

## Chapter One Finding Roots

To begin with, there had been just one small secret, but as is the way with such things, that secret grew up, got married and started having babies. Before she knew it, Lulu Baker had lots of secrets, and the only person she allowed herself to share them was Frenchy. She had been in on the whole magic recipe book business right from the start, including this new development; the growing of ingredients in Lulu's own back garden. Frenchy had seen the note Lulu had received from Cassandra, her mentor and supplier of magical ingredients, on midsummer night:

**Dear Lulu**

**Congratulations! You have successfully carried out three recipes ... Your success has been due to the conviction you have demonstrated, and the talent you have shown in nurturing your plants. Therefore you qualify to move up to the next grade of responsibility, which is to build your own private store of ingredients - if you wish to do so. I very much hope you will, and enclose these seeds as a gesture of my faith in you. Please plant them, and we will speak again very soon, if you want to continue.**

**Love,**

**Cassandra**

Excited, Lulu had planted those seeds - for something called the Creeping Crillow - the very next day. However she found lately that Dad had been asking rather too many questions about her unusual plants. But she could hardly blame him; they really were *very* unusual...

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Lulu pressed the latest batch of seeds into the moist ground, covered them with earth and patted it down. A fine rain filled the garden with the musty dead-leaf smell of autumn. Lulu liked this smell; with it

would come the spiced-wine smell of Halloween parties, and the toffee apple and burnt-out firework smell of Guy Fawkes Night.

The tinkle of wind chimes mingled with soft, whispering voices. Ignoring the voices, Lulu sat back on her heels and wiped her hands on her gardening trousers. 'There! That's the last planting of the season,' she told Frenchy.

'What kind of plant is it?' asked Frenchy, eagerly.

'It's a Zizyphus Shrub,' said Lulu. 'Like that one over there.' She nodded towards a small bush with ripe red fruits. 'The fruit's really yummy - but don't taste one, it'll make you zonk out. It goes into something called the Sandman Smoothie; sends you to sleep instantly. I always make sure I have it at bedtime!'

There were those whispering voices again.

Hearing them, Frenchy peered in the direction they were coming from and frowned. The voices stopped. Frenchy shrugged and gazed around. 'Place looks amazing, Lu,' she remarked, casting her eye over the vivid jungle Lulu had created. So which one's the Creeping Crillow, then?'

'That one over there,' said Lulu pointing to a rather unremarkable plant with feathery leaves and little blue flowers.

'That's it?' said Frenchy. 'It looks so...ordinary.'

'Just wait till you see it in action!' said Lulu. The Creeping Crillow got its name because it was so averse to direct sunlight, it would actually cross the garden to avoid it. Lulu peered up at the pale grey sky. 'Mind you, it's kind of dull right now, so don't know if it'll do anything.' As she spoke, the whispering voices grew louder. Lulu turned around to face the small tree with pretty drooping branches that stood behind her. 'Sshh!' she hissed, and the tree immediately fell silent.

Frenchy giggled. 'I take it that's the Idzumo tree!'

Lulu rolled her eyes, but couldn't help grinning slightly. 'Yeah, that's right. Honestly, it starts muttering away whenever you're talking near it, like it's trying to join in the conversation. There it goes again! - *shush*, will you!' Lulu linked arms with Frenchy and guided her to the other side of the garden. She had learnt of this chattering tree the first

time she had met Cassandra; Idzumo honey had been a vital ingredient in the Truth Cookies Lulu had made, which compelled the eater to tell the truth about everything. The idea of a talking tree was just too irresistible to Lulu, and after some persuasion Cassandra had finally agreed to let her have a young sapling.

'Well, Cassandra did warn you it could be annoying,' Frenchy reminded her.

'Yeah, I know. I just really wanted it!' Lulu admitted. 'Hey, check this one out,' she added, leading Frenchy over to a low, spreading plant with large white trumpet-like flowers. At the base of each flower grew little squash that resembled yellow cucumbers. Sushi, the neighbour's cat, wandered close to the plant and sniffed. All of a sudden, the plant squirted a clear fluid from the centre of its flower, right into the cat's face. *Meeeeeaaow!* screeched Sushi, as she dashed back over the fence to the tranquil calm of her own garden.

Lulu giggled. 'Now you know why it's called the Squirting Squash.'

'Oh, that's the one you used in-'

'The Upside-Down Cake, that's right,' said Lulu. 'Brilliant, eh?' The juice from the Squirting Squash - a challenge to collect - had been a prime ingredient in this cake, which had become a regular favourite of Lulu's. The Upside-Down Cake was for lightening the mood of excessively serious people, and Lulu had found it worked wonders on some of the teachers at school. Lessons had never been so much fun.

