

# *The Strange and Wonderful Tale of the Sugar Cookie Princess*



*Or the story of:*

—A young maiden—  
—An impenetrable prison—  
—& A batch of sugar cookies—

He smelled her before he loved her. It was as simple as that. One day, there she was, taking a tray from a steaming oven, wiping brown curls from round cheeks that were red and flushed. Standing across the counter, he

watched a tiny curl spring free and nestle against her cheek. He watched her set the tray onto the counter, taking care not to burn her fingers, her back delicately arched.

“Can I help you?”

Peter started. When he had been least expecting it, the head baker had somehow appeared before him, tall, plump and all business. Her hair was pulled into a severe knot, no curls tumbling loose, and her lips wore a frown like she had just eaten a lemon.

“I—” Peter felt the words get stuck. “I—”

“Blast it!” a voice suddenly cried.

Peter looked up, startled. As he did so, he saw the Angel give a little yelp and start back. In a moment, he clearly saw the reason why. Even while she poked and prodded at them, her expression dejected, her cookies were turning into charcoal discs. A few customers coughed politely and turned away.

“I *knew* that an hour was too long!” the Angel cried, giving the burnt cookies a final nudge.

This was not, Peter felt, a point that could easily be contested. By that point, gray smoke was rolling through the shop. He tried very, very hard not to smile.

“An hour! An *hour!*” the head baker cried, nearly trembling with rage. “You can’t bake a cookie for an hour! Are you *daft?*”

The Angel pouted, pretty lips drawing together. “But when I baked the cherry pie for just *half* an hour, it wasn’t—”

“*A cookie isn’t a pie!*” the head baker screeched, practically hopping now. “A cookie is entirely—” The head baker stopped suddenly, giving a little groan of frustration. “Oh! Never you mind.

Just go throw those away and start fresh. After all, nobody on Earth would eat those things now. You had best—”

“I’ll take one.”

Both the head baker and the maiden jumped slightly, the older lady wearing a disbelieving frown. “What!” she exclaimed. “You can’t possibly mean that. They’re charcoal!”

Even the young maiden looked skeptical. “*Burnt* charcoal.”

But looking at her, frizzy hair, flushed cheeks and all, Peter just smiled. “How much for the lot?”

And that was how it happened. A few moments later, Peter stood on the street, clutching two dozen of the worst cookies that he would ever come across. All around him, a January wind whipped little snowflakes against his coat. As they melted, blending into the woolen fabric, he felt something quite similar happening on his insides. It felt like his heart and stomach were slowly turning to mush.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

Peter turned around, a smile on his face. Sure enough, not a few feet away, the young maiden was watching him curiously. He shrugged. “I like ’em this way.”

The young maiden snorted. “Fat chance! They’re inedible.”

Peter sniffed. “Now *that’s* a point of view.” And to prove it, he defiantly grabbed a charcoal cookie and took a big bite.

A long moment passed. He chewed. *Another* moment passed, this one even longer. He started to swallow. Then, surrendering to the inevitable, he coughed and spat it out, feeling vaguely like he had just kissed a chimney. “Okay.” For some reason, his voice had an odd rasp to it. “So you win. Maybe they *are* inedible.”

At that, the maiden laughed. “I *knew* it! You *were* lying.”

Peter smiled. “Guilty as charged.”

She smiled back. “The name’s Emily.”

“Peter.”

His hand touched hers. She smiled again. And once again, Peter felt his insides turn to mush.

There was really no doubt about it. Losing had never felt this good.

They went to the Brickminster church three times. The first time was for a wedding. Emily was wearing a yellow dress, sitting quietly with her parents. Her hands were folded in her lap. Her neck was arched gracefully upright. Where was he? He was somewhere near the back, stealing glances at the yellow arms and back and legs.

The second time was during the dead of night. Emily held a candle, letting the little light dance through the thick shadows and over the cold stones.

“How did you do that?” Emily whispered, drawing a bit closer to him.

“Do what?” Peter replied.

“You know, with the door. I’m *sure* that it was locked.”

Peter grinned, his hand on her forearm, guiding her deeper into the little building. “Let’s say that I have a way with doors.”

“But *how?*” Emily persisted, never one to let a mystery hang.

“I can’t give away all of my secrets.”

“But *how?*” Emily said again.

And so, with a sigh, Peter dug into his pocket and withdrew something very small and metal. “Do you see this?” he asked.

Emily nodded, staring curiously at the little pick.

“With this, I could open any door in the world.”

“Any door? Any time?” Emily asked skeptically.

Although the question has a teasing note, the response was perfectly serious. “Well, that depends.”

“On *what?*”

“Are you on the other side?” Peter asked quietly.

