

Chapter 1

Cruciverbalist: crossword puzzle designer

“What’s wrong?” I glanced at my aunt, the brightest woman I knew and the person who’d given me a new lease on life at the Cookbook Nook when my career at an advertising agency wasn’t putting a smile on my face.

“Nothing,” she murmured.

“Liar.” I couldn’t read tea leaves, but I could read her.

“*Pfft*,” she said dismissively.

“Talk to me,” I said. She was the closest thing I had to a mother. Mine had passed away a number of years ago.

“I’m fine.”

She and I were sitting at a table in our modest café sipping tea. The tables were set with white linens and vases of flowers. The view of the ocean through the windows was spectacular—not a cloud in the sky. The garlicky aroma of the prix fixe entrée shrimp risotto graced the air. The place was brimming with satisfied customers who were listening intently to the guest speaker, Wesley Preston. At the same time, the waitstaff was either refilling beverage requests, clearing tables of plates, or delivering a delicious array of petit fours.

“Is it the chatter or the clatter?” I asked.

“I might be twice your age, young lady, but my hearing is A-OK.”

“I wasn’t implying—”

“*Shh*.” She smoothed the lap of her silver Moroccan caftan and returned her attention to

Wesley. When not running our culinary bookshop, she liked to do tarot card and palm readings and believed she should dress exotically for her customers.

“Is it Wesley?” I asked, tucking my chin-length hair behind my ears.

“No.”

Wesley wasn't a handsome man, but he wasn't un-handsome, either. Though his face was narrow and his retro round wire-rimmed glasses were reminiscent of John Lennon's specs, he had a winsome, toothy smile, and his posture was impeccable—probably because he was vertically challenged, and the more erect he stood, the taller he appeared. His ensemble of pinstripe suit with a pen-and-pencil set poking from the handkerchief pocket made him look scholarly. His salt-and-pepper mustache added to the image.

“He's very cocky.” When Wesley had introduced himself as a crossword designer extraordinaire, he'd seemed smug. My aunt didn't like people who were full of themselves.

“With good reason. Stop pestering me.”

Wesley motioned to the blackboard that I'd wheeled in for today's chat. Seven strips of colored paper were taped to the board in even horizontal lines. “If I might draw your focus to the front of the room . . .”

“Is it the crowd gathering in the parking lot that's got you flummoxed?” I asked.

The attendees for the seminar had paid an admittance fee. Outside the restaurant, sunlight highlighted the growing throng of Wesley's fans waiting for him to emerge so he could autograph their crossword puzzle books.

She didn't respond.

“I can't believe the two of you haven't seen each other in nearly twenty years,” I whispered. Earlier in the day my aunt had told me their history. They'd met in grade school and had gone to

high school and college together. Over the years, they'd lost touch. "Especially since you're a cruciverbalist yourself," I added, loving how the word *cruciverbalist*—from *cruci*, meaning cross, and *verbalist*, meaning wordsmith—rolled off my tongue.

"Amateur," she murmured. "I'm an amateur cruciverbalist."

"Why haven't you reached out to him until now?"

"Because."

Wesley was in town to serve as emcee for Crystal Cove's popular Crossword Puzzle Tournament, held annually between Halloween and Thanksgiving at the Center, a convention-sized site located on the grounds of the community college. On Friday and Saturday, fifty solvers would participate in the competition. The fifty would be winnowed down to twenty-five based on their solving success, and on Sunday those twenty-five would vie for the trophy and a cash prize of twenty thousand dollars. Also on Sunday, the twenty-five finalists would have a chance to prove their mettle as cruciverbalists by creating an original puzzle, based on a given theme, to be announced that day. One of the would-be constructors could win a ten-thousand-dollar prize my aunt was putting up for the most imaginative puzzle. He or she would also score the chance to have that puzzle published in the *San Francisco Gazette*. Tomorrow night, Intime, my husband's French restaurant—how I enjoyed calling Rhett my husband; we'd married in June and had been living in wedded bliss ever since—would host a cocktail reception for the tournament participants and their guests.

For additional puzzling fun, Wesley had created daily puzzles that the puzzlers, audience, and us regular folk could try to solve starting tomorrow, Wednesday, and running through Saturday. Eight restaurants in town would be offering freebie appetizers or sweet treats—two establishments a day—to whomever solved the puzzles without erasures. The Nook Café and Latte Luck were on

board for tomorrow. Brick's Barbecue and Taste of Heaven would host Thursday. Shredding and Mum's the Word would take Friday, and California Catch and Pelican Brief Saturday. All the shops in town, including ours, had copies of the puzzles, sorted by days, to hand out to participants.

This year's tournament theme was food, which was right up my alley. Not to create a foodie puzzle—I had no lofty dreams of becoming a puzzle constructor—but I couldn't wait to try my hand at deciphering the daily clues. For the event, I'd stocked a variety of crossword puzzle books as well as crossword solver's dictionaries at the shop. I was eager to return to see how they were selling.

