

# *Once Upon a Cupcake*

*A Short Story*

BY MEGAN LENTZ

# Chapter 1

Goosey batter dripped down Lisa's face. She was convinced she would never get the hang of this whole baking thing.

Kate raced into the kitchen, her blond pigtailed swinging as she slipped over the spilt batter. "Lisa, hurry. Mrs. Drrippins is coming."

Lisa looked at the little cuckoo clock above the sink and realized she had lost track of time. It was almost 7. Lisa did not want Mrs. Drrippins finding her unprepared for the day.

"Lisa! Where are you girl?"

Kate gave Lisa a worried look and then raced to the front of the shop.

Before Lisa had a chance to wipe her face, Mrs. Drrippins was in the kitchen, hands on hips, looking mad as a dragon.

"What is taking you so long, girl? We are set to open the shop and I don't see any of your wares in the display counter."

"I'm sorry Mrs. Drrippins. It's not mixing right."

"Look at you. Wearing more batter than you've managed to bake. When are you going to get your head out of the clouds and start thinking about your future? Now I promised your mum I'd look after you, but a woman can only tolerate so much. If you can't earn your keep, I'm afraid there's little I can do. A person has to learn to

take care of herself. Now get out there behind the counter while I clean up this mess in here."

Lisa scurried out to the front of the shop, her cheeks redder than their red velvet cake.

Maria was already out front, unlocking the door. Kate was acting busy behind the counter. "What'd you do this time?" Maria asked. She sounded exasperated.

"What didn't I do? You know I will never be good enough for her."

Maria didn't respond. She walked to the baker racks and helped Kate set up their wares in the display cases. Lisa joined them, but it seemed everything she touched Maria came back and readjusted. Sometimes Lisa wondered why she even tried.

Maria and Kate were Mrs. Drrippins nieces. Kate was 10 and Maria was 16, only 3 years older than Lisa but ahead of her in so many ways. Kate and Maria's mother had passed away when Kate was born and Mrs. Drrippins had raised them like they were her own, though it was clear that Maria was the favorite. Maria always had the prettiest frocks, the nicest shoes, and the warmest blankets. Maria was also beautiful with her perfectly blond curls, a dainty little mouth, and her little nose that turned up just enough to make her adorable. As if that wasn't enough, Maria was also a wonderful baker, a great cook, and could sell anything to anyone.

Lisa, on the other hand, had dark, wild curls, a nose that was just a little too big and lips that were too plump. Lisa had not yet hit

her growth spurt and her hand-me-down clothes always seemed to dangle on her like loose skin. Lisa always felt awkward when she moved and her baked goods never got great reviews. In fact, customers often asked who had done the baking when they came in to buy something. If Maria was working the counter, she could usually sell some of Lisa's goods, but when it was just Lisa, she never seemed to convince them to buy her cakes.

And then there was Kate. Quiet and unassuming, Kate always managed to stay under Mrs. Drippins radar. While Kate rarely baked, and almost never sold anything, Lisa suspected that, if put to the test, Kate would be just as wonderful as Maria.

Lisa knew she should feel lucky. Her mother had passed away when she was just a little thing, barely able to walk, and Mrs. Drippins had taken her in. When Maria and Kate arrived a few years later, Lisa hadn't noticed that Maria was treated better than her. Lisa didn't care that her doll was not new or that her dresses were the ones Maria didn't like or had ruined. She didn't know enough to see that things were just a little unfair. And besides, why shouldn't Maria, who was related to Mrs. Drippins, get better things? What did it matter that Lisa had lived there first? What did it matter that Mrs. Drippins was the closest thing to a mother Lisa had ever had?

"Your cakes are looking nice today," Mrs. Drippins said to Maria as she emerged from the kitchen. "At least there will be something to sell today. Now I have to run out. Maria, you're in charge of the desk. We are running a bit low on money this week, so we need a

good day. And Lisa, well, I guess try to make something edible to add to the display. Or at least try to make it look edible."

