

The background of the cover features stylized, light gray leaf illustrations in the corners. The leaves are elongated and pointed, with some showing serrated edges, resembling cannabis leaves. They are arranged in a way that frames the central text.

Rubi Ramos's Recipe for Success

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WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK



Chapter 1

The *Ban on Baking* didn't crumble in one chomp. Instead, it ended with a thousand little bites.

The first one came that morning, when I leaned into the kitchen counter and chewed through the bolillo's crusty shell. The soft middle made me sigh. Licking the Nutella-coated crumbs from the corners of my lips, I dropped my gaze to the oven.

If hazelnut tasted this good slathered inside a bolillo, how would it taste between flaky croissant layers? Or blended with the sugar paste topping a concha? The moka pot brewing Cuban coffee gave a high-pitched whistle. A warning I'd tread into dangerous territory.

"Rubi, el café," my mother called from the laundry room.

"On it," I yelled back through the last mouthful of bread. I turned the stove off. The blue flames vanished, the baking ideas didn't. They never did.

I craned my neck toward the hallway. Still clear.

Darting across the kitchen, I grabbed a binder from the messenger bag slung on the back of the chair and pulled the pencil from the middle of my curls, wrangled high into a topknot.

Hazelnut croissants, I jotted in the margins of the Law and Debate binder. *And hazelnut conchas*.

Underneath the word *concha*, I drew a lopsided circle, striped its insides like the seashell the Hispanic sweet bread was named after. The dark and hurried scribbles gleamed against the rest of the blank, white page, daring me to keep going.

So I did.

The tip of the pencil scratched against paper as I drew a multiplication sign over the *and*. I added an equal sign after *concha*.

"Croncha," I said, writing in big, bold letters.

I didn't know if I could replace the concha's regular sweet bread with buttery layers of croissant dough. But I could almost taste the combination. The notion of a new pastry excited me more than spring break.

Then my parents' voices drifted in from the hallway.

The words Dad spoke were thick and exaggerated, like wooden spikes he drove through his Spanish to make sure his Cuban accent never went away. My mother's was more like the pictures I've seen of Havana's oldest buildings, falling away bit by bit. Crumbly, unlike the rest of her.

Striding down the hallway, my mother's pin-straight hair bounced down her back like a shiny, black cape only Darth Vader could envy more than I did. No matter how short he cropped them, Dad's salt-and-pepper curls still managed to boing and frizz. Exactly like mine did whenever I let them loose.

My mother made a beeline for the coffee. Dad started in the direction of the sliced bolillos. Only he was so focused on the kitchen table that he nearly slammed into the edge of the island. I followed his line of sight all the way to the baking notes dripping down the margins of my wide-open binder.

My stomach flipped. I almost snapped the lid on the contraband. But something about the way the corners of his lips curved

into a smile made my fingers itch with the urge to hold it up for him to see. His eyes roved down the page. I swore he was salivating—and it had nothing to do with the warm bolillo he grabbed.

Mid-bite, he nearly choked though. Probably remembering who stood right next to him. Just as my mother turned to see what the commotion was, he pointed the bread at her.

I slammed the binder closed. Even if creating recipes wasn't technically breaking the Ban, baking-adjacent activities were still no bueno. I shoved it into my messenger bag. The croncha scurried into my heart, squeezed into chambers overcrowded with the rest of my in-the-margins recipes.

"The mail," said my mother, reminding me of the Recipe that mattered most.

- One acceptance letter from Alma University.
- Fold in pre-law major until smooth.
- Sprinkle in a dash of Ivy League law school.
- Set, and watch me rise.

They'd crafted it for me the moment I was born. Never asked me about adjusting any of the ingredients. Ironical, yes. But I also couldn't deny the Recipe was foolproof. If followed to a T, it'd yield my future success. My mother downed another cup of Cuban rocket fuel. "Did you check the mailbox yet? Is the mail here?"

The kitchen air felt suddenly thick. "I'll go check it now." Grateful for the chance to escape it, I breezed through the sparsely decorated living room, and out the front door.

