Woods, I think that was the first time I saw the real you.

The whole uproar, with the sirens and the fighting.

All hell breaking loose, that's what it felt like.

The man with the knife and you all tied up and me with no hope of defending myself. We were this close.

You need to know this. That guy you saw me with, long hair and denim vest and tattoos on his forearms, his name is Jared.

The truth is that I didn't completely trust him then. I just had to do what I had to do. You meet people in your life and they're here for a reason, only you don't always know it at the time.

He has a part in helping me get out of Modern College, only it's not what you think.

How all this changed my life is why I'm telling you this. Nothing stays the same. Life is the ultimate magician. It shows you one thing and then this changes into something else.

If you look at the world this way, life is one long string of magic tricks. It's all misdirection and some clever moves. It's all secrets and hiding stuff and turning the situation in your favour. It's don't kill yourself doing it.

Remember the Chinese Linking Rings trick I used to perform for you in your room?

I showed you three metal rings that weren't connected. You examined them closely just to be sure.



But then after the rings were rubbed together, after they were waved around in the air, you couldn't believe your eyes, because the next thing you knew, they were now linked. A solid chain. As if they had always been that way. How impossible.

Surprise.

The thing to remember is what you see is not what it is.

I remember our first time, you tried to pull the rings apart, you tried until your face turned red, I remember you were grunting so loud that I laughed, but no matter what you did, you just couldn't. You gave up and you needed to know how it was done.

It took me a long time to tell you the truth. It took you almost dying.

I remember your look that night in the house, deep in the forest, when I was fighting for my life and Jared showed up with the gun and I turned around and saw you looking at me.

In that moment I sensed that everything had changed.

Now I know what you said is true. The Confederates. They have a part in everything. They are quietly waiting. Always working their evil. You know it. You've seen it with your father. And now I have too.

Never let the wicked win. Not without a fight.

How you brush your hair is how I do mine now.

The way you scratch so hard at your elbow until the skin breaks and it scabs over and still you pick at that until the hard skin falls off and what's underneath is bloody again, I remember it so well.

I still have that photo of us. You look just like the first time I saw you, on my first day at the College. The interview. Before you told me about the murder.

I wish I could stick to performing the simple party tricks that you enjoyed. I wish I could just wave my hands and make bad people disappear.

I wish.

The secret of magic, the thing that it's about, is having hope in the impossible.

Out of nothing, something appears.

Something disappears.

Something changes into something else.

Something is broken, torn up, crushed beyond repair, and then in a flash made good as new again.

Something is moved, something or someone, from one place to another, in a way that defies the laws of physics, the rules of reality.

Magic is you're stuck in danger and it looks like you don't stand a chance, but then you get out.

Magic is you predict that something impossible will happen, and it actually does, and it feels like a miracle.

This world is a land of illusions. Smoke and mirrors. False evidence appearing real.

Our senses are easily fooled. But never the heart.

Magic is what happened to us. You and me. Magic is what makes us who we are. Why I write this.

Let's go back to before Jared.

Back to how I learnt to play the game that eventually exposed Lawrie and got him locked away.

Eleven years ago, when I was five.

## 2

Imagine me at five years old. I am Angel of the Morning, and the awful smelly end of Two Hills is my whole world.

I live in a house at the end of South Street, and have always been here as far back as I can remember. We have few neighbours. Very few. If I have to guess why, I'd say it's the sick smell that comes in from the old factories on the other side of the slope. All day and most of the night. In fact it's worse at night. They have poor workers running the machines while the rest of the world sleeps. Or try to. It could be toxic. Maybe it's slowly killing us or making us sick. But not yet.

What doesn't kill you makes you wonder.

If you want to imagine our house, think of a soggy cardboard box with a roof. The walls outside are a dirty shade of grey. From the paint and also how the dirt and dust have built up over the however many years before I came along.

Inside, it's mostly shadows and stuffy corners and old books. Lots of old books. I'm too young to read them properly and I'm always disappointed that there aren't more pictures. Hardly any at all. Lots of numbers, though. I

wonder what these books are about. What secrets they hide. What mysteries they teach. What stories they tell.

Also, imagine lots of locked cupboards everywhere. There's plenty of stuff inside there but I don't know what. Sometimes I will rattle the locks just to see if I can open them like that. Never any luck. No one is careless here. Locking up is a virtue. There are only three cupboards around the house that aren't locked, and I get bored with them.

It is like a strange kingdom. If you want to imagine our house, think of a cave where a never ending stream of spiders and rats and big bugs wander around. Think of how every other evening we go out to the back yard and burn a stack of paper, all covered with handwriting, and we stand around until every last scrap is totally burnt up.

