

# *The Keepsake*

by Suzy Vitello

*Book Two of The Empress Chronicles Series*

*Excerpted chapters*

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*One*



“Liz!” screams Dad.

I back away from the rushing air, slowly. “Coming.”

“Chop, chop!” he says.

I count seven steps, and then turn around, touching each finger to my thumb seven times: finger-thumb-finger-thumb, and all the way to seven. Breathe seven breaths. These last few weeks, since all that weirdness with Cory and the locket, my OCD is worse than ever, and my whole thing about counting-by-sevens has reached full on certifiable.

Plus, it’s so crazy hot out I can hardly move without feeling faint.

Cory and Willow are in the shed scrubbing all the goats’ udders, trying to prevent the spread of bacterial mastitis, which seems to have infected Shamrock, the star goat. There’s no end to disease out here, and when it’s this hot, it’s worse. I tried helping with the udder-cleaning, but as soon as I saw that inflamed milk sac – boom - shivers of repulsion zapped through me. Acid puke burped up my throat. I couldn’t do it. I *can’t* do it. Booby prize is, I’m on fence repair with Dad.

Dad has a spool of wire he’s pulling taut, trying to wrap it around a fencepost that’s lurching to one side. He waves me over with his chin.

The sun blasts as though shooting from a laser, and already there's a trickle of wet running between my shoulder blades, under the chain of the locket. I wrap my hands around the post and pull it toward me as much as I can while Dad winds thick, shiny metal wire just below my grip. I'm pulling so hard on the wood post my muscles shake. Gritting my teeth, because I really don't want the words to come out, but they do anyway, the way they've been, lately. Whatever my deepest thoughts are, out they come. "This is pointless. You know that, right?"

Dad is muttering, swearing under his breath. I tell him, "The goats aren't stupid. All those fresh blackberries, Willow's vegetable garden? Why would they stay in a dusty corral when dinner's just a squirm away?"

Our electricity bill is nosebleed high, thanks to the cheese-making stuff and refrigeration. According to Dad, even putting in an electric fence will send us into poverty. Which is ridiculous, but true. Dad and Willow are constantly fighting about money. There isn't enough of it and the stack of unpaid bills on Dad's desk is so tall, it's bending like the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

"Save the attitude, okay? Just keep holding on."

*Keep holding on.* Right. In this stifling heat, on this filthy farm, that's pretty much what I've been doing. School is still 53 days from now, and I can't wait. If you would have told me that I'd be counting the days – truly, ticking them off on my wall calendar – until sophomore year begins, I'd have laughed in your face. Between Mom being gone for over a month, Willow and Dad screaming at each other, and my weird semi-crush on Cory – and the whole Sisi journal fiasco (not to mention my shrink's sudden departure), it's a wonder I haven't gone completely crazy. I mean certifiable. Back to the bin, crazy. A lot of it would be solved if Dad would let me go, but now is not the time to reintroduce the idea of going to Europe to be with Mom.

Dad swears a few more times but then, finally, he gets the wire wrapped tight and the post righted. The look of the repaired section of pasture fence is actually somewhat perfect. Symmetrical, strong, capable. It's a little bit beautiful, and I must be cracking a smile because Dad's tone changes. A soft layer of love coats his voice, and he says, "Princess, we did it," and then offers the high-five hand.

Even though high-fiving is something a parent does with a little kid, I indulge him. His calloused palm against my chapped one. *Slap!* I'm knocked a bit off balance, and the chain of the locket shifts, the locket itself cutting into the skin of my collarbone. And it's a boiled over pot how the words roll up and out my throat, "I wish we could be more like this all the time. Happy, I mean."

Dad's eyes go all squinty, and he looks at me hard. "Me too," he says.

He straightens up and bends backward a bit, his face to the hot sun. There's more he wants to say, I can tell, but we're interrupted by the sound of Willow and Cory screaming at one another from the barn. Their harsh words are punctuated with goat bleats and metal clanging. Dad sighs. "Guess they didn't get the *be happy* memo."

"Right," I agree, my OCD doing what it does, causing my mind to churn numbers: seven, six, five, four as we walk-run toward whatever they're fighting about.

We get there by the time I'm at two. Cory has tied a bandana around his forehead, but you can still see veins bulging out around the edges of it. And his neck is a sculpture of muscle. His fists, clenched.

