

THE UNEXPECTED PARENT: JAMIE BROOKE

Wilbert the Wombat headed out for his evening walk. The sun had long set, but the ground still felt warm under his leathery paws. He breathed in the warm air and the smell of Christmas pudding baking in the distance. Wilbert smiled to himself, picturing the family of sugar gliders that lived in the big fig tree above his burrow. His neighbours were always quick to get in the festive spirit. It was only November, and already he spotted their tiny Christmas lights circling their home in the tree hollow. They'd invited him over last year for a festive feast, only to discover their serving size was a bit too small for his liking. He remembered going home later that evening, tipsy off of honey milk and Australian whiskey, and eating a whole plate of buttered carrots and baked potatoes to curb his hunger.

As Wilbert walked, he waved at his neighbours in Fig Tree. The mob of kangaroos watching a boxing match in the meadow, the parade of echidnas sniffing the ground for their favourite ant treats. But his smile faded as he found himself alone along a lone path near the gurgling creek. It had been a long time since Wilbert had celebrated Christmas Day with anyone else. He often pretended he was okay with it, but the truth was that he missed his friends, who he knew gathered with their families to celebrate. Unfortunately, Wilbert didn't have family nearby.

As he neared the row of mailboxes for Fig Tree, his mouth dropped open as he spotted a barn owl dropping a small letter into his faded red box. Of course, it wasn't strange for owls to drop off letters here. But it was very strange to see him dropping one into Wilbert's! So he picked up speed, called out a thank you to the owl as it flew away, and then hurriedly grabbed the letter.

Mr Wilbert
1 Fig Tree Lane
Fig Tree New South Wales
4321

The letter really was for him! He hastily slid one long claw along the back of the letter to open it, then carefully pulled out the single sheet of paper.

Dear Wilbert,

Long time no see! Missing you from Tasmania and hoping you're doing well. I finally have some time off work for the holiday season, and I thought I'd come to visit you in Fig Tree. Could you accommodate a visitor from December 21 - 26? I'd love to see you, mate. Write back soon.

*Sincerely, your cousin,
Wally*

Wilbert's heart beat a little faster. He quickly stashed the letter in his pocket and hurried back home. After all, he had a letter to write and an invitation to accept. It was shaping up to be a beautiful Christmas, after all.