"If you must know," my aunt began, "I meant to reach out to Wesley over the years, but I never mustered the courage."

"Why would you need courage?"

"The last time I saw him, I told him to get a life."

"Ooh. Why? What did he do?"

Aunt Vera didn't answer because she'd become transfixed with something across the room.

I followed her gaze and saw Noam Dixon, another of her grade school buddies, sitting at a table by himself. He'd come into the Cookbook Nook earlier, tripping over the carpet as he'd made his entrance.

At first glance, Noam, with his swoop of gray hair covering one eye, the knot of his paisley tie loosened, and the ruffled state of his plaid shirt, reminded me of an absentminded professor. Now, he was twisting and turning the top of his ballpoint pen repeatedly. The movement must have been making a sound because the woman to his right was giving him an annoyed look.

"C'mon, Aunt Vera, something else is bugging you," I said. "Spill. Is it Noam?"

"It's nothing." She toyed with her napkin and set it aside, turning her distracted attention to the

single daisy in the petite vase. She ran her finger along the petals. “A memory best forgotten.”

A memory? What memory? Why couldn't she confide in me?

My aunt patted my hand. “Quiet now.”

“As any cruciverbalist knows,” Wesley continued, his chest swelling with pride, “there are basic tips to creating a crossword puzzle. Number one . . .”

Everyone in the café was on tenterhooks, hoping to pick up a clue as to how he or she could come up with this year's winning puzzle. Wesley, my aunt, and our mayor would be the judges.

“First, think of the theme.” Wesley removed the topmost strip of paper from the blackboard to reveal the advice he'd uttered.

A puzzle theme for foodies could be anything, my aunt had told me. Types of food, types of cooking styles, movies or books featuring food, and more.

“Write a long list of words”—Wesley peeled away another strip of paper to reveal his advice—“but then that's obvious, isn't it?” He amused himself so much that his mustache twitched with pleasure. “Remember to include words of varied length,” he continued. “No two-letter words, of course, but you'll need plenty of three-letter words. They are the basic connectors for your longer answers.” He rattled off a list. “Ale, are, era, eta, one, ore. The list is extensive.”

“I remember the two of us going over a list of three-letter words in sixth grade,” my aunt said to me. “How we delighted in coming up with clues for each. *One*, the last digit in a countdown. *One*, a digit in binary code. *One*, no longer divided. *One*, wedded.” Her eyes glittered with enthusiasm. “Wesley eventually published a book of three-letter words.”

“Were you two ever an item?” I asked.

“Heavens, no.”

“Truth?”

Her cheeks tinged red. “Wesley was in love with another girl, Elyse. He had been since sixth grade. I didn’t stand a chance. They became engaged in high school, and they married in their sophomore year of college, but it didn’t last. They divorced a year later.”

“Did you try to win his heart then?”

“Nope.” She clucked her tongue. “By then, I’d fallen for another guy.”

“The guy who left you at the altar?”

“No, not him. Way before him.”

After the altar fiasco, she’d marched through life solo until she fell for Deputy Marlon Appleby.

“Did Wesley remarry?” I asked.

“Hush now.” She patted my arm. “I want to listen.”

While we’d been chatting, Wesley had removed two more strips from the blackboard. “Make sure you link words together in the center so they become one long word. They’re the anchors for your puzzle. Next, create clues. Don’t make them too verbose. Here’s a clue for the answer *Rudy*. A man’s name that rhymes with *foodie*.”

The audience chuckled politely.

“If you need help coming up with possibilities, remember that the Internet is your best friend. On it, you’ll find loads of word-themed sites.” Wesley uncovered his final tip. “Do you want to write a museum-themed puzzle? You’ll find a healthy list of related words online like *halls*, *art*, and *diorama*. How about animals? *Four-footed*, *hooved*, and *fauna*. History-themed? *Ancient*, *medieval*, and *illustrious past*.”

Someone in the crowd *oohed*.

Wesley hoisted a finger. “Lastly, remember to get your facts right. For example, who wrote

‘The pen is mightier than the sword’?’

A few hands rose.

“If you think William Shakespeare, you’re wrong,” he said.

Hands dropped. A few in the audience looked perplexed.

Wesley smirked. “Edward Bulwer-Lytton created the metonymic adage in 1839.”

“Who?” the woman Noam had irritated chirped.

“He’s the author who wrote the play *Richelieu; Or the Conspiracy*, and believed the written word was far more effective than violence for getting a point across.”

“What’s a metonymic adage?” a man in a bow tie asked.

“Ah, the better question is what is a metonym?” Wesley grinned. “It is a figure of speech in which a thing or concept is referred to by the name of the said thing or concept. The Pentagon is a perfect model of a metonym, referring to the U.S. military and its leadership, as well as to the building itself.”

My aunt leaned into me. “He does like to flaunt his cleverness.”

I detected a trace of bitterness in her tone and elbowed her. “C’mon, now, you’ve forgiven him for falling for someone else, haven’t you?”

“Most definitely.” She pulled a face. “Had we ended up together, we would have torn each other to shreds.”