I am five and they are maybe sixty or older. I have no way of knowing. They say they are my aunts, and I believe them, I have no reason not to, not yet. Not ever.

If you want to imagine what they look like, think two women, the same height, both with short hair, both always clearing their throats, the same wrinkled skin. They wear old dresses, very often grey and brown and dark blue, that seem to come from another place, another time, another world. It makes them blend into the dark walls of the house. As if they're playing hide and seek.

They never tell me their names. I'm too young to know any better but still I sense, in my childish way, that there's something unfair about that.

They have too many secrets but I have none.  
Not yet.

## 3

They say they are my aunts, and what we call one another might as well have been some sort of secret agent code. Number One, Number Two, Angel of the Morning.

Number One has a big face and her eyes are quick and fierce, like an owl I once saw in a nature documentary. She has thick lips. Imagine her mouth turning downwards, even when you think she's laughing. She's always good to the strays that come in through the hole at the back of our garden fence. She speaks to them tenderly like she's talking to her own children. As compared to when she speaks to me, she's mostly solemn. She spends a lot of time writing in her books. Writing, writing, writing. I peep into her books, sometimes as she's working, but I can't figure out a thing. I'm too young but I already know that the writing is somehow very important.

If you try to imagine Number Two, she has small eyes and small dark spots on her cheeks, both sides. Imagine false teeth and a big mole on her left cheek. She likes spicy chicken wings. She loves to cook. She makes bread and soup. She doesn't write much, not as much as Number

One. She talks to herself as she goes about. Mumble, mumble, mumble. She does most of the cleaning in the house, and she's the one who takes care of me when I am ill. Sometimes she will sing to me. I remember that her hands are always cold. Her grip is tight. Close to painful. I never get used to that. She lets me help her in the garden. We work in the sun, weeding and watering and planting. I like this.

My mother, they say, had named me after a song that she really liked, *Angel of the Morning*, and that's the story why it says in my birth certificate that my real name is Angel Morning Lee.

Number Two will sometimes hum bits of that song when she looks at me. The song that gave me my name.

My mother's name was Angel too. That's all they tell me. They won't say what happened to her, or how I ended up staying with them. I'm too young to really want to know. They show me a ring with "Angel" engraved on the inside. When I am older they will let me have it.

There is a game that we play at meal time. The three of us. I will never forget these moments. Imagine me standing at the dining table, the two of them behind me, and I point first to my right, and then to my left.

"Number One on the right, Number Two on the left," I chant with them, like I'm saying a nursery rhyme.

Right after I say this, Number One is supposed to walk over and sit in the chair on my right, and Number Two the chair on the left. "Well done," they will say. "Good Angel!"



It is a bizarre game. Don't tell anyone.

Sometimes they will be playful and try to confuse me. They will swap places. I have to stay alert and catch them before they sit down. "Number One on the right! Number Two on the left!" Imagine me squealing loudly in protest. Imagine me chasing them around the dining table, around the small kitchen, and dragging them to their proper seats. They don't laugh much but it amuses them. We play this every day, at every meal. And we always have to play it three times. After a while it's the most natural thing to do.

I should be in school, or some place like that, that's the law and has been for many years, but they don't send me and I don't know any better. There aren't many children living in this corner of Two Hills. I don't really know what children of my age are expected to do. We are in a world of our own. We play our own games. We keep our own secrets.

They have two rooms at the back of the house that are full of books, and this is where they teach me. Sometimes. Mostly Number One. I learn to recognise letters and some words. I write a little, draw, paint, cut paper, fold paper and sing. Also, there is an old piano in the hallway, the keys are shaky and some even buzz, but it is enough for Number Two to teach me how to pick out simple melodies. I don't know what the song titles are but sometimes I still hear them in my head.

I think they are rather clever. Like, I am too young to know any better, but they appear to know a lot about the

secrets of the world and how things really work. At bedtime they tell me stories. I notice that the characters too often seem to end up dead or in pain or running away from something terrible. I wonder if this is how all stories are supposed to be. I am too young to expect otherwise.

They like riddles. Brain teasers. Puzzles. Imagine them bent over their little books, lost in thought, humming their song. Working on their secret stuff.

The thing they always remind me, never let the wicked win.

## 4

Sometimes we go for walks around the neighbourhood, but never too far, only halfway across Two Hills Park, mostly so Number One can look out for strays that are hungry or need attending to. We always avoid the neighbours.

When I am five years old, I start to get curious about the other people who live around us. Some of them have houses that are bigger than ours. Many of these house are much nicer. They have gardens that look like strange little playgrounds, full of unfamiliar flowers and pretty pots and a shiny new swing or a small slide.