Willow is red-cheeked. Fuming. Her face all mad is happening more and more, lately. She hammers brushes and sponges into an aluminum trough, and once we're all the way in the

goat shed, she shifts her attention to Dad. “It’s just not working. I don’t know whether he’s stoned again or just stupid. I’m done with this idiot.”

I can hear Dad swallow, and he steps toward his girlfriend, who is all sweaty and dirty and untucked. She looks like she just crawled through the desert, and there’s two cloven hoof prints on one of her thighs. It’s a negative-space etching, an art project they used to assign back in my alternative middle school days. Most of her jeans leg is coated in dust except for where one of the goats kicked her.

Dad tries hugging Willow, but she pushes him away. She’s *that* mad. Cory chimes in, “I’m supposed to somehow *know* not to use liniment? Sorry, Sis, I didn’t take goat infections 101. I’m not a mind reader.”

Words want to vomit up from inside me again. I don’t know what is going on, but it’s like my voice has a mind of its own. And then, in spite of practically clenching my jaw closed, out springs: “Have you considered just quitting the whole Willow Creek Cheese business? I mean, the way you guys are headed, you’re going to kill these poor goats.”

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

Willow starts crying. This is her dream, this goat farm, and it’s not working out.

Cory shoots me a look, even though he was ready to punch his sister a minute ago. Even though she’d just called him an idiot. Blood being thicker than water and whatnot.

Dad is rubbing Willow’s upper arms, and her face is in the little hollow under his throat. A weird bolt of jealous pierces me in the gut. He used to comfort me that same way. I turn and walk out of the goat shed. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, one, two, three, four, five ...

Cory follows me out. I hear him gaining on me by the time I get to the sixth round of sevens, so I start jogging, even though the heat is prickling me and I'm ready to pass out I'm so thirsty.

Cory's deep voice rolls toward me. "Liz! Wait up!"

I'm not waiting. I'm starting to really fear what's going to come out of my mouth next. A month ago, I'd started feeling in control. Wasn't counting, wasn't cleaning, *was* gaining weight like Dr. Greta commanded. But then she left the country, and everything started to fall apart at the farm. And now there's a new dilemma courtesy of Mom. She's been iClouding and Vibering and What's-Apping. She wants me to join her on the cruise ship all of August – she's even secured me a job in the toddler care room. She sent a plane ticket, and I really miss her.

Which is another thing that's got Dad and Willow upset.

By the time I reach the dusty farmhouse porch, Cory's caught up. He grabs my shoulder and pulls me back a little, and in his grabbing, he catches a finger in the chain of the locket.

"Dude! You're still wearing this?"

I feel caught doing something I shouldn't be. The warmth of a blush fills my cheeks.

He says, "I thought you were all grossed out by germs and stuff. This jewelry is typhoid waiting to happen."

"I soaked it in one of your sister's weirdo natural cleansers."

"No way."

"Way. Plus, I think you mean tetanus, not typhoid."

Cory and I sit down on the flea-ridden couch on the porch, and I reach into the cooler of kombucha that Willow placed nearby earlier in the day. I've got my knees tucked under me, trying not to imagine that I'm some sort of Sweet Tomatoes for vermin. I pull the locket up over

my head and hand it to Cory, and he holds it in his palm, open to the goddess picture under the glass.

We can still hear Dad and Willow arguing in the shed. It's more like whining, actually. Their voices all up-speaky and drawn out. Cory is still focused on the goddess, his bandanna resting crooked on his forehead. "Wouldn't it be cool if this had some sort of power to grant wishes? You know. Like a genie lamp."

Okay. I'll play. Why not. "What would you wish?"

Cory gestures to the shed. "It'd be nice if this thing would work out for Willow, y'know?"

I take a sip of vinegary potion. A bolt of sour attacks my nasal passages. It takes me a moment to be able to speak. "*This thing?* You mean, the thing with my *dad*, or do you mean the *goat* thing?"

Cory shrugs. "Anything. I mean, she's sort of cursed. Her big heart gets her in trouble."

Willow is blood. I'm water. I'm staring at the locket in Cory's hand. The afternoon sun rays are poking in from the side of the porch, hitting the metal just so. There's a gleam it's giving off. Almost blinding if you look at it straight on. "I keep wondering if I should contact Dr. Greta about this."

"I think that ship has sailed. You stole it ... *we* stole it. Remember?"

My heart skips around a little hearing the truth. The locket, the diary ... every day I feel like I'm deeper inside of a lie. Maybe that's why I keep blurting out truths. My guilty conscience from our caper last month, replacing Sisi's diary entries in Dr. Greta's cabinet with my empty food journal pages. The stolen diary entries are hidden in my room. "She hasn't written back since that time."