The last part she added as she spied the one rack of cakes Lisa had finished. There was no question whose cakes they were. The frosting was dripping and uneven and the filling was oozing out. When compared to Maria's cakes, there was no question which one a customer would want to buy.

Feeling dejected, Lisa sulked to the back corner of the room. She heard the bang of the door as Mrs. Drippins left the shop.

"I'd buy your cakes," Kate whispered.

Lisa was grateful for her words, even if they did little to sell her cakes. Before she was able to respond, Maria loudly exclaimed "Wow. She's in quite the tizzy today. What'd you do this time?"

"Same as always. Not enough, apparently. I wish I could bake as well as you. You don't think she will kick me out, do you? If money is tight, she won't be able to afford to keep me."

"Don't worry, Lisa. You know she is always saying things like that. We have plenty of money. There's nothing to worry about."

Lisa couldn't help but notice that Maria did look worried.

Before Lisa could say anymore, they heard the tinkling of the doorbell announcing their first customer of the day. It was Mr. Leonard. He worked for the bank.

"Hello, ladies. Maria. Lisa. How nice to see both of you today. Is Mrs. Drippins around?" Kate had a wonderful talent for remaining invincible.

“She had to run an errand. What can we do for you today? The apple pies are looking especially nice today. We used some wonderfully juicy apples. Best I’ve seen all season. I know Mrs. Leonard loves her apple treats.”

Leave it to Maria to always try to sell a baked good. Lisa wished she could be as persuasive as Maria.

“Ah, well, they do look lovely, but I’m not here to buy. I have some business to discuss with Mrs. Drippins. Will you tell her I stopped by?”

“Of course, Mr. Leonard. And please, do mention to Mrs. Leonard that we have a whole batch of apple treats today.”

Mr. Leonard barely acknowledged Maria’s words as he left the shop.

“What do you think that was about?” Kate asked from her dark corner in the back of the room.

“Who knows? He seemed very distracted. But I’m sure Mrs. Leonard will be back once she hears about the apple pie.”

But Lisa was not so sure. And seeing Maria fail at a sale left Lisa feeling even more uncertain about her future. If Maria wasn’t making sales and the bank manager was making business calls, there seemed very little chance that Mrs. Drippins would be able to keep supporting Lisa.

Just then Lisa noticed a face peering in through the window. When Maria noticed him, he waved.

“Lisa, would you mind running things for a few minutes?”

Lisa didn’t mind. She knew that John was courting Maria. And who could blame him? And who could blame Maria for encouraging him? He was attractive and very muscular from lifting the meats at his father’s butcher shop. And he was nice enough, or so he seemed from Maria’s stories. John had never actually spoken much to Lisa. And Lisa always got so tongue-tied around boys that she hadn’t had much of an opportunity to talk to him, either.

With Maria gone, Lisa began fiddling with the display case, turning things just so, trying to make her cakes not look quite so bad. Lisa had never been good at sitting still. She could hear Kate in the kitchen cleaning bowls and moving things around. Sometimes she envied Kate’s freedom.

A few customers came in, but no one wanted to buy. They all seemed disappointed to see that it was Lisa working the counter. Not Maria.

Lisa tried not to let it bother her. But it was hard.

When Maria finally returned, Lisa was relieved to see her. She was tired of the disappointed looks on the faces of all of the customers.

“Lisa, where’s Kate? Did Auntie return?”

“Kate’s in the kitchen and Mrs. Drippins is still out.”

“Oh good. Quick. You have to help me. John said he heard a rumor that Auntie is trying to sell me off. To Lenny Milch, the boy from the Dairy.”

“I don’t understand. Why would she do that? Everyone knows you and John are an item. Why not sell you to him and have done with?”

“Don’t you get it? Half of our bills are paid to the dairy. We get our eggs, our milk, our butter, all from them. And now that Auntie can’t pay her bills, she found another way to get the supplies we need.”

“But, what can I do?”

“Well, for starters you can go pick up the eggs. They didn’t deliver them this morning and we’re out. And while you’re there, you can try to be extra nice to Lenny Milch.”