Sometimes when we are at Two Hills Park, I will see families who look and behave so differently from us that they might as well have come from another planet. I often wonder why. Their clothes always look new and fresh. I see them driving in and out of the carpark in their family cars. Their kids look eager and hopeful. Imagine them bouncing in the back seats, impatient to get somewhere. I am too young to know better but I feel like they're some other species of human. All of them. I feel like an alien. An intruder. Like I'm spying on them.

Up until I am five years old, I can't remember ever being in a car before. Number One and Number Two seldom take me out of the house and when they do we walk.

Aside from that time when they take me to the basement so they can put the tattoo on my shoulder, and the "Number One on the right, Number Two on the left" game we play at meals, and the fact that I don't ever get to spend time with the other kids, which I suspect has something to do with the tattoo on my shoulder, you can say I have a sort of normal life.

We don't get many visitors but when I am five years old, one afternoon on a Saturday, a man comes to the house.

Imagine me playing in the small patch of ground in front. Unlike our neighbours' gardens, ours is a bit more like a wasteland. There are so many patches where the grass refuses to grow. And always, you can't ever forget it, there is the smell in the air, coming in from the factories. Our house is closest to the back road, which leads to the factories, so maybe the smell is killing our garden.

This afternoon, I'm looking for a snail that I had noticed the day before when I was helping Number Two with the gardening. It seemed far too dark and shiny and gnarly for its kind, and that's fascinating to me. I am hoping to find a matching pair, so I can maybe play my game with them. Snail Number One on the right, Snail Number Two on the left.

The man drives up to our front gate. He's in a black car. It's bigger than most of the cars I have seen, and the windows are dark. It makes an unusual sound, different from all the other

cars around here. The sound is deeper. And there's a strange whirling too. Clack-clacky-rrr-clack. Rubber hitting metal. I'm squatting in the shade and the man doesn't see me. He stops to look up and down the street and then he reaches through the gate and unlatches it. Just like that, he lets himself in and walks up the front path. There's something about his thick suit and dark leather shoes that make me uncomfortable. Something about his shadow too. He doesn't belong here. He's frowning. I can sense that he can't wait to finish what he has to do and get away.

Number Two must have heard him fiddling with the gate. She hurries out and blocks his way. They speak. It's like an argument, but polite. She sounds like she wants him to turn around and go away. I have to know more. I run behind the side wall and peer out carefully.

## 5

I can't hear exactly what, but the man says something that shocks Number Two. She gasps. She stares at him for a bit. A blank look. Then she turns around and although she's unwilling, she leads him inside.

I am too young to really know but I can sense that something bad has happened. Or is about to. I feel it with so much certainty. Inside my small chest my heart is fluttering like a scared bird. I can't help thinking. Is this anything to do with me? I have to find out.

I run to the other end of the house, where the living room is. I can hear their voices even before I get there. Number One is angry. Number Two sounds suspicious. But the man's voice is the loudest. Impatient. I can't make out what he says. It sort of sounds like he is trying very hard to convince them of something.

I get closer to the window but still I can't hear what they are talking about. And then my foot kicks against a stone and sends it rolling across the stone path.

Number One must have heard it. She calls for me. I figure that she's coming to the window. I panic. I am filled with a

desperate impulse to not be discovered. But what can I do? I have to disappear. Turn invisible. Like a magician. I spin around but in my hurry I trip over my foot and fall.

The next moment, Number One is at the window.

“Angel?” she says loudly. “Angel!”

I want to cry out, show her that I’m sorry for eavesdropping like this, but there is a look on her face, such a look that I suddenly know I can’t afford to make a sound.

She stares at me and she sees me but she acts as if she doesn’t.

“Angel, where is that girl?” she says. She frowns at me, like she would do when she’s annoyed about something I did, but this time her eyes are different. She is solemn. And perhaps scared too. I know that I am too young to understand all the feelings that are playing on her face.

“She’s not here,” Number One says quickly. She turns around and goes back. “Funny, I thought I heard her. She must be with the neighbours!”

I feel a strange lightness in my body. She saw me, clear as day, but then with those words that she said, she turned me invisible. The moment is so weird, it feels like a new reality has opened up in my head and sucked me into another world.

## 6

There is more talking inside the room. All I can catch are mumbles. Then it gets furious. The man's voice gets louder and louder. I think I hear him say, "Time is of the essence!" And he says it again. A moment later I hear them get up. Chairs scraping against the floor. Hurriedly. The man is leaving. Number One and Number Two follow him.

I have to stay invisible. That much I can sense, from the look on Number One's face. There is danger around and I must avoid it.