Morning sun stirred awake, lighting up the hills and the already gridlocked freeways of OC. The ocean stretching beyond it glittered. I squinted. The faintest edges of Catalina Island came into view.

The sight made me wistful for something I couldn't place. Probably a spring break on the beach with Devon. Not freezing inside the auditorium with Madeline and the rest of the Law and Debate team. Swallowing hard, I walked down the driveway to the mailbox.

Our postman, Samuel, approached ours. He shuffled through a stack of mail. Paused at something thick. Chunky enough to be Alma U's acceptance package.

My heart pounded, spurring my feet to do the same. I sprinted forward, arms outstretched. Ready to finally receive the key ingredient in our Recipe for Success.

"Whoa, Rubi. Nothing from Alma today."

Soles of my flip-flops squeaked to a halt. Heart did too. "Nada? You sure?"

He shook his head. "Only these."

The pile of mail thudding between my palms masked a huge sigh. As if it wasn't totally weird I sometimes (lots of times) stalked the mailbox, he asked, "Same time tomorrow?"

Not trusting my voice to hide my disappointment, I nodded. Whoever said patience was a virtue obviously never applied to colleges before. Never mind living inside the pressure cooker of making sure their Big, Shiny Future stayed on track.

I riffled through some bills, *USA Today's* Best College Rankings—and ooh—the latest issue of *Baker's Dozen*.

I flipped through Dad's magazine, fully intent on borrowing it to read at study period, like always.

Then my breath hitched.

The announcement written across the page jolted me like a defibrillator. Every recipe housed inside my chest pounded. Stilled heart fluttered to life again.

Orange County's First Annual Bake-Off: Four challenges. Two acclaimed judges. One prize of a lifetime.

Dough you have what it takes to be OC's best amateur baker?

I glanced up the driveway to the front door, ready for my mother to burst free and catch me red-handed. I pulled the phone from the back pocket of my uniform khakis. Opening the message thread with Devon, I snapped a picture of the ad, added a few question marks, and hit send.

"Dough you have what it takes?" I whispered to myself, nearly dropping both the magazine and my phone when it started buzzing in my palm. The phone was only halfway up to my ear when Devon's voice trilled, "Rubi, you have to try out for this! You *dough* have what it takes to get in!"

My mouth twitched into a smile. Just like Devon showed me every single one of her fashion sketches, I showed her every new baking idea. Except while Devon was actually allowed to make her creations, the Ban put a wrench in baking any of mine.

Was baking like riding a bike? With Devon squealing in my ear, I very badly wanted to find out.

Then again, the whole point of my parents working so hard in the bakeries was so I didn't have to. Not to mention the last time I tried riding a bike, it didn't go well.

"Oh, come on, Rubes! I can feel you smiling," she sang-shouted.

"No, I'm not." Only damn it, I was. "But let's say if I hypothetically got in, you know my mother would actually kill me if I competed."

"Only if she knew about it," she said, egging me on.

Luckily, there was enough good daughter left in me to try to fight the fire Devon was fanning. "But I'd know about it."

"We're seventeen! Hiding things from our parents is in our DNA. It's our teenage duty, or something."

There were lots of other teenage duties I hadn't partaken in. Like despite knowing the tongue was the main organ in the gustatory system, I'd never actually used it to kiss anyone. Never

spent a full day at the beach even though I lived pretty close to one. Considering my DNA was so different from most teenagers living in Pelican Point, my duty was to make sure my parents' sacrifices amounted to something.

Like making damn sure I got into Alma.

"Don't you think I should at least wait until I get accepted into Alma before trying to get into Bake-Off?" I snuck another peek up the driveway.

"It's not your fault Alma still uses snail mail. Your acceptance package is probably on its way as we speak."

I glared at the mail tucked underneath my armpit. "It's not."

"It will be. In the meantime, just do this thing, Rubes. Today's the last day to submit an application."

I looked down at the magazine again, wide open in the palm of my hand. Arguments against at least trying out began to drain away. Maybe my mother sensed it because the front door creaked open. "Dev, I got to go. The Boss is coming."