“I’ve been thinking that maybe someone planted all of it,” Cory says. “Like someone played a trick on us.”

Cory has snapped the locket closed and he’s holding it up like he’s trying to hypnotize me with it. The timepiece wobbles back and forth on the chain. This crazy old relic hidden in the spine of the diary had sprung loose when we tore into the journal.

His teasing me though, it makes me wonder something. “How do I know you didn’t scribble that note in there and pretend to be Sisi? I mean, I can’t read German. You could have made the whole thing up.”

He laughs. “Yeah, right.”

The kombucha is giving me heartburn, or maybe it’s the memory of something that’s now resurfacing. “That very first note in my food journal, remember? *The Count must die*? Maybe you wrote that? Maybe you’re trying to drive me back to the loony bin?”

“Ha! Then I’d get to do all of these chores by myself. Good plan.”

If I were cooler, I’d do an ironic thing with my eyebrows right now. Instead, I just confirm what nerd I am. I tell Cory that maybe he and his sister are gaslighting me.

Cory’s face goes all puzzle-twist.

“Gaslight, you know? That black-and-white film with Ingrid Bergman?”

Cory stops pendulum-swinging the locket and stares at me. Aside from not being an art house movie guy, he’s also not a classic film buff. So I give him the quick summary. Even the spoilers because he’ll never see *Gaslight*.

“Okay, so Charles Boyer tries to make Bergman think she’s going crazy. Things disappear. Paintings on the wall. Brooches from her purse. But it’s Boyer, all along.”

“So, what does that have to do with gaslight?”



I pick up the kombucha bottle and hold it up, swirling the tiny bit that's left. "Boyer reduced the flow of gas to the lamps. She kept seeing the lights flicker and dim, and he told her she was imagining it."

Cory closes his fist around the locket. "So, if you got sent back to the psych ward, what would I have to gain?"

"Maybe you want my collection of rare books? My Japanese bathroom fixtures catalogs?"

"Caught me," says Cory, and he grins that big dimple grin, and there's a tingle in my chest. This boy who I've only known for a month – who sometimes feels like a brother and sometimes ... not. We're connected through the diary. His ability to translate Sisi's language and all that we uncovered together.

But here, at the farm, the thing about Cory being my father's girlfriend's brother – it's too weird. I can't crush on him. Or, I won't.

The fighting sounds of Dad and Willow, briefly calmed, now seem to be back in escalation mode. One of Willow's mangy cats creeps from oak trunk to oak trunk, after a robin and I jump.

All my senses are in overdrive. I need to take my meds. The smell of manure and spray from the leased clover fields hits me hard. All these things - tension, the cat pouncing, the insane heat, my weird feelings about the locket and diary and Cory – they all combine into a big knot of anxiety. My lungs feel heavy, and won't fill with air. I feel like I'm disappearing.

"Liz?"

I wave Cory away with the back of my hand.

"You're going all pale. What's up?"

Before I can think of anything to say to explain my sudden attack, I grab the locket back from his hand. Like when I used to keep my hands under hot water, I want to feel pain. Something that breaks the spell and proves I'm real. I push the tip of the metal wing into my palm. It punctures the skin and a trickle of blood oozes out. Cory grabs the locket back. He peels off his bandana and quickly ties it around my hand. "What the hell?"

I'm in that halfway place. Not really here. A deep spike of terror has me frozen. And, like a little baby, I sputter, "I need to go to my mom. I can't be here anymore. On this stupid farm with all these germs and everyone fighting."

Cory is still holding my cloth-bandaged hand, and he lifts it above my head as though suggesting I know the answer to a question posed in class. "Settle down, Elizabeth," he says in a whispery voice. "Take a deep breath."

My palm throbs. I can feel it again. The ghost of me is being replaced by nerves and skin and blood. I'm breathing. I wipe the sweat from the fuzzy edges of new bangs that are just growing back in after I burned half my hair off a few months ago. I feel my panic slide away. But I know it's temporary, this reprieve. There's no way I can last a whole summer here.

## Two



I snapped the keepsake closed. My fingers curled around the Virtue locket and I dashed it to the floor as if the locket were injected with poison. Was I to become this ratty figure under the glass? This peasant with flea-bit hair and sun-damaged skin?

“Your Grace!” yelled the hairdresser from the cabinet down the hall. “The time is growing short! We have much to do.”