“You want me to marry him instead? I’m no where near old enough and besides, I’m an orphan.”

“What’s any of that got to do with anything? Just because you’re betrothed doesn’t mean you have to get married tomorrow. And I’m an orphan too. I’m still good enough to marry him.”

“Yes, but you are an orphan with family. I’ve got nothing.”

“Fine, you don’t have to marry him, but you better find some way to bring in money. I slave in that kitchen making cakes and I spend all day selling them. I’m the only one bringing in anything. It’s about time you start earning your keep. If Auntie is trying to sell me off, you can bet it won’t be long before she ships you out too.”

Lisa was too angry to argue. It wasn’t fair for Maria to say those things. Sure, she didn’t bring in any money, but she worked

just as hard as Maria. Sometimes she wondered if she didn’t actually work harder than Maria.

Putting on her hat, Lisa went to the kitchen to grab a basket for eggs and then stormed out. She was too mad to even say goodbye as she slammed the door.

# Chapter 2

The day was actually very fine, much nicer than it had felt while cooped up inside the dark shop. Not for the first time Lisa thought they would make more money if they sold their cakes and pies from a booth like so many of the other sellers. Being out in the sun made Lisa much more inclined to buy things, and she was pretty certain other people felt the same way. She saw all the customers lined up at the booths. Many more than she had seen inside the shop all day.

Lisa was not in a hurry to return to the shop. She was furious with Maria, but also ashamed. No matter how mad she was, Lisa knew there was at least a bit of truth behind Maria's words. Lisa didn't earn money for the bakery. Instead she wasted money baking things they could not sell.

Lisa tried to distract herself with the wares at the booths. Since she did not have any money, Lisa could not purchase anything, but she still liked looking at all of the goods. She looked at the little pieces of jewelry with their green and red stones and the delicate hair combs carved from shells. She dreamed of wrapping the brightly colored scarfs around her neck. They were made of a material that was so delicate you could almost see through it. And her mouth watered at the sight of the bright red apples and the plump cranberries.

By the time she made it to the center of town where the advertisement board stood, Lisa was in a much better mood. She didn't mind that she could not actually buy any of the things she had seen. She was happy enough just getting to see them.

It was so nice outside Lisa decided to stop and read the advertisement board. She rarely read it. It usually listed things for sale or services needed. One time Lisa had asked Mrs. Drippins if she might answer one of the ads requesting help so that she could bring in a bit more money, but Mrs. Drippins had forbid her to respond. She had told Lisa that if she had enough free time to be hiring herself out, then she wasn't working hard enough in the bakery.

Lisa was about to turn away from the board when she heard Kate. "What about that one?"

"Where did you come from?"

"I heard what Maria said. I didn't really want to be around her in that mood. So I followed you instead."

Lisa didn't mind that Kate had followed her. Now that she had cooled off, she was happy to have the company. "Which one did you want me to read?"

Kate stood on her tippy toes and pointed to a small poster with spirals and elaborate print. Even though it was small, it must have cost a lot to print.

Lisa read the poster. It was for a bakeoff at the castle. And the winner would receive 500 gold pieces. The bakeoff was scheduled for tomorrow morning.

“Maybe we should show Maria. I’m not really much of a baker, Kate. You know that.”

“Maria’s already seen it, but she isn’t interested. She said the life of a baker isn’t for her and if she wins the bakeoff, that’s all anyone would know her for. Besides, I bet if you weren’t worried about being as good as Maria that you’d be able to make things better than her. You get too worried and then the recipes go wrong.”

Lisa knew they could use the money. But with her baking skills, she didn’t see how she could have a chance at winning, despite Kate’s faith that she wasn’t actually a bad baker.

But still, Lisa’s eyes lingered. If she could just get her batter right, maybe she could win. And if Lisa brought in 500 gold pieces, there was no way Mrs. Drippins could throw her out. 500 gold was more than Maria’s pies brought in last month, and Mrs. Drippins had never threatened to throw Maria out.

By the time Lisa made it to the dairy, she was convinced that she should enter the bakeoff, and with Kate’s compliments and assurances, she started to think that maybe, just maybe she could win.