"Fine, but if you don't sign up before second period, I'll force you to do it then."

I ripped the ad from the magazine, and shoved it and my phone into my back pocket right before my mother popped through the front door. "Honorio, hurry up." Her shoes clicked forward. I tucked the magazine under my armpit between the other mail.

"Nothing yet?" she asked when she reached me.

I shook my head.

Her forehead wrinkled and her face darkened with disappointment. "Entonces what are those?"

"Oh these?" I held them up like they were nothing substantial. "College rankings. Bills." *Act natural*. "Oh, and one of Dad's magazines too."

He walked from the house then with my messenger bag over

his shoulder, a thermos in one hand and a bolillo in the other. He kicked the door closed and rushed down the driveway to meet us.

My mother snatched the baking magazine from my hand, swatting him with it. "How many times do I have to keep telling you these should really go straight to the bakery, Honorio?"

He pulled her in for a hug. "Until it gets through my thick skull." He winked at me. She didn't see me return the gesture because her eyes closed as she hugged him back. Probably relishing in the sound of her favorite nickname or the warmth of the parental PDA.

When they finally peeled apart, she honed in on the other magazine. Plucked it from my hands. I wanted to tell her she didn't still have to keep subscribing to it. But I couldn't. Not when she pressed the magazine to her chest and smiled like it was Christmas morning.

Finding out Alma never dipped below the top ten, and that I was almost in, was undoubtedly her idea of the best gift ever.

As if she wanted to give me a little present of my own, she grabbed the bolillo from Dad and handed it to me. "Now eat up. You won't be able to learn anything on an empty stomach. Get moving or you'll be late. Same goes for you too, Honorio." And with that, she walked to her car and drove off.

"Gotta love the Boss," Dad said. He took a sip from his thermos. At least she'd left him with some sustenance.

"Want your bolillo back? I already had one."

"You keep it. I'll eat at the bakery." He slung the bag over my shoulder then patted it.

"Oh, and Dad? Thanks for the save back there."

"No worries, kiddo." He brought his face down to my ear and lowered his voice as if letting me in on a secret. "Since you have a half day today, are you coming in later? After your shift, you can tell me what the croncha is all about."

A chance to riff baking ideas again? “Of course!” When it came to Alma ushering in the next episode of our family’s future, my parents were always on the same page. As far as the Ban though . . . While my mother would never even entertain the idea of me breaking it, Dad sometimes looked the other way for a slight bend or two. “I’ll head over right after debate practice.”

I looked to the magazine in his hand, then touched my back pocket. He smiled super wide, as if knowing Bake-Off’s ad was hidden inside it.

“Okay, kiddo, let’s get moving before we get in trouble.”

That’s the trouble with bending. It was impossible to know how far to go before you broke.



Chapter 2

School went by in a blur. I studied Bake-Off's site between classes. During classes. Jotting down notes about each challenge instead of following along with the lectures.

Ideas for Bake-Off Challenges:

1. *Chewy or crispy for the Cookie Try-Out Round?*
2. *Should I put my own spin on a bread or a cake recipe for the Signature Bake Challenge?*
3. *Omigawd. A Mystery Challenge. All bakers will have to bake the same recipe—except the details of said recipe will be announced upon arrival. Yikes (but also yay)!*
4. *Last. But. Not. Least. The Jaw-Dropper Challenge . . . what jaw-dropping feast for the eyes and taste buds could I make for this one?*

Thinking about all the delicious possibilities made my mouth water, filling it with a phantom sweetness. My stomach growled.

The last bell rung, masking most of the grumbles. AP English textbooks slammed shut. Classmates bolted from chairs

and spilled into hallways. I cut through the crowds, winding up the bricked and cobblestoned walkways paving every courtyard and corner. Temptation throbbed throughout my body. And inside was something deeper.

A longing to bring my unbaked recipes out of the margins.

"Rubi! Wait up." Devon's voice echoed through the campus. She shouldered through the throng of plaid Catholic school uniforms. Torie, already clad in her Immaculate Heart softball jersey, followed closely behind.