Before anyone can see me, I scramble to the back of the house. There is a cupboard there, made of some dark wood, just outside the gardening room. There are only three cupboards around the house that aren't locked, and this is one of them. I open it quickly, my small hands trembling, choking on my breath, trying not to cough as I squeeze inside among the old broom handles and spades and rakes, so many of them. I pull the door shut and hold on to the thin ledge across the middle on the inside, so that it won't swing open. The smell of the damp wood and garden dirt overwhelm me, make me dizzy. They smell like a lot of



other things around the house, like the air that blows down from the factories.

I hear the front door slam shut. Then the gate creaking as it is hurriedly pushed open and then shut again. In between there is a brief pause, enough time for three people to pass through.

I have no idea what I'm doing. Or what I'm supposed to do. My heart is still pounding. My mouth is dry. My fingers shake. I am almost dizzy. In the dark space I can't see anything but I can taste my jitters like a rare flavour of ice cream. It is thrilling to disappear like that. For just a while. But then I get terrified. How long can I play this game? I start to feel silly. And now it seems shameful. Wrong. I want to get back to that other world, the one I was in before, where Number One could see me. I wish she had scolded me for listening in like that. I wish she had called out to me. Being invisible seemed like a good trick for a while but I don't want to be invisible anymore.

I hear a car drive away. Clacky-rrr-clack. I'm surprised to realise that I recognise the sound. It is the man's black car. It isn't headed towards the Park. It's driving across to Second Avenue. Number One and Number Two have never taken me in that direction before.

Now I don't want to be alone anymore. I can't bear it. It's suffocating in here. What if my heart stops beating? I burst out of my hiding place and run out, down the path, out the gate, as fast as I can, after the car.

Stop, wait, I'm sorry! I want to shout all those things but my voice gets stuck in my throat.

I think I catch a glimpse of the car heading down the far end of the street and then it disappears around the corner.

Imagine me standing here, outside, all alone, stunned.  
Ashamed.

# 7

I go back into the house and wait. And wait.

I walk through every room just to make sure that I am indeed alone here. Once, I glance at the main bookshelf in the study and realise that four or five books are missing from the top shelf. Black notebooks with a heavy leather binding. They've always been there before. I'm certain.

I'm surprised they're gone, but then it's not important anymore. I'm too young to know any better.

They have never left me at home on my own before. Never. I don't know how late it gets but it turns dark and darker outside. I don't cry but that is when it hits me that they won't be back.

But of course I'm scared. Will the man return for me? I'm all alone. I won't be able to fight him. I need to leave the house and get help but I don't dare. For a long time I hold my pee in. If I punish myself, maybe I can change what I did. How childish but I am too young to know any better.

I remember Number One's last words. "She must be with the neighbours." That's what she said. Was that a secret message for me? It must be. So I wrestle with the gate and

after I manage to open it I walk to the nearest house, push open their front gate and just walk up to the door. I nudge it open and go in. There's a woman there ironing her clothes. I wonder if I am still invisible, if she can see me. I feel exhausted. Maybe being invisible does that to you.

But she looks at me in surprise, and also with a frown which lets me know that she does recognise me. All I can do is stand there and look back at her. I don't feel like I need to explain what happened. I've always been taught to avoid our neighbours. But I can't play by the old rules anymore. I've been sucked into another world. I was invisible and now I'm alone.

Number One and Number Two, that is the last time I ever see them.

I had only caught a glimpse of the man's face, but the shape of it stays with me. Also, the sound of his voice. And the sound of his car's engine. I feel like his shadow is hanging over me. Maybe one day he'll come searching for me. When I think about this, I shut my eyes tight and sing to myself, so that the thought goes away. What I sing is, "Number One on the right, Number Two on the left." When you're so young, anything you learn stays with you in a deep way.

The woman, my neighbour, calls the police. They send social services to get me. I'm brought to the St Agnes Home, which is an hour's bus ride away, at the far side of Two Hills, overlooking the East River on one side and the Border Forest on another. It is an awful night. I can't sleep. I hear strange voices in the air around me.

## *about the authors*

NING CAI, a nominee of the Singapore Literature Prize 2016, is an author of three non-fiction books. A champion of female empowerment, she serves on the committee of the Singapore Council of Women's Organization (SCWO)'s Women's Register. As her stage alter-ego 'Magic Babe' Ning, the celebrity magician has showcased her unique brand of magic, illusions and escapology to an international audience and has been watched by millions.

DON BOSCO is an award-winning writer and publisher. His stories are inspired by Asian legends and pop culture. He started the publishing studio Super Cool Books in 2011. He is a co-organiser for StoryCode Singapore, which promotes transmedia storytelling across multiple platforms. He used to write magazine features, TV scripts and film treatments.