The trip to the dairy, though, forced all thoughts of the bakeoff from Lisa’s mind.

“Sorry, lass, but I can’t give you anymore eggs. The bakery owes us too much.”

“But, how will we bake without eggs? We will be ruined. If we can’t bring in money, we can never pay back the debt.”

“Really, lass, I am sorry. But I’ve been told I’m not to extend any more credit. At least not until a repayment plan has been made. Maybe you should speak to Mr. Leonard. I hear he sometimes will lend people money.”

Lisa’s walk back to the bakery was much less joyful than her walk to the dairy had been. Maria had told her they didn’t need to worry, that the bakery was not out of money. But if they couldn’t even buy eggs, things must be worse than Lisa had imagined. And Lisa had a sneaky suspicion that they had already borrowed money from the bank. Why else would Mr. Leonard have come by to see Mrs. Drippins if not to get the loan paid back?

Kate tried to cheer Lisa up, but even Kate, who was always cheerful, seemed upset. Lisa knew that Kate was not as young as everyone thought. She understood a lot more than people realized, especially since she had a way of overhearing things from her hiding spots.

If Lisa could win the bakeoff, she could pay off the debt to the dairy and the bank, but without the eggs, she couldn’t even enter. If Maria would just agree to marry Lenny Milch, they could get their debt erased, but Lisa knew it was no more fair asking her to do that than it would be to ask Lisa to marry him.

Maria and Mrs. Drippins were out when Lisa and Kate returned to the shop. All of the lights were off and the door was locked. Lisa saw a note on the counter from Mrs. Drippins, telling her she had business with the bank and the dairy and she and Maria

would be back later. Not knowing what else to do, Lisa turned the lights on and flipped the door sign to open. They still had cakes. If they were not going to have eggs to make new cakes, Lisa could not let the ones they had go to waste. She would have to try to sell them.

Kate ran off to do whatever it was she did all day and Lisa sat in the empty shop. No one entered the shop the rest of the day, and when Mrs. Drrippins and Maria returned, they looked deflated. They each mumbled a good night and retreated to their rooms.

Normally Lisa would have closed the shop when the sun set, but she had not sold anything all afternoon and closing the shop seemed like giving up. Lisa was pretty sure that once the shop closed, it would never reopen. She was not ready to face this reality.

Kate came to join her when the sun was gone, but she was not much company. She was fidgety and quiet and kept picking at the counter with her fingernails. Finally, Kate curled up in a corner and drifted off to sleep. Lisa watched Kate sleep for a while and then walked outside. The stars were just starting to come out. As Lisa watched them, she saw a shooting star. Quickly, she made a wish.

“I wish up a star that my dreams will come true.”

Lisa wasn't sure what her dreams really were, but she knew that the star would know, and it would make it so. She returned to the shop and rested her head on the counter and soon she began to doze off, with dreams of bakeoffs and dancing eggs filling her head.

The tinkling of the doorbell woke Lisa with a start. She sat up straight and looked at the door, wondering who could be coming in so late.

Standing in front of her was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. Her dark hair was pulled up on top of her head with little curls escaping to frame the side of her face. Her dress was made up of several layers of a blue fabric, each a slightly different shade, so that it looked like moving water. And her skin was like smooth ivory. She was so pretty she almost seemed to glow. In fact, Lisa was pretty certain she was glowing.

“Child, why do you look so sad?”

Even the woman's voice sounded like light, soft and sweet. It filled Lisa with hope.

“Everything has fallen apart.”

Lisa would not normally have been so open, but something about the woman made her want to be as honest as possible.

“Child, surely not everything?”

“We have no eggs and no money so the dairy won't give us any more. And I was going to enter the bakeoff but now that we have nothing, I can't. Not that I would have won anyway. And since I'm worthless, Mrs. Drrippins is sure to throw me out and then I will have no home, no food, no family, and no skills.”

The woman ignored most of the complaints. “Are you sure you wouldn't have been able to win?”

“My cakes are dreadful. People only ever want Maria's.”