Devon nudged me in the ribs. "So, did you do it yet?"

"Not yet." We shared a conspiratorial smile.

"You hear that, Torie? Everyone knows 'not yet' is an inch away from 'yes.'"

"I mean there are only *four* challenges." How time-consuming could they possibly be? I pulled the phone from my pocket and handed it to Devon. Torie leaned over to take a look.

"Wow. Celebrity judges? Do you know who they are yet?" she asked. "Any scoop on the Prize of a Lifetime?"

As if *Dough you have what it takes?* wasn't intriguing enough, now I was salivating for more info. I snatched the phone back and refreshed the site for the millionth time. "Nope. Nothing yet." I slipped it back into my pocket and quickened my steps, trying to outdistance my impatience.

The bottoms of my flip-flops slapped against the pathway. Devon's heels clicked and Torie's cleats scraped as they kept up with my mad dash to debate practice. Devon wiggled her eyebrows at me. "Do you need my kitchen to film the 'show us your baking skills' part of the application?"

Both the phone and the ad burned through my uniform. "I mean, I have a shift at the bakery later." I paused at the front of the auditorium doors. "I could film something there." Low-key,

of course. "My shifts don't technically violate the Ban . . ." Neither would applying to Bake-Off. Right?

Devon's smile went wide. "You don't have to convince us, Miss Master Debater."

"Yeah, Rubi. This isn't one of your matches."

At the mention of Law and Debate, I reflexively went into rebuttal mode. "Then again"—I glanced at the doors I was about to walk through—"the tournament is weeks away."

The smart thing to do was use all my free time to prep for it. "Not to mention the Trig midterm." Ugh, math. The one stain on my otherwise spotless GPA, and the barrier keeping me from the top 5 percent of my class. "I could try to raise my solid B to an A minus."

Devon and Torie sighed in exasperation, knowing full well without some miracle tutor, raising it wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

"Okay, fine." I leaned into Devon's honey-blond hair. Whispered the only argument meaty enough to keep me from applying to Bake-Off. "But what about the Recipe?"

Devon knew about my predetermined Recipe for Success. She knew mostly everything about my family's past and my future. A part of me wanted her to do a complete one-eighty and talk some sense into me.

Instead, she said, "Some recipes are begging to be tampered with."

I swallowed hard. "Not this one." Never this one. Plus, without Alma's acceptance letter in hand, I didn't even have the key ingredient yet to even attempt some tampering. And just like that, my priorities settled over me like a dusting of powdered sugar. "I'll see you two later."

"Rubi—"

I pushed through the doors so fast I got light-headed. Though I wasn't sure if that's all that made me dizzy.

Whenever it got close to debate tournament season, Sister Bernadette moved our practice sessions to the auditorium. Holding them here did add an extra layer of gravitas. The only downside was hauling all the theater pieces backstage and lugging our debate equipment onstage.

Teammates scraped tables and chairs into place. All the cardio should've counted as an extra period of PE.

Carolina dragged one of the podiums across the floorboards. I hurried to help her. "Sorry I wasn't here as early as usual to set up," I said. "I got caught up in a little mock-debate sesh outside." Technically, true.

"A captain's work is never done."

I cracked the teeniest smile, fingers tensing against the podium. Today, I'd spent zero minutes on *debate* debate. What was wrong with me?

Heart, do not answer that.

Except it did—pounding and pounding. "Let me go grab more chairs." I darted away so she—and the entire team—wouldn't hear it.

Pushing through the backstage curtains, I jumped back, barely avoiding a head-on collision with the murder-wasp-in-queen-bee's-clothing herself.

"Jeez, can't you ever watch where you're going?"

I reined in an eye roll. "Sorry, Madeline."

She dusted the front of her blazer even though I hadn't actually knocked into her. "Yeah, you should be."

Whether she wanted me to apologize for snagging the cap-

tain spot on the debate team, a seat in the FLOC, or my general existence, I couldn't tell.

Oh god. Her scowl was turning into a smirk.

