



Exploding with loud, rock 'n' roll attitude, eleven-year-old Jack Fineman dreams of becoming the greatest pastry chef who ever lived. But his plans are thrown off course when his butterscotch basil brownies are upstaged at his sixth-grade holiday party. The winner? A simple plate of chocolate rugelach baked by Jillian Mermelstein—the new girl at school whose mother has recently died, and who only wants to be left alone.

These two budding bakers' lives are mixed together when they're selected to compete as teammates in a nationally televised baking competition. For Jack, this is a chance to advance one step closer to culinary greatness. For Jillian, it's an opportunity to help her father by earning her share of the \$150,000 top prize. As they prepare to face bakers from the city's other middle schools, Jack and Jillian realize their biggest challenge will be to find the perfect recipe . . . for working together.

Dig into this delicious tale of rivalry, friendship, heartache, and dessert!

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The  
\$150,000  
Rugelach

by  
Allison & Wayne  
Marks



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## Chapter 1

Jillian Mermelstein stared at the long wooden spoon lying next to the empty mixing bowl. It had been months since she had thought about this scarred brown utensil, usually hidden in the kitchen junk drawer underneath a pizza take-out menu. She ran her index finger over its curved top, where a small triangle of wood was missing like a chipped tooth.

She closed her eyes and gripped the handle hard, hoping it would magically make her feel joyful and inspired, like it once did. Instead, the spoon felt cold and dead—a stick of tiger maple with a chunk missing, a reminder that her life would always be slightly broken, forever incomplete.

Jillian placed the old spoon back in the drawer. She wouldn't need it today.

Clutching a flathead screwdriver and a bundle of wires, Grandma Rita strolled into the room as Jillian closed the

drawer. “I’ve been working on that busted garage door opener all morning,” she said, unbuckling her tool belt and placing it on a chair. “Seems to be a faulty sensor. Oooh, is that a mixing bowl I see? Is somebody thinking about doing some baking?”

To anyone who knew her, Grandma Rita was the most loving person on the planet. Her bright smile and kind eyes could light a million candles. Sometimes she wore pink highlights in her graying hair “just because.” She was the best kind of crazy.

Grandma Rita picked a flier off the refrigerator. “Say, you still have to take something to your sixth-grade winter party, right? It says here, *bring cookies, brownies, or other baked goods*. What’ll it be?”

Suddenly the only thing Jillian wanted was to run to her room and escape within the pages of the thickest book she could find. Reading was how she spent most of her evenings and all of her weekends. It was the perfect way to avoid conversations like this one.

*No reason to change my routine tonight, especially for a stupid class party.*

“Come on, Jilly. It’ll be fun,” Grandma Rita said, doing her best to sound cheerful for her granddaughter’s sake. “Let’s fill the house with the smell of fresh almond cookies.”

Jillian crossed her arms. Her jet-black ponytail swayed as she shook her head. She gazed down at her tennis shoes, unwilling to look her grandmother in the eye. Her skin was

unusually pale, not like last year when her summer tan lasted all through the winter. She just didn’t feel much like going outside anymore, not even to hike on wooded trails or pick wild blackberries.

“No. I don’t want to.”

Grandma Rita persisted. “How about we make chocolate rugelach instead? I bet your friends at school would love that.”

Jillian frowned. Since moving with her father to Ardmore, Ohio, from Seattle in September, she hadn’t made any friends at Sieberling School. She didn’t want any. And she certainly didn’t want to spend an afternoon making chocolate rugelach, or almond cookies, or anything for *anyone*. Watching her classmates wolf down their lunches, never pausing to actually taste the food, made her doubt that they would appreciate her rugelach—a traditional Jewish pastry filled with a spiral of chocolate tucked between layers of flaky dough.

“I can’t. Too much homework.”

“Then I’ll just have to make the rugelach myself.” Grandma Rita went to the cupboard and began gathering ingredients, none of which had any business being in a rugelach recipe.

*Argh! Soy sauce? Not soy sauce, Grandma!*

Jillian laughed to herself. As a part-time math professor, Grandma Rita had an amazing way of simplifying the story problems in Jillian’s homework. She could replace a leaky

faucet, install an electrical socket, change the oil in her roadster, and run the annual Ardmore Thanksgiving Day 10K in under an hour and five minutes.

But no matter how much Grandma Rita tried, baking was not part of her skill set. Her pound cake weighed a ton. Her sugar cookies were too salty and her salted caramel cupcakes were too sweet. Once, smoke from a blueberry pie left in the oven too long brought a prompt visit from the Ardmore Fire Department. Jillian feared that her grandmother's solo attempt at rugelach might have even worse results.

"Yes, siree, gonna make the world's best chocolate rugelach for Jilly's class," Grandma Rita said, whistling as she picked up a cheese grater and glanced at Jillian out of the corner of her eye. "Sorry you don't want to help, but, hey, I'll do just fine . . . all . . . by . . . myself."

Jillian thought about the wooden spoon, which used to feel so warm. So comforting. It had belonged to her mother—Grandma Rita's daughter, Joan. Mom had taught Jillian how to bake in the kitchen of Joan of Hearts, the pastry shop she had owned in Seattle. Her mother had shown her the secrets of making rugelach: letting the butter soften, not overmixing the ingredients, properly chilling the dough, turning each bite-size morsel golden brown, and knowing the precise instant to pull it from the oven.

Now her mother was gone.

Jillian picked up the spoon and recalled her mother's words at the end of her first baking lesson.

*Don't forget to add the most important ingredient of all. Love. Trust me, without it, your rugelach won't taste nearly as sweet. Nothing will.*

"Fine, Grandma, I'll help you," Jillian sighed.

"Wonderful! I'll put on Vivaldi. Your mother always listened to classical music when she baked."

"Yes, I remember."

"So, my dearest pâtissier, where do we begin?"

"First, put away the cheese grater and soy sauce. We won't need them."

"Of course, I knew that," Grandma Rita said, winking.