“Maybe you are missing an ingredient.”

“I do everything just how Maria showed me.”

“Ah, but maybe that is the problem.”

“But Maria’s cakes are always perfect.”

The woman sighed. “Come, let’s go to the kitchen and give it a whirl.”

“But we don’t have any eggs.”

“Well, you are in luck.” And with those words, the woman pulled a basket from behind her back, and inside it lay at least a dozen eggs.

“Who are you?”

“Why, I’m Cyndal. You wished upon a star and here I am. Now come on. Let’s see what the problem is.”

Lisa had read about fairy godmothers, and she knew that wishing upon a star was supposed to make your dreams come true, but she had never heard about a star coming down to grant the wish. And she had certainly never heard of one that showed up with a basket full of eggs. With a glance at Kate still asleep in the corner, Lisa led the woman to the kitchen and started setting things up. When she went to grab the cake pan, Cyndal stopped her.

“Let’s try something different. Something that will set you apart from the other contestants.”

Lisa was confused. “Like a cheese cake? I’ve never used a spring form pan before.”

“No, not a cheese cake. How about something smaller? Like you.”

“I don’t have anything smaller.”

“As luck would have it, I do.”

Cyndal gave a little giggle and pulled a funny little pan with lots of small circles from one of the many layers of her dress. Lisa wondered what else the woman had hidden in her clothes and behind her back.

“I’ve never seen a pan like that.”

“It makes mini-cakes. I like to call them cupcakes, because they look like little cups.”

Lisa was excited to try baking little cups, but she was also a bit worried. After all, if she couldn’t successfully make a big cake, why should a little cake be any easier?

Despite her fears, Lisa got to work. She cracked the eggs and measured out the flour and followed the cake recipe she knew by heart. Every now and then Cyndal would suggest she add an extra ingredient or put in more or less of something and Lisa dutifully followed. “Add some more vanilla”, or “How about crushing up some strawberries”, or “beat the eggs just a tad bit more, dear.”

When Lisa was ready to start scooping the batter into the pan, Cyndal stopped her. “You are forgetting the magic ingredient.”

Lisa looked around the kitchen, trying to figure out what she had missed. “Here.” Cyndal produced a little vial of sparkling powder from her dress. “Just throw a little pinch in the batter and when

you put it in, I want you to imagine how wonderful the cupcakes will taste. Think about the love you are putting into your food.”

And so Lisa closed her eyes and imagined a beautiful, perfectly shaped, light and fluffy mini-cake. And she thought about how much she wanted her cake to taste like eating the most delicious cloud, light and moist and full of flavor. And then she threw the powder in.

When Lisa opened her eyes, Cyndal had a big smile on her face. “What was that?” Lisa asked.

“Stardust, of course. Now, child, let’s scoop this batter into the tin and start baking them. Then we can get started on the frosting. We only have a couple hours to get you ready for the bakeoff, so we better get baking.”

## Chapter 3

By the time the sun rose, Lisa was exhausted, but she had a tray full of the most delectable looking treats she had ever seen. And she, Lisa, had baked and decorated them. There were strawberry vanilla cupcakes with perfectly swirled vanilla frosting and red velvet with little red strawberry heart cutouts placed on top. There were carrot cupcakes with frosting that looked like pure gold and even mini-apple pies made in the cupcake pan.

Cyndal helped Lisa pack up the baking supplies she would need, including a little vial of stardust, wished her luck, and then disappeared out the door.

As soon as Cyndal was gone, Lisa heard a noise. “What smells so good?”

Lisa turned and saw Kate, bleary eyed, coming into the kitchen.

“What are those?” Kate’s eyes turned to saucers when she saw the cupcakes.

“Cupcakes. I’m going to make them at the bakeoff.” Lisa felt her cheeks go red. Kate seemed to glow at the announcement.

“You’re entering then? Of Lisa, I’m so excited. I’ll cover for you here. But look at the time. You better hurry up and change. You

will have to leave before they get up, just in case Auntie is in one of her moods.”