Whatever crap she wanted to stir, I had no time for it. Sister Bernadette would be here any minute. I grabbed two chairs and moved toward the stage.

Madeline's heels stomped behind me. "I ran into your little friends outside."

"Uh-huh."

"I asked Devon about Parsons . . ." One look at Devon and most people would think she was a model instead of someone wanting to design clothes for them. "She said she got in three days ago."

"I know." A squeal flew from my lips and I whipped around, almost hitting her (again). "We celebrated by going to the Mix." Even Madeline nodded like it was the best food hall in OC. "Then we had a dozen chocolate-dipped strawberries for dessert—"

I almost let slip that I'd made them for her too, but I turned away. Set one chair at the end of the table.

Most of the team was here now. Shuffling through index cards, reading outlines, muttering arguments from behind the podiums.

"Victoria," Madeline continued, "or Torie, as she likes to call herself, is still deciding between UCLA and USC." Under the bright auditorium lights, her smile gleamed poison-apple red. "A total mood." Then her voice got syrupy. Chemically sweet, like cancer-inducing saccharine. "I haven't been able to decide between Harvard and Yale myself."

The humblebrag garnered a handful of head shakes. I walked to the other end of the table and set the last chair down. "Looks like the debate team has a Rory Gilmore on their hands," I mumbled, slinging my messenger bag over it.

Carolina glanced up from her index cards. “More like Azula Barbie.”

I bit the sides of my mouth to keep from laughing. All laughter evaporated when Madeline plopped herself into my chair. “Uh, hello? I was going to sit there.”

Madeline said nothing. Proceeded to adjust the silk hairband crowning hair so blonde it shone silver, and settled into the chair as if it were her throne.

A throne a long line of ancestors had warmed for her before passing on the birthright. Ha! As if birthrights were the only paths to thrones. Hadn’t she ever heard of wars and rebellions?

Save it for the stage, Sister Bernadette’s voice boomed in my head.

Considering she’d storm in here any minute—fine.

I grabbed my bag and stomped to the other end of the table. Took out my Law and Debate binder. Nothing like reviewing affirmative and negative resolutions of paying college athletes to cool down.

Except my glaze bypassed the arguments and zeroed in on the croncha brainstorm instead. I turned the page, but the outline of it bled through to the other side. Daring me to craft another shell-inspired pastry . . . Ooh, like a madeleine.

Traditionally these little sponge cakes were made from ground almonds. I snuck a peek at Madeline and my handwriting exploded. What about swapping almond flour with semi-ground Cap’n Crunch? Because these treats definitely would shred the roof of one’s mouth.

“As I was saying.” Madeline reached into her python-skin Hermès briefcase and pulled out her iPad. She tapped on something and began scrolling. “Junko chose MIT. Stacey, Brown.” She mumbled some of the other FLOC members’ names, rattling off Ivy after Ivy. “This morning Ella settled on Juilliard.”

Underneath Cap'n Crunch, I wrote: *shards of glass could work too*. "What's your point, Madeline?" I peeled my face from my binder. "This is debate practice, not a FLOC meeting."

"I really wish you'd stop using that disgusting acronym. It makes the Future Leaders of Orange County sound like a flock of birds."

"That's exactly what we are. A group of birds flying to the best colleges in the US." We locked eyes. "A FLOC, if you will." Duh.

Carolina's spray-tanned skin got blotchy. Her body shook with laughter. "Birds of a feather . . ." She trailed off, laughing. Her laugh was so loud and infectious, it made me crack up.

Nina did too. Nat pressed their lips together as if trying to stop themselves from joining in.

Madeline didn't. She was too busy shooting us—me—a look. "Not all the same feather."

Every ounce of air left the auditorium. All eyes landed on me. I was very conscious of my feathers, darker than any of theirs. Much darker than most of the past debate (and FLOC) members too.

Carolina opened her lips as if to protest. Nat pushed their neon-green glasses up the bridge of their nose. At least my team had my back.

Leave it. I'm fine, I mouthed, afraid if I used my voice, even a little, I'd yell so loud it'd permanently damage my vocal cords.