'Ah, there you are Noodle,' said Lulu's dad as he emerged from the back door. 'Hi Frenchy.'

'Oh! Uh, hello,' said Frenchy, a little taken aback at first. Although Lulu had told her about her dad's new hairstyle, it was the first time she'd seen it. He *did* look very different.

Lulu's dad smiled and ran his fingers through his hair. 'How are your mum and dad?' he asked.

'Oh, brilliant, thank you!' said Frenchy.

'You have a nice holiday?'

Frenchy looked flushed with happiness. 'Yes, thanks. It was...lovely to go together.' That had been Lulu's big success with the Cupid Cakes - bringing Frenchy's parents, Jack and Jill, back together.

'I'm sure,' said Lulu's dad. Lulu couldn't help noticing a wistful look in his eye; it was now nine years since Mum had died. Lulu had been so little, she had no memory of holidays with the three of them; all she had were the pictures.

Dad gazed skywards. 'Ah, brightening up at last, I see!'

Lulu hadn't noticed, but indeed a patch of blue had appeared, pouring the early October sun's rays directly on the Creeping Crillow. She and Frenchy exchanged nervous glances; Dad had yet to witness the Crillow mid-creep. In fact he hadn't even noticed that this modest looking plant appeared in different flower beds at various times of the day.

Lulu's dad smoothed his hair back again. 'Well, give your parents my best, won't you?' he told Frenchy on his way back indoors. 'We must get together soon.'

'I will, thank you,' said Frenchy.

Immediately Dad's back was turned, Lulu and Frenchy swivelled in unison, eyeing the Creeping Crillow in anticipation. Sure enough, the sun had begun to bother it, so it pulled its chunky, stout-legged roots out of the ground and began to stroll over to the shady side of the garden. It did so without making the slightest sound, yet Dad suddenly turned back.

'Oh by the way, I was going to make some-' He stopped abruptly and stared. The three of them stood, marvelling at the plant as it walked over to a nice shady spot and silently slid its roots back into the soft ground. It wiggled its bottom as it lowered itself into place, then spread out its stems contentedly. Lulu couldn't help letting out a nervous giggle, and this set Frenchy off too.

Dad rubbed his eyes. 'Did that really just happen?'

'Um...' said Lulu, before bursting into laughter again.

Dad cleared his throat. 'Look, Lulu, you know I told you about that college friend of mine who became a botanist-'

'No, Dad, *please*, ' insisted Lulu, tugging on his sleeve. She paused; mustn't sound too desperate, she thought. But if Dad's botanist friend were told about her plants, then the next thing she knew, everything about her magical recipe book, *The Apple Star*, and what Lulu had done with the Truth Cookies and the Cupid Cakes would be out in the open. 'It's just that - well...' she trailed off, unable to come up with a plausible excuse.

'Oh, don't be so silly Noodle! It's just fascinating, that's all. What harm could possibly-'

'Ahem,' interrupted Frenchy, adjusting her glasses. 'Lulu, I guess we'll have to let your dad in on our little secret.'

Lulu gaped at her in disbelief. Surely she wouldn't!

'See, the thing is,' said Frenchy to Lulu's dad, 'you know how *my mum* is really into growing veggies and stuff?' She glanced briefly at Lulu as she said the words 'my mum', to quell her alarm.

'Yes?'

'Well...how do I put this? Some of the species she grows are imported and, well, she brought them over herself, you see. Which, uh, isn't strictly legal. When Lulu got into the gardening thing too, Mum let her have some seeds and cuttings. So we really would rather you didn't, you know, tell anyone. If that's OK...?'

Good old Frenchy, thought Lulu, heaving a sigh of relief. What a clever idea; Frenchy was a quick thinker.

Dad frowned and shook his head.

'*Please*, Dad?' said Lulu, still clinging to his arm and treating him to the most soulful doe-eyed look she could muster. 'We don't want to get Jill into trouble, do we?'

Dad ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. 'Look, it's not that I want to get anyone into trouble, it's just... for heaven's sake, a plant just walked across my garden!'

'Sshh!' hissed Lulu. 'You want the neighbours to hear?'

*Sssh! Pss haha wissy babble gradilibam!* went the Idzumo Tree.

Dad sighed heavily and shook his head again. 'Oh, good grief!' he said. 'I'm going for a walk...' He turned and headed off through the side gate.