Lisa knew that Kate was right and so she rushed upstairs. She saw Maria asleep in their bedroom. It was not like Maria to sleep late and after the look she had on her face when she returned from the dairy with Mrs. Drippins, Lisa guessed that Maria was being forced to marry Lenny Milch. But Lisa did not have time to worry. And if she won the bakeoff, Maria’s dreams of John would be saved.

Lisa splashed water on her face, ran a comb through her hair and then slipped into her favorite dress. It was a hand-me-down from Maria in a gorgeous kelly green cotton. Maria had never worn it because she said that kelly green was not her color. But when Lisa wore it, she felt ready to meet the world.

When Lisa returned downstairs, Kate looked anxious. “Hurry. I heard Auntie moving around.”

Lisa grabbed her basket of supplies and then pushed the tray of cupcakes over to Kate. “Think you can sell some of these today?”

“Can I eat one too?”

“I won’t tell if you don’t.”

Kate stood up on her tippy toes and kissed Lisa on the cheek. “Good luck.”

Lisa ran out the door and when she turned to give Kate one last look, she saw her half way through a strawberry cupcake, frosting and crumbs all down her front. Lisa had never seen someone en-

joy something she had baked that much. It made her feel confident that she could do this.

By the time Lisa arrived at the castle, the sun was up and there was a line stretched all the way out to the bridge.

When it was finally Lisa’s turn to register, she gave her name and listed her bakery as Lisa’s Cupcakes. For some reason she couldn’t explain, she wanted to do this on her own, without Mrs. Drippins and Maria shadowing her every move. “That’s an interesting name, dear,” the woman behind the registration counter said. But, despite the interesting name, she gave Lisa a number and sent her on to the courtyard where she was to wait until it was her turn to bake.

Lisa looked around in awe. There must have been at least 50 bakers. And only 1 of them would win. Lisa’s tummy did a flip-flop. She hoped she would be that lucky winner.

“Well, aren’t you a tiny thing. How old are you, anyway? 8?” Lisa looked up at the burly man speaking to her from one of the booths. “I’m 13, and a better baker than you despite my age.”

Lisa had no idea where those words had come from. She was usually so timid. She wondered if maybe a little bit of the stardust had settled in her as well as the cupcakes.

The first batch of bakers was called and they filed into the castle. Lisa began to feel more nervous. She knew her group would be called next to go to the second kitchen. Despite her nerves, Lisa wondered how many kitchens the castle had. She could not imagine

needing more than one kitchen, but then, they probably did feed a lot of people on a regular basis.

Lisa's group was called and she lined up. She was the youngest person in her group by at least 10 years. She was certain of it. But Lisa tried not to let her age affect her mood. She could win this if only she could focus.

Nothing could have prepared Lisa for the kitchen. It made Mrs. Drippins' kitchen seem like a dollhouse's kitchen. Everywhere stood shiny white stone counters and large mixers and ovens big enough to bake an entire horse.

Lisa could feel the panic starting to rise. Was she in over her head? But then she saw one of the contestants sneer at her, and Lisa lifted her chin and walked down the long, clean aisle, searching for her number.

When Lisa found her workstation, she quickly laid out her supplies. She was just finishing her setup when she felt someone bump into her and, as she tried to catch her balance, her hand hit the vial of stardust. She heard the vial shatter on the stone floor.

Lisa looked up into the face of the baker who had made fun of her in the courtyard. He sneered. "Better be more careful. No one wants a clumsy baker." He walked off to a spot a couple feet from Lisa.

Lisa bent down to try to gather up whatever stardust she could. But it was useless. The dust was so fine it wouldn't settle. It seemed to snake its way across the kitchen, refusing to be trapped. Lisa could

feel hot tears forming behind her eyes. She would not let them see her cry. She would figure something out.

Just then one of the judges came in. "Alright, contestants. You know the rules. You must bake your own goods. You will be judged on what you produce while in this kitchen. And you have one hour to complete your baking. And your time starts, now."

With those words, the judge flipped over a large hourglass and Lisa worked to swallow her growing panic as she saw the little grains of sand begin to fall.