"Circling back to your question, Rubi." Madeline crossed her arms. "My point is, any updates from Alma?"

Despite the AC blasting through the auditorium, I got clammy. Clammier when every gaze turned in my direction again. I didn't blame them. They simply wanted to know if they had a captain capable of making landfall . . . We'd made it to the OC tournament, after all. They were probably wondering if now was the best time to jump ship. Or even worse, mutiny.

Over my dead body.

"I told you I'm still waiting for my acceptance package to arrive in the mail," I said.

"BTW, I think they're phasing out acceptance letters and sending emails instead." I raised a brow. "Or maybe sending both. My aunt's on the board." Madeline was from one of those types of families where each member was on a board of insert-prestigious-institution. "I think she mentioned something about it last night. Since Alma was never on my radar, I wasn't paying much attention." She smiled. The pointed tips of her canines sparkled against her lipstick. "I can text her right now and see *if* you got in."

I hated how she kept doubting me. Hating more how her doubts always managed to tug at mine. All my academic accomplishments were proof I wasn't the token brown member of the FLOC or the debate team, and yet. In that moment I wished for Alma's unconditional acceptance to appear in my hands. Not only because it was the main ingredient in the Recipe. But because it'd finally shut Madeline up. It'd shut up any doubt monsters lingering inside of me too.

I put on my captain face. "Our SAT scores are nearly identical. My GPA is a 4.1—"

"Easier to do when you're two math courses behind."

Not wrong, but ouch. As I shrugged off the dig, Carolina grabbed the stopwatch from the middle of the table. Her eyes flashed between me and the on button.

I nodded. Showtime. "I've done more community service than any of our illustrious past-FLOC members. We're on the same debate team. Last year, I took us to the finals—"

"We didn't win it."

"Did you forget I got us into the tournament this year too?" Madeline's lips flapped open to say something, but I jumped in

first. "We will make it to the final round and I'll make damn sure we win." I straightened my spine. "It's not a matter of *if* I get in, but when."

Carolina clicked the stopwatch and clapped. Nina made air horn sounds. My heart pounded the way it did after winning a debate. I guess I just did.

Against Madeline. Against my doubts. As my arguments echoed in the cavernous room, it hit me. I'd also crushed the last bits of hesitation over applying to Bake-Off.

The acceptance letter *was* coming. Bake-Off wouldn't pose any risk to Alma now.

"Whatever." Madeline rolled her eyes. "I was only trying to help." She flipped through an outline, droned on about the pros of fracking.

Go frack yourself, buzzed on my lips. I pushed out, "Thanks, but no thanks," instead.

Under the table, I pulled out my phone. Bake-Off's application lit up its screen.

Somewhere backstage, clogs pounded floorboards. All chatter around the table and podiums evaporated. Even the blasts of AC ceased to hiss. The swish of Sister Bernadette's habit was more powerful anyway, prickling all our arms with goose bumps.

My fingers outpaced her march. Most of the application was filled out by the time she took command of the stage. Black habit whipped to a halt. She pushed her headpiece back a few inches, revealing a swath of hair so silver it shone like metal, forehead lines as deep as trenches. "We are only a few weeks away from the tournament." Pacing between the two podiums, she clapped and rubbed her palms together. "Are you ready to win it this year?"

The entire team erupted into cheers. Well, almost. With

my fingers glued to the phone, I couldn't clap until my palms stung. Much less do that fingers-in-mouth whistle thing Nat was doing. Sister Bernadette's voice boomed louder than any mic could. "Team, I said: Are. You. Ready?"

All the applause lifted my heart higher and higher. I snuck one last peek at the brainstorm in the margins. At Bake-Off's application.

YES. A million times, yes.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

First published in the United States by Wednesday Books,
an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

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For information, address St. Martin's Publishing Group,
120 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10271.

www.wednesdaybooks.com

Interior and case stamp designed by Devan Norman

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is
available upon request.

ISBN 978-1-250-86252-5 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-250-86253-2 (ebook)

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional,
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bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales
Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442,
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First Edition: 2023

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1