Emily looked at him, her eyes big and brown like British elms. And when she spoke, her voice was equally serious. “I could be.”

Peter smiled. “Then yes.”

The third time that they went to the Brickminster church was, of course, for their wedding. It was summertime then, a time of blooming lilacs and fresh hay. Someone else made the cake.

For the first year, their world was all bliss and lazy perfection. There were walks through the field just following sunrise, taking hay to the goats. There were nights by the fire, lounging on the sofa and fighting for legroom. (Emily usually won.) And every Sunday, there were cookies.

“Why always sugar cookies?” Emily asked one day. “We could make other things.”

“Why mess with perfection?” Peter responded mildly.

“They’re not exactly perfect,” Emily said, fighting a smile.

Peter grinned. “They are to me.”

Laughing aloud, Emily hit him lightly with a rolling pin. “You, sir, are incorrigible!” she said wickedly.

“And *you’re* letting them burn again.”

“Bollocks!” Emily cried loudly, racing to the oven. Sure enough, black smoke was soon pouring into the room. “You could have said something a bit sooner!” she scolded him reproachfully, surveying the burnt mess with dismay.

Peter smiled contentedly, leaning against the counter. “I *suppose* so. But this way is *much* more fun.” And scooping a burnt pellet from the tray, he flashed a trademark grin and took a large chomp. This time, he even managed to swallow.

Looking back, Emily would remember that afternoon well. That was less because of what happened, however, and far more because of what happened next.



“What is it?” Emily asked the next day, seeing a little letter flop onto the table. Jammed between a postcard and a medical bill, they had almost not seen it at all. Peter grabbed it lightly, preparing to rip it open. But when he saw the return address, he grew very still. They *both* grew very still.

Emily slowly sank into a chair, her body surprisingly numb. “Go ahead. Open it.”

Her voice was calmer than she

would have thought.

He shook his head, pushing the envelope away. And so she did.

To be sure, the war had always been there for Mr. and Mrs. O’Grady. It had been part of the haunting music that filled church services and the reason that chocolate cookies had no chocolate anymore. It explained why funerals came so frequently these days, piling against one another like schoolchildren at the lunchroom door. It was the reason that milk had replaced cream, even for the luckiest few.

All the same, that afternoon was when the war finally came to *them*. Taking a deep breath, Emily refolded the little paper and put it briskly away.

“How long do we have?” Peter asked numbly.

Ignoring him, Emily stood up and walked to the stove, giving the soup pot a big stir. “I hear that Billy Marsden is getting married!” she said brightly, laying down the ladle. “Would you believe that? Little Jennie Hayworth must have finally said yes. Isn’t that just darling? The soup is ready.”

Peter just looked at her, his expression dead. “So as little as that.”

Emily sighed, finally turning to face him. When she did so, her eyes were wet. “One week.”

Peter nodded. “Good for Billy,” he said quietly, gently taking her hand.

“Good for Rosie,” Emily replied. “That boy is a prince.”

Peter nodded. Then they sat down and ate the soup.

All things considered, it could have been worse. Peter was given a defensive outpost, overlooking the Northern Sea.

“Nobody will bother him there!” the grocer said confidently, placing her eggs and butter and flour into a bag. “Why, those are the best o’ the lot!”

Emily nodded. And for a few weeks, that thought gave her comfort. It got her through the cold morning and long afternoons and even longer nights. Better that he was there, enjoying the sea air and winning at cards. Lucky him! So she told herself, over and over again, slopping through icy mud and cakey snow. He was probably having a ball.

“In any case, it will be over soon,” the postman said, dropping the post onto her doorstep. “The Bourbons can’t hold a candle to our boys. It’ll all be over by Christmas.”

Emily nodded mechanically, though it was getting harder and harder to be calm. It had been two months without a letter.

As it turned out, the postman and the armchair generals were partially right. The war *was* over soon. Just six months after Peter left, one army completely overwhelmed the other. The problem, of course, was which army had won.

“How did it happen?” Emily asked numbly, watching a Bourbon flag rise over the local school.

At her side, the local schoolteacher shook her head, cheeks blotchy from crying. The Bourbons had invaded by sea, it seemed, advancing so quickly and unexpectedly that many Gregoire soldiers were imprisoned in the very forts that they had manned.

“Was there bloodshed?” Emily asked, her gaze still on the flag.

No one knew.

“What happens next?” Emily asked.

No one had a clue. And still, no matter how often Emily checked the mail, no letter came.

As the weeks slipped by, she felt a strange numbness began to fill her. There were goats to be fed and potatoes to be harvested. There was still laundry to be done. For a time, this satisfied her. But when six months came and went, still without word, an odd energy took root. And one day, without quite knowing why, she started to bake.