Lisa tried to remember everything Cyndal had shown her. She measured out the flour and mashed the strawberries so they were just right. She beat the eggs a little longer than she normally would have. She added a touch of vanilla. And the whole time, she imagined what her cupcakes would look like. She pictured the cupcakes she had made the night before. She pictured the look of pure pleasure on Kate's face when she had bitten into the cupcake. And Lisa wished with all her might that maybe, just maybe, she would be able to win.

When the judge called time, Lisa pushed a strand of hair behind her eyes, wiped her hands on her apron and looked around the room. Some bakers had not finished their cakes and pies. Others had gone above and beyond, creating cakes with multiple layers. Looking at her cupcakes, Lisa realized that Cyndal had been right. She did stand out. Many bakers had gone bigger, but not one had gone smaller.

Lisa waited nervously for her turn to bring her cakes back out to the courtyard where the judging would happen. She was scared that the mean man from before would do something to ruin her cakes. But he was too busy struggling with his 4 layer cake topped with a candy crown to pay much attention to Lisa's little cakes and Lisa was able to set her cakes up without anything happening to them.

Once everyone was set up, a horn sounded and everyone was quiet. One of the judges announced the arrival of the King and Queen and the special judge, the crowned Princess. Lisa felt her breath catch. She had no clue they would be judging the cakes. Now she looked at her cupcakes and felt silly. No wonder everyone had created such large, over the top goods. She felt like she was insulting the royal family by serving them these little deserts, but there was nothing she could do now.

When it was finally her turn, Lisa was so nervous. She tried wiping her sweaty palms on her dress, but they just seemed to get grimmer. She had been watching the royal family walk from table to table, only the Princess was the only one that ate anything. And she did not seem to like anything. There were a couple things she had not spat out, and these the other judges had rushed to taste. But if the Princess spat out a bite, that baker was instantly out.

Lisa curtsied low to the royal family. "What are these?" she heard the King ask.

"They are cupcakes. Mini-cakes. These are strawberry vanilla, made with real strawberries."

"Mini-cakes," the Princess repeated, "Like me?"

Lisa looked at the Princess. She wore a pink silk dress and her neck was covered with strands of pearls. Her blond hair had been curled into a million little corkscrews and was topped with a giant pink bow. The whole effect made the Princess look very tiny indeed. Lisa knew the Princess was younger than her. She guessed she was around Kate's age. Lisa had never paid much attention to the royal family, so she couldn't say for sure.

Lisa did not know how to answer the Princess. She didn't know if she liked being little or not. So instead Lisa just smiled and held one of the cupcakes out to her.

Everyone watched as the Princess took a bite. And then a second bite. And finally, she had eaten the entire thing!

The other judges rushed to taste the cupcakes and they too seemed to enjoy them.

But then the Princess turned and walked to the next table, without uttering a word, and Lisa decided that maybe she had not liked it. Maybe Lisa was not the winner.

By the time the Princess had finished her rounds, there were only half a dozen bakers left standing. Everyone else had been disqualified. Lisa didn't think the Princess had eaten as many bites from anyone else's treats as she had from Lisa's, but Lisa could not say for certain that this was the case.

Lisa waited anxiously for the winner to be announced. A drum was banged and the final contestants were ordered to the front of the growing crowd. “And the runner-up for best baked goods is, Lisa’s Cupcakes.”

Lisa could not believe it. They called her name, but they did not call her name as the winner. She was the runner-up. The runner up did not win any money. She would not have enough to pay off their debt.

Lisa walked to receive her award. She felt numb. As she stood beside the Royal Family waiting to hear the name of the winner, she felt a slight tap and turned her head. She was surprised to see the Princess standing beside her. The Princess whispered in her ear. “Yours was my favorite, but mum says we have to honor Mr. Blanche instead.”

Lisa could not believe her ears. The Princess liked her cupcakes best of all the other treats. While it wouldn’t solve the bakery’s money problems, it did make Lisa feel like the luckiest girl in the world. She looked back at the Princess and gave her a huge smile as Mr. Blanche, the burly gentleman who had spilled the stardust, came up to collect his reward.

