

CHAPTER ONE

Mean Claudine

There are two kinds of magic. One happens by chance. For example, your cooking-challenged mom makes an amazing chicken adobo by accidentally dumping the right ingredients in a pot. Or maybe you find yourself having car trouble and a stranger just walks up to help you. Totally random, everyday miracles.

But there's also the kind of magic you intentionally make happen. The kind that some people find hard to believe—it's magic that *can't* be real, but it actually is.

Ever since my parents and I moved to Isla Pag-Ibig from Marikina City in Metro Manila, I've seen more of the intentional magic than the random one.

Because my grandfather, my lolo Sebyo, can do the intentional kind—and so can I.

Well, sort of.

Lolo Sebyo is an arbularyo, a faith healer. He heals

people with prayer, herbal oils, and massage. Sometimes, even with magic—real magic.

I'm Lolo Sebyo's apprentice. And part of being an arbularyo-in-training is running errands for Lolo like buying herbs and groceries from the wet market.

Woof!

My dog, Kidlat, runs to the river before I can stop him. He's like a brown-and-white cannonball splashing into the water by the side of the road.

"Oh, come on!" I groan. I'm tempted to join him. It's a Friday afternoon, and the sun is out—a much-needed break from the usual early-September rains. But the stuff I bought is heavy and I know I should bring it right home. "Lolo's waiting for us. We don't have time for this."

Kidlat stops splashing about. He looks at me with his big brown eyes. I imagine him saying, "You know you want to, Jolina!"

"Okay, you win," I say with a sigh, securing my shopping bag behind a giant rock. I hoist my shorts up and join my dog in the water. Kidlat's begging is totally manipulative. Yet I still fall for it. Every. Single. Time. "Let's go swimming. But just for a bit."

The water is cold on my skin and so clear I can see my toes. Above, the afternoon sun peeks through a canopy of leaves and branches. The rays touch the water's surface, making little specks that look like tiny, dancing fairies of light.

I have to admit Kidlat's right. Taking a dip is a great idea. "You're such a smart boy!"

Kidlat swims beside me. His nose is warm as it nudges my thigh.

"You like this?" I scratch Kidlat on the two brown spots behind his ears. I love him so much. We wouldn't have been able to afford to get a dog of his breed—he's a Jack Russell terrier with a fancy pedigree. But our kind neighbor in Marikina City gave him to me as a gift when I was five.

I'm twelve now, and Kidlat and I are still the best of friends. Our best friendship will last till the end of time.

Kidlat floats on his back in my arms and closes his eyes. I giggle. "Silly dog."

Mom said there used to be more water flowing through this shallow river. It was so deep, she couldn't walk on the bed the way I'm doing now. But things change.

Like my life. I never expected my family to move away from Marikina City. I close my eyes like Kidlat does. Marikina is an old city. It has a river too, but no way you'd want to swim in it. Mom said someone once had the idea of using janitor fish to clean the dirty water. That plan backfired—the river is not only still dirty, it's also full of janitor fish now.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't little *Joh-lai-nah* Bagayan."

Ugh. Not *her* again.

So much for a nice afternoon swim.

Claudine Dimasalang sits on a giant rock on the riverbank. She's brown but lighter than me and has the high-bridged nose and deep-set eyes I wish I had. Her wavy black hair has bright pink, blue, and purple highlights.

And she *knows* my first name is Jolina. As in, *Job-lee-na* with a long *e*. We've been attending the same Bible study group since my family moved here three months ago. She's also been making my life miserable since then.

"You not supposed to take a bath there, *little girl*," she says in this bossy voice that grates in my ears. Listening to Claudine is like hearing fingernails scratch a blackboard. It's irritating *and* painful.

She loves to bring up my height, but it's not like Claudine herself is that tall. Sure, I'm a bit on the short side—my homeroom teacher in Marikina always put me up front during the flag ceremony. And admittedly, Claudine is a head taller than me. But calling me a little girl is too much of a stretch, especially when I'm five months older than she is.

"I don't see a sign saying I can't swim here." My jaw clenches. *I mustn't get angry*. It's hard to do whenever Claudine's around. I muster a smile that makes me look like I just swallowed sinamak vinegar. "Other people swim here."

Claudine raises her eyebrows, her lips curved into a smirk.

Okay. I *think* people swim here. I was so sure they

did. But now that Claudine's here, I can't be certain anymore.

I just hate how easily Claudine makes me doubt myself.

"Do you see anyone else here aside from you and your dog?" she sneers, flipping her hair over her shoulder. Claudine's always messing with her hair.

"But no one says I can't." I'm not letting her get the best of me. "In Marikina, we have signs for things we're not supposed to do."

Claudine's sneer turns into a scowl. "You're far from Manila now. You can't bring your disgusting habits here and force them on everyone else."

What is wrong with this girl? "I'm not forcing my habits on anybody—"

"I saw your mother at the resort today."

I grit my teeth but say nothing.

Claudine's family owns the biggest luxury resort in Isla Pag-Ibig—the very same resort where my mother works.

Don't say anything. Don't do anything.

I take a deep breath, then exhale slowly like Mom taught me. She practices a lot of calming exercises. And I really, *really* need to be calm right now.

"Your mother would be so horrified to hear what you've been doing," she says coyly. "What if I tell *my* mother to tell *your* mother—"

"You wouldn't." Well, I hope she wouldn't.

I'm still not sure what I'm doing wrong, but Mom is

a trainee. She doesn't have the privileges of a regular employee yet. Like, they can fire her anytime. And I don't want to give Claudine's mom any reason to.

I have a bad feeling Claudine knows that too.

Claudine flips her hair again. "How would you know?"

I ball my fists. It's getting really, really hard for me not to lash out.

Claudine looks pointedly at my hands. "What are you going to do, use your magic wand on me?"

Ugh! I hate being powerful and so powerless at the same time. I have magic, but I can't use it on this mean girl. It's one of Lolo's rules: *Never use magic to hurt others. We heal people. We don't harm them.*

Besides, I don't have a magic wand. My family's magic doesn't work that way.

"Come on, good boy," I tell Kidlat, looping my arm around his tummy as I wade away from Claudine.

But she's obviously not done with me yet.

"You only have magic because of your family," she spits. "If it were up to me, I wouldn't give it to an untalented nobody like you."

Ouch.

Okay, so . . . I'm not very good at magic. I don't even know why my lolo keeps trying to teach me. Granted, I only started magic lessons a few months ago when we moved here. But every single potion I've tried to brew has so far been nothing but a big glop of failure.