At first, it was just every Sunday. With time, however, the frequency increased. In a short while, it was every day, even when the cupboards were almost empty and there was little hope of filling them. She stopped eating and she stopped sleeping. All that she could do was bake and bake and bake, churning out more cookies than an even army could eat.

When the Bourbon soldiers came by, making their rounds, they watched her with amusement.

“What’s your plan?” they asked, their expressions smug. “Will you *bake* your husband home?”

She ignored them, removing a pan of banana bread. Although the bananas had been nearly rotten, the smell of cinnamon and sugar and melted butter smelled heavenly. And once the soldiers tried a piece, unable to resist, word began to spread.

Quite soon, nearly every soldier was clamoring to visit her house. Even soldiers who should have been far away, doing other rotations, found excuses to make an appearance. Before much time had passed, some evenings would see fifteen soldiers or more piling into her kitchen.

“Can you make more chocolate chip?” one would ask.

“I’d like another sugar loaf,” requested another.

“Make me a popover!” cried a third.

They always made sure that she had whatever she needed. Even when there was no butter, they found butter for her. Even when there was no sugar, they found sugar for Emily. But one day, enough finally came to be enough. When a group, more boisterous than usual, overturned and broke a large vase, Emily slammed down her rolling pin. “If you want my cookies, then let *me* come to *you!*”

And so, abashed, the soldiers did.

Within a week, Emily was summoned to the army barracks, asked to take just an apron and a mixing bowl. And with the ingredients that they supplied, she made enough sugar cookies for the entire fort.

As can only be imagined, the story quickly spread. Other outposts, hearing the extraordinary tale, wanted the Sugar Cookie Princess to visit *them*. So Emily began traveling far and near, carrying nothing but a wooden ladle and a mixing bowl. And so it was that, one day, she reached a certain base on the Northern Sea, overlooking a whipping ocean. Set on a rocky island, it was located perhaps two hundred yards from shore.

Emily shivered. “What’s this town called again?”

“Dearheart,” said the innkeeper, handing her a mug of tea.

Emily shivered again, drawing the tea toward her body. This was the space. Even if she had forgotten the distinctive name, she would have felt it in her bones. He was here. Her baby was here.

That night, once she had eaten and rested a bit, a soldier came and took her across the black water. As they went, Emily looked around her curiously. “How deep is this?” she asked, gazing at the black depths.

The soldier shrugged, continuing to row. “Deep enough.” Another stoke of the oar. “Not, o’ course, that it matters much.”

“What do you mean?” Emily asked innocently.

“The undertow is too strong to fight. Anyone who tried to swim it would drown.” Another grunt. Another stroke of the oar.

“That must make it ideal for having prisoners,” Emily said thoughtfully.

The soldier gave no reply. But for Emily, the wheels were already starting to turn.

As they pulled into the little dock, Emily quickly scanned the coast. The island was little more than a rock heap, dipping into the cold ocean. Places to land a boat, however tiny it might be, were few and far between.

Entering the fort, Emily was surprised to see that it looked ancient. The soldier soon affirmed this. “The place has been around for centuries.”

Emily nodded vaguely, watching the stone walls glide by. “Would you show me around?”

The soldier looked at her suspiciously. After a moment, however, he grudgingly relented. “That’s the mess,” he said, indicating a large room with wooden tables. “Those are the barracks,” he said a moment later, indicating a stairway snaking upward.

“What about that?” Emily asked lightly, gesturing to a different stairwell, this one descending into the gloom.



“*That’s* for the prisoners,” the soldier replied.

Emily nodded, wisely asking no more. But she had already seen what she needed to. She had seen a large door with a wooden frame and a very, very rusty lock. The fortress truly *was* from years ago.

Once she entered the bustling kitchens, the cookies took little time to prepare. By now, the movements came so naturally that she barely had to think. Within two hours, she had prepared enough treats for the entire platoon.

“Is this everything?” a young soldier asked, having been sent to help her carry. Emily hesitated before answering. “Well, it’s *almost* everything.”

Beside her, the young soldier frowned. “What do you mean?”

Sheepishly, Emily indicated a tray of burnt cookies. “I botched those ones a bit. They’re really not fit to eat.”

The soldier shrugged. “It’s not a problem. We’ll just throw them away.”

Emily nodded and raised the tray, apparently ready to dump them. Just before she did so, however, an idea seemed to strike her. Behind the kitchens, they could just see a walled courtyard where

the prisoners were being put to work. “What if we gave *them* the cookies?” Emily asked suddenly, glancing innocently at her companion.

The soldier looked puzzled. “But why? They’re just prisoners.”

Emily shrugged. “Well, the alternative is just tossing them. And that *does* seem to be a waste.”