When Lisa returned home, everyone was waiting in the shop despite the late hour. Lisa was certain she was going to be in trouble. But instead, Mrs. Drippins ran over and gave her a hug. “Your little minicakes sold like crazy today. How did you do it?”

Lisa looked at Kate, who wore a huge smile. And then she shifted her eyes to Maria, who had a look of gratitude on her face. “But, I didn’t win the competition. So it doesn’t matter. We can’t pay off our debts.”

“You let me worry about that child. You just worry about making more of those, what do you call them, cupcakes. People have been asking for them all day.”

Lisa went to bed happy, but she wasn’t sure if she could reproduce them. She had no more stardust. Sure, she had made the cupcakes at the bakeoff and the Princess had liked them, but maybe some of the stardust had floated from the air into the batter. Maybe it was all just luck.

Lisa woke up before the stars had gone to sleep and went down to the kitchen. She was surprised to find Cyndal waiting for her. “Child, did you not learn a thing? It wasn’t the stardust that baked those cupcakes. It was your belief in yourself.”

“But I didn’t win.”

“Winning isn’t everything. Now, it’s getting late. I must be off.”  
And with that, Cyndal disappeared.

Lisa searched around the kitchen, trying to find enough supplies from their dwindling stock to make cupcakes to sell. She was just finishing up her first batch when she heard a knock on the door. It wasn’t yet 7. It seemed a bit early for customers. She continued baking. Maria was already out front so she could handle the customer.

Lisa was just putting in another tray and wondering where they would get the supplies for a third batch when she heard a throat being cleared behind her. Lisa turned and saw a man dressed in livery from the Palace. And beside him stood the Princess.

“Hello,” Lisa said. She wasn’t sure what else to say.

“Father wanted to let Mr. Blanche create my birthday cake this year, but I insisted. I told him since he had gotten his way with the bakeoff that I would get my way with this. And so he has agreed to let you create some of your cupcakes for my birthday.”

Lisa could not believe her ears. Behind her, she heard Kate coming into the kitchen. “You’re the Princess!”

The Princess stared at Kate and then laughed. “Well, of course. What’s your name?”

“I’m Kate. And you’re it.” Kate ran up and tagged the Princess. Lisa could not believe her eyes when the Princess, instead of being upset, giggled again and then took off after Kate. The man in livery cleared his throat and held out a little leather pouch.

“This should cover the cost. We will require 300 of your cakes.”

Lisa opened the pouch and almost fainted at the sight of so much gold. There must have been at least 200 gold pieces. Even though she hadn’t won the bakeoff, she would still be able to pay off their debts. The bakery was saved.

Lisa took the gold to the dairy and had them send down the supplies she would need for the Princess’ birthday. She then stopped

by the bank and paid some gold to Mr. Leonard. She did not have enough to cover their debts with the bank in full, but he said it was enough to buy them some time.

When Lisa returned to the bakery, she saw a line out the door. And when the people saw her, they all started calling out their praises, asking when she would have more cupcakes to sell.

As the cupcakes grew in popularity, the bakery began to bring in more and more money. They had to hire more help and Lisa was allowed to buy new dresses and shoes. The Princess became a regular customer and she and Kate became fast friends.

One day Mrs. Drippins announced that she was tired of running a bakery, and if Lisa wanted, she would sell it to her. Lisa had never had anything that belonged to her, and so she agreed. Mrs. Drippins moved to a little cottage outside of town, and now that they were not working together, she and Lisa became friends, meeting weekly for tea and cupcakes.

As the sales grew, Maria was also freed from her betrothal to Lenny Milch. Now that they had money, she was free to marry the man of her choice. And she chose John.

And the next year, Lisa entered the bakeoff, and she won.

Lisa never saw Cyndal again, but every night she went out and looked up and thanked her lucky star for helping her find the confidence to make her dreams come true. The star had granted her wish. And with that, Lisa was able to live happily ever after.

*The End*