Already the day was insufferably hot, and with my newfound agitation, I was certain to perspire through my camisole. And if that were not enough, I could hear heartbroken Nené in the next room, lamenting her fate as the old maid of her younger sister.

Whenever fate poured down its retribution, Papa had always taught us Wittelsbach children to imagine ourselves as great birds, who could soar above the trouble. *Move as though you have wings beneath your feet*, he would say, with a wink and a sly grin. The necklace on the floor, its chain coiled like a snail shell, from above, it actually made a lovely pattern. Much like the knot of hedges in the English Garden back at home. I inhaled. I exhaled. I studied the keepsake and made myself deaf to the hairdresser. And, soon enough, the anxious beckoning

from the servant was replaced with the calm voice of my governess, whose dear words, spoken the night before, ran through my mind: *You must think of the future, Dear. Not the past.*

And so I would.

I swept the Virtue locket up in my hand. Yesterday, this picture within was of me – my governess had worn it all my life, and I had been saved from many ills. If I was now to be the protector of the ratty peasant whose picture lay within, whoever she was, so be it. I would seek her out, and move forward.

Upon a dusky blue velvet settee I sat still while combs, oils and ornaments were dragged, slopped and stuck against my scalp. Every so often Mummi would appear, wringing her hands and clutching her girth (seems she had had a bit too much plum wine at the ball the night before). Nené, too, would stumble along, her wailing down to mere sniffles, the lace hem of a handkerchief curled out of the bottom of her tight fist. Her snivels burst to cries anew as she trudged past me. Evidently, there was to be no fuss and bother with her own hair or face, and, indeed, there was not one chair free in the cabinet for her to make ready for the emperor's birthday luncheon.

As the sharp teeth of the comb pulled through my hair again and again, snagging and snapping through curls, I tried not to hear the low muttering behind me in Austrian dialect, *Rose of Possenhoffen, indeed. This girl is more countrified than a Hungarian gypsy. And, There are more flakes on her scalp than on top of Grossglockner!*

“What is that in your hand, Your Grace?” asked one of the attendants who fussed with the clasp of my summer cape.

I'd hoped to conceal the Virtue locket, but not accustomed to being so closely scrutinized, I'd been careless, the wing of the keepsake peeked out between two of my fingers. "Just a remembrance," I sighed.

The hairdresser held out his palm. "You are meant to put your simple country baubles away, Your Grace. You are on the cusp of the royal elite."

I held my treasure tighter. "If you please, Sir. This locket means a great deal to me. And to my family."

Mummi strode by, and upon hearing me mention *family*, stepped close to the clot of fuss-makers. "Locket?" she bade.

This was not welcome in the least, this intrusion. For my mother had no knowledge of my exchange with my governess. How could I begin to explain it? Papa was once in love with the Baroness Wilhelmine, after all, and this very locket was a big part of that story.

My lips spilled a falsehood of their own accord. "Remember the gift from the Emperor's young brother, Karl? This is that very keepsake. A Habsburg heirloom. I must return it."

"I remember how fond he was of you," crowed Mummi. "But it would be most improper for you to return the gift now, would it not? Now that you have been promised to the emperor. Perhaps I can take the necklace and return it to the archduchess."

Mummi's outstretched palm replaced that of the hairdresser, who'd gone back to waxing my stray curls.

Again, an untruth forced its way out. "I should polish this first. I would be embarrassed to return a tarnished locket to my future mother-in-law."

Mummi chuckled. "There is an entire staff here at Bad Ischl to perform such a task as that, my dear."

Nené appeared once again, before I had a chance to lie a third time. And she saved me in her wretchedness. “Let Elisabeth clean it,” she bade. “She could do with a bit of humility.”

Mummi relaxed her hand and returned it to her side. With the other she withdrew a fan and flapped it several times. The heat in the cabinet was now quite unbearable, and Mummi had been suffering from bouts of perspiration and rash of late. “Very well,” she huffed.

My troubles were averted for another hour. Nené and Mummi shuffled off to the guest quarters, and once again the muttering about and tugging upon my hair commenced.