The soldier appeared to consider this. “Yes,” he said slowly, turning the idea over. “I suppose that there’s no harm in it. I mean, we really might as well.”

And so it was decided. “Oy! You!” the young soldier said not ten minutes later, accompanying Emily into the courtyard. By this point, the soldiers had all been fed, expressing due appreciation at the delicious sweets. “Orderly line now!” the young soldier barked. “You’ll get your turn!”

At that, the tired prisoners began lining up, eager for whatever crumb might be dispensed. Emily kept her eyes lowered, burrowing deeply into her hood. But as she watched the hands go by, taking cookie after cookie, she looked avidly for fingers that she might recognize. None came.

The longer that she watched, the more that her heart sank. What if she was wrong? What if he was already gone? Even worse, dead? But near the very end, a familiar hand finally did appear. By this point, there were only a few cookies left, the rejects of the lot. One of the remaining few, in fact, was little more than a disc of black charcoal.

When the familiar fingers reached for the cookies, Emily saw them hesitate slightly. She held her breath. Then she saw them reach for the charcoal round.

As they did so, Emily sighed and straightened slightly, letting her hood slide back. “Isn’t it a beautiful night?” Emma asked innocently, beaming at the starry sky and the ocean beyond. “Don’t you agree?”

The young soldier shrugged, apparently not having considered it much. “I suppose so.”

Emily smiled. “I bet that there’s a great view from outside.”

“What do you mean?” the young soldier asked.

“Well, when I was little, my family used to visit the Bellingham coast. We found that if you stood on a bluff, just when the sun was about to rise, you would get a view like none another.” Saying this, she shrugged slightly. “I don’t know. I suppose that seeing the bluff out there just reminded me. You know how it is.”

“Which bluff?” the young soldier asked, feeling more lost than ever.

“Oh! Any of them really,” Emily replied. “But *especially* the big one just down there.” At this, she yawned. “Oh ! I *am* tired! I imagine that I must be going soon.”

Not long after this, a different soldier conveyed her across the channel. This time, Emily was perfectly silent, every nerve thrumming wildly. And late that night, while the rest of the inn slept, she shrugged on a black jacket and slipped through her window.

Outside, the moon was just a crescent, throwing only the weakest light onto the world below. Even so, combined with the silvery stars, it was light enough that Emily could easily reach the rocky

shore. And there, after some effort, she was able to locate the wooden rowboat that the inn family kept hidden.

Within moments, she had set out, fighting against the choppy waves. While the sentries would have spotted a battleship in a heartbeat, nobody could have been expecting a tiny rowboat going *to* the island. After some hours, nearly faint from exhaustion, she finally slipped into the little cove that had so reminded her of the Bellingham coast. And then it was simply a matter of waiting.

As hour after hour slipped by, she began to grow cold and numb. She sat in the swaying rowboat, staring at the dark fortress and imposing boulders. Every cresting wave was a potential soldier. Every moment was an eternity.

At some point, she must have dozed off. For when she awoke, it was to a strange and wonderful sensation. Though surely impossible, she could have sworn that a pair of lips brushed hers. Slowly, slowly, she opened her eyes, fearing that it might indeed be a dream. And when she did, lo and behold! There he was! There was her Peter, grinning like a Cheshire cat. Behind him, the sun was just threatening to rise.

“You’re here!” Emily said, her voice a croak. Never had any moment been sweeter than this one.

“You’re darn right,” Peter replied gravely, settling into the rowboat. “Which, I might add, is far more than I can say for my front tooth. Bloody ’ell! Could you *warn* me next time?” And shaking his head, he withdrew the little pick from his pocket.

Emily stared at him. Then her eyes narrowed. “Why, you ungrateful—”

But before she could finish, he kissed her words away. “Come on,” he said, his voice soft. “Let’s blow this joint.”

And so they did, carefully navigating the little rowboat across the blackened waves. In just a few hours, they slipped through the forest and to a nearby port. And once there, they secured passage on a commercial boat, relying on a resistance network that had been designed for that very purpose.

I cannot, of course, tell you any more than. I cannot say where the boat went, much less where they are living now. After all, these are still dangerous times. Even with Gregoire restored, having finally expelled the Bourbons, you never know who may be reading this. What I *can* say, however, is that Peter and Emily have goats again. They live on a farm that has horses and pigs and a big kitchen with a woodburning stove. And I *can* say that, should you ever pass this cottage on a Sunday afternoon, perhaps just a little after tea, you are liable to catch a very familiar and very enticing odor. It is the odor, of course, of melting butter and sugar and perhaps a bit of cinnamon. And if Peter has had his way, you may even catch the scent of something burning. After all, however far our heroines have come and whatever they have done, *some* things will never change.