

TIMBALAYA[®]
where dreams live

chapter one

Timbalaya

:from the Lishic timban, meaning root, and from the Fjordish laya, meaning rich, full, abundant.

Make your wishes to the tree, and make them with all your heart, and one day you will know their fruit - The Fifth Great Pa of Timbalaya

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The Day Before

Luni Flit was the kind of person who kept herself busy when something exciting was going to happen the next day.

Today, she was busy busy busy. She was doing any and every job she could think of. She took a sheet of rusty sugar paper from The Draw and sanded down the splintery part of the shutter over the kitchen window. She patched a hole in her overalls. She took a stick from outside and poked around in the chimney and finally dislodged the sticky bun that Chee the wombat had thrown up there months ago during some game they'd been playing.

Now, Luni was putting the finishing touches to her decorations. She'd been making them for months and months,

keeping them on the kitchen table so they had to be moved whenever it was mealtime, which was very often at Number Four, Wishing Lane.

“Do you think you’ve done enough to them p’r’aps Lune?” said Chee as he hopped up onto the stool beside her.

“No-o,” said Luni. She was sewing another feather onto her headdress, which now looked like the backend of a peacock. The feathers were all different sizes and colors; they’d gathered them from along the hedgerows of the fruit patch where they fell from birds who were finished with them. She pu-u-u-llled the needle out from the headdress again until it tugged, and then snuck the needle back into the feathers...

“Okay!” said Chee. “Time for lunch Flit-face.” And he fetched the stack of three plates from the shelf and plonked them down on the table, trapping one or two of the feathers as he did it. Luni giggled.

“I’m too excited, Chee” she said. “This time tomorrow we’ll be...”

“I know, I know, I know!” said Chee, who’d been hearing about the Water Day, we’re-going-to-get-our-keys business for *months*.

As Chee put knives and forks and spoons out, Luni looked out of the kitchen window and there stood the Wishing Tree, as it always stood. It was humble and magnificent at the same time. It was as brown as any other tree, but when the light shone in

a certain way, it glowed and shimmered in all the colors that existed in Timbalaya. Its trunk was a history of knots, holes, and woven Wishing ropes. And where the tree met the ground, it bloomed into beautiful roots that swam like beasts through the little moat-lake that surrounded the tree.

All the little houses and huts of Wishing were built towards it. Even the tree houses had their best windows facing the Wishing Tree. All the tracks and roads and wiggly paths seemed to lead to it, too. How quiet and calm it was in the distance. Its branches swayed gently against the blue Timbalaya sky and if you listened very closely, you could hear its whispery wonderful sound. The sound of thousands upon thousands of Wishes.

Luni couldn't believe that tomorrow, when Water Day came, she would finally be old enough to receive her key to the Tree. *What would wishing feel like?* she wondered.

Luni turned the little dial of her locket as she thought. The locket was Luni's most precious object. In fact, she had worn it for as long as she could remember. It was about the size of a two pence piece and it sat between her collar bones, and whenever she ran or leapt, the locket tap-tapped, and Luni was so often running or doing some quick thing or other, that the locket always seemed to be tap-tapping against her collar bones. You could rarely get Luni close enough or still enough to get a proper look at it. But if you did get a proper look at it, you would see that Luni's locket was made of fine brittlewood

and was an absolute miniature of a Buzz-Bird's nest. Instead of opening like a clam like most lockets, Luni's bird nest locket opened from the middle like a flower – you had to twist a little dial at the side, and, slowly, slowly, the twigs and edges of the nest untangled themselves and revealed in their centre a tiny precious egg.

She'd never told anybody, but sometimes Luni wished on her locket just as if it was a key to the Wishing Tree. And she couldn't help feeling that it was lucky somehow.

“Little lucky egg,” she said quietly, turning the locket's dial again and revealing the tiny, never-hatching gem.

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Meanwhile, Sparrow Flit, Luni's twin brother, was out trying to catch lily pads for their Day Before Water Day lunch. The valleys of Timbalaya are full of networks of lakes and streams, puddles and wells and because of this there's always a slight smell of fresh clean water, as if always someone has just drawn a bath. And the sound of it is quite something too. There is always the sound of water, bubbling somewhere, floating somewhere else.

I know what you're thinking; lily pads surely don't take much catching. But Timbalaya lily pads are some of the sneakiest creatures around, always spinning too fast for you to see them or whizzing off through the water just as they're about to be

caught. In fact, Sparrow Flit is one of the only people I know who's fast and scrappy enough to catch them.

"Come... to... SPARROW," Sparrow lunged over the bank again into the cool water - clap-splashed his hands around a clump of lily pads - touched his toe to the smooth stony bed of the stream - and came up whale-heavy out at the surface and clambered up the bank again. He inspected his hands which were still bunched into fists but the lily pads had escaped him.

"Stupid LILIES," he said, sighed... and leapt once again into the stream. SPLAGASH!

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Chee put the spoons in their places carefully for lunch and Luni stopped gazing at the Wishing Tree to help. She shook a tray of knobbly buns into a big bowl and carried it with both arms wrapped around it - her locket jiggling over her collar bones - to the table, where she plonked it. A few stray feathers drifted into the air and down again.

Chee humped himself onto his stool and hot-potatoed a knobbly bun from the top of the heap, blowing quickly - HOO HOO HOO - on it before taking a bite. Chee was always hungry. One of his worst flaws, as he confessed himself, was that he was never patient enough to wait for anything to cool down or to set or to ripen.

But although he was the *only* wombat in Wishing Village, he knew from rumors of the general habits and tastes of

wombats, in *general*, that this was a common struggle. It was expected of him, as a wombat, to be impatient around deliciousness. And he had learned to accept it.

Chee had been adopted by the Flits when he was a tiny wombat, just a prickly lump in a bucket, left on the little patch of grass beside the Wishing Village sign. Luni and Sparrow Flit, the twins, had grown up with Chee. They couldn't remember life without him; nor did they want to. Luni laughed as the poor wombat swallowed the knobbly bun almost whole and dove his paw into the bowl for another.

Then suddenly there came a flopping sound, as if a piece of wet laundry was trying to escape from a laundry basket. A moment later, the creaky-crooked door of Number Four creaked open and there stood Sparrow, covered head to toe with stream water and lily pads.

"I caught some," he said quietly and flopped over to the table, taking his place on his favorite stool closest to the stove. He continued to drip for the rest of lunch, but the lily pads were delicious wrapped around the knobbly buns, and Luni and Chee were ever so grateful when they'd stopped laughing.

And that was pretty much how The Day Before the Water Day proceeded at Number Four, Wishing Lane. Sparrow's tough locks of sandy-colored hair dried even tougher and lockier than they'd been before. Luni finished her headdress and had enough feathers left over to make a little something for

Sparrow to wear too. Chee ate and ate, and had a little snack, and then looked forward to supper.

And the Wishing Tree whispered and blew like it had no idea what day it was.

The gang went to bed as early as it possibly could because the sooner they slept, the sooner they'd wake up and it wouldn't just be any old day anymore, it would be Water Day. The Actual One and Only Water Day. The one when Luni and Sparrow would finally come of age and get to make their wishes to the tree. So Luni climbed into her little bed, which was tucked on the window ledge, and Sparrow climbed up the little ladder to his top bunk and Chee shuffled into the bottom bunk and the lights went down over Wishing Valley. They watched the Wishing Tree from their windows, swaying, collecting the moonlight. And eventually, after much thinking and turning, everybody slept.