Baroness Wilhelmine had told me there were three lockets, and I pondered this, my fist closed tight around the one in my hand. This peasant girl, she was who I must protect, it seemed. And the keepsake that my governess had taken from me – its winged hinge obscuring the photograph of my intended, Franz Joseph – it had a strong magic. That of revealing love. But what of the third locket that Baroness Wilhelmine had described? The one Lola had claimed I would soon discover. The locket of Voice, which promised to turn me mad. As the combs tugged my scalp, I felt the sharp metal of Virtue ripping into my flesh. The peasant girl hidden inside looked quite mad indeed. Perhaps she had, herself, come across the Voice locket? Ah, but I had plenty of time to ponder this. Most important at this hour was to present myself as a future empress in front of my future mother-in-law and aunt, the Archduchess Sophie.

X   X   X

Soon, the hour of the emperor’s birthday luncheon arrived, and I was escorted to the hall by two of the archduchess’s ladies-in-waiting. Clearly, neither lady was happy with this assignment, and

they bowed curtly, eyes trained on the floor before one of them pushed my bottom toward the great table that was filled with all manner of heaped serving tray and heavy laden goblet.

I had heard of these infamous Viennese luncheons where plate upon plate of food, accompanied by glass upon glass of wine, would be served in succession. If one were to consume all that was offered, one's stomach would truly explode. Especially given that, for this occasion, I was cinched tighter than a horse saddled for steeplechase. The Habsburgs had a particular brand of machine-made corset – steel instead of bone – and the cold stays gripped my midsection as though a smithy had driven horseshoe nails into my tender skin.

As I was directed toward the great, laden table, an intrusive thought wicked its way in. What would Count Sebastian make of all this fuss? This excess? And where, pray tell, had my dear count – the man responsible for my very first kiss – where had he gone? Did he know of this troublesome development? Surely he would laugh out loud at the frill, my cinched girth, the platters of boar and *spaetzle*, which would most likely be nibbled from and then tossed to the swine. A small rupture burst from my lips, and I quickly hid it behind my fan. I envisaged Count Sebastian, that bold revolutionary, his finger pressed against the tip of his nose, affecting a piggy, and snorting, *Who gives a hog a meal made of its own? The aristocracy, that's who! While children cry for gruel and half of Bavaria boils last year's potatoes yet again, they feed pork to their pigs!*

“Your Graccce,” hissed one of the beleaguered attendants. “Composure!”

A trio of trumpets blasted in my ear as I walked past a podium. I stepped high and light, as would make Papa proud. Birthday banners fluttered from a balcony above the hall, and underneath the pageantry small children had gathered, all in long gowns – even the boys. They began to sing so beautifully, their soprano and alto harmonies no doubt chosen from the best

children's choir in Vienna. I had to admit, the whole scene, excessive though it was, was magnificent.

Two footmen pulled back a large chair draped in a velvet shawl. I sat down, and began to scrape the chair forward toward the table, but no sooner had I began my tugging, when the same footmen lifted me up as though I were an Egyptian princess carried on the backs of camels. They set the chair (and me!) down ever-so-gently, and then a large linen broadcloth found its way to my lap. The gesture quite put me in mind of the feeding ritual for my baby sister, Sophie. Again, I had the urge to laugh out loud at the silliness. But, I dared not. For at that moment, the children stopped their singing. The trumpets ceased. A few throats cleared, and the echo of those could be heard in the stifling hot hall.

In walked the archduchess flanked by her two youngest sons, and once she was seated – across the table from me – she clapped her hands and the trumpets resumed, blasting a well-practiced entry march. It was then that I quite lost my breath. Settled in its prison between the metal stays of the corset, the air that would normally move in and out of my lungs sat thickly against my vitals, for the vision of the man who walked elegantly and with great stride – as if marching to his first meal in a fortnight – was grander yet than the man I remembered from the previous night. The emperor was dressed in full uniform, a powder blue jacket dotted with two rows of brass buttons. A gold choker threaded through with crimson silk. His deep blond hair as lustrous as a chalice, and his eyes! Even from where I sat, an entire length of table from him, his gaze lifted me nearly off that large dining chair.

There was an announcement of some sort. The emperor's twenty-third birthday. Hurrah! Something similar to that. But I really did not hear any of it, nor did I continue to feel the metal stays of my corset. Indeed, not even the wing of the Virtue locket which I'd managed to secrete



under my camisole. All thoughts of my dear Count Sebastian vanished. All discomfort and speculation and mirth at the ridiculous pomp – all of that fairly melted and swam out of my mind at the sight of such a handsome man, who, for reasons I still could not discern, would name me as his bride by the end of this lavish feast.

*I hope you enjoyed the first two chapters of The Keepsake. Stop by [suzyvitello.com](http://suzyvitello.com) for more giveaways and extra content.*

*xo*