

GYPSY PEBBLES

PEGGY NOLAN

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Richard who has always been
there to encourage me
and help me over the rough patches.

Other books by Peggy Nolan

The Spy Who Came in from the Sea
A Sunshine State Young Reader Selection

Willow's Quest

Willow and the Settlers

Missing Dad

The Shadow in the Window

Riding the Pine

Deadline

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Chapter 1

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The Fortune Teller

Violetta awoke with a smile. Ah, what a wonderful dream. A dream of a wedding. Her wedding. And the groom was Stefano, the handsomest young man in the village. She snuggled deeper under the covers and tried to hold on to the dream. But it floated away as though washed out to sea. She sighed. After all, it was only a dream.

Many times, she had watched Stefano stroll beneath her window. Often as not he had a pretty girl beside him. Oh, how she had wished she could be one of those girls. Well, not one of those girls, but the girl always at his side.

Then she laughed. She couldn't help herself. Tomorrow, at least tomorrow, at least for one day, she would be the one walking with Stefano.

Shouts rose from the street. Then others. In seconds it sounded like a swarm of honey bees. Violetta threw off her covers, leaped out of bed, and ran to the parlor. She threw open the tall, green shutters and leaned out. What a sight!

"Look! Look!" the children cried. "The gypsies are coming!" They clapped their hands and danced about in the cobblestone square below the window. Mothers rushed to snatch up their little ones for it was said that gypsies carried children off, never to be seen again.

Violetta shivered, out of fear or excitement, she wasn't sure. With the men of the village at sea or busy in the olive grove or vineyards, the mothers took no chances. They

hurried up narrow, crooked stairways, escape routes from pirates of times past, and disappeared behind their heavy wooden doors. Still, Violetta noticed that other women peeked around their half-opened doors or peered from their windows. All looked toward the mountain.

“What’s that commotion?” Mamma called from the kitchen. But Violetta was too mesmerized by what she saw to answer.

A band of gypsies traveled down the steep mountain path toward her seacoast village of Vernicchio. The men swung along in their bright colorful shirts and sashes. They wore scarves around their heads. Violetta blinked at the sun flashing off the women’s jangling bracelets. She stared open-mouthed at their carts that were painted in bright reds, greens, and yellows. Pots and pans clashed and clanged as the carts passed over the rough ground. What treasures they were bringing, she could only guess.

She scooted over to make room for Mamma and Nonna who had pushed in beside her. “Listen,” she said when she caught the jangle and beat of a tambourine. What a happy sound. She couldn’t help but tap her foot to its rhythm.

The clang of the pots and pans grew louder, nearly drowning out the tambourine. Any fears she had gave way. Her excitement grew as the gypsies reached the edge of the village. They passed the jumble of pastel houses that sat one above another on the narrow street and soon entered the market square where the children had played moments before.

The men opened their carts, while the women billowed old sheets onto the ground and spread out their wares: colorful cloths, baubles, crockery, and much more.

So much temptation! Violetta ran to her room in search of a centime, found one, and charged down the stairs and out the door before Mamma or Nonna realized she was gone.

Many of the village women who had fled had already given in to their curiosity. They were back, along with many others, poking among the scarves, tin pans, and trinkets that were offered for sale or trade.

Violetta felt the sun warm on her skin and noticed that the town cats had either slunk into the shadows or lay on nearby ledges, watching. She looked around and caught sight of shiny mirrors and birds in cages.

But she had no time to think about cats or birds. Reds and blues and greens of every shade surrounding her left her breathless. The wonderful scent of spices and the sound of a fiddle beacons her. She didn't know where to go first.

Clutching her coin to her waist, she moved from place to place, poking at the bright, colorful blouses and shawls, and fingering soft, velvety fabrics. But all of them cost far more than the centime in her hand. She picked through pretty pins and earrings, but they too cost too much.

A gypsy boy held up a frog by its back legs and waved it in her face. "Cure your warts. Only three centime."

She shuttered and moved on. Perhaps a mirror, but the young girl, no more than twelve, bargained no lower than two centime. Violetta was about to give up when she spied a rainbow of ribbons that hung from a wire and danced in the breeze. Ah, ribbons of every hue. And wouldn't one look lovely in her hair when she met Stefano. Her heart skipped at the thought of him.

As she hurried to the cart, an old gypsy woman wound her

way through the crowd, her gaze fixed on Violetta. Unaware of the woman, she eagerly reached for a silky ribbon, blue as a robin's egg. But the gypsy was quicker. She grabbed Violetta by the wrist with her bony hand.

Violetta spun around and found herself staring into eyes as black and deep as a cave. She tried to pull away, but the gypsy's sharp fingers tightened on her arm. The woman was hollow-cheeked, her hair wild. She may have been beautiful when she was young, but now she was old and bent. She wore a cape as red as her rouged face.

"Tell your fortune," the gypsy tempted in a reedy voice as she tugged Violetta away from the ribbons.

Violetta shook her head no, but the gypsy held tight.

"I have something to show you," the woman said. She let go of Violetta's arm and pulled back her heavy cape, revealing a crystal rock.

Fascinated, Violetta stared at the rock. She saw that it was about the size of the balls the village men used to play *bocce* on the sandy shore, and yet very different. Gingerly, she reached out and touched the crystal ball. She felt a strange sensation and jerked her hand away. Then she leaned in, the better to see. Deeply imbedded swirls of milky white spread out from the center, like a flower within.

"Only one centime and I tell all," the woman coaxed, motioning her closer.

Still she held tight to the coin in her hand.

The bony fingers plucked at her sleeve. "Ah, I see a handsome man."

With that, Violetta took a deep breath, tossed aside her fears and boldly dropped the coin into the gypsy's hand. The

man had to be Stefano, the one she dreamed of, the one whose attention she longed for. But the fortune teller didn't speak of the handsome man, not then. She drew back, a look of horror on her face.

Pins pricked at Violetta's insides. "What do you see?"

The woman looked deep into her eyes. "A great tragedy will soon befall you.

Violetta's stomach knotted. She wanted to hear about the handsome man, not misfortune. "What tragedy? How do you know?" she asked.

"Look for yourself into my crystal." The gypsy tilted the rock and circled her hand over it. The milky swirls turned to dark clouds. Violetta tried to look away, but the crystal drew her in. She had to know.

"Darkness will envelop you, but I cannot see in what form it will come." She tilted the crystal again and the whiteness of the swirls reappeared like a clearing sky. "Then better times will come."

Relieved, Violetta looked into the gypsy's eyes. "And the young man," she said. "Do you still see him?"

"Ah, yes, I see him clearly. He is dark and handsome with fine strong shoulders.

Violetta frowned. Stefano was certainly handsome and his shoulders had a certain elegant slope that showed he had the blood of an aristocrat. But he could hardly be called dark. She opened her mouth to ask, "How can that be?" when something sharp and cold sliced the air between her and the fortune-teller.

Violetta fell back. Father Canavera!

Her face flushed. She knew the Church forbade fortune-

telling, that God alone knew a person's fate, not tea leaves or tarot cards or crystal balls.

"On your way, gypsy!" cried the wizened old village priest. Angry spittle dotted his lips as he waved his walking stick at the woman.

She quickly hid the magic crystal beneath her cloak and raised her haughty chin. Before moving off, she stepped close to Violetta and secreted something small and hard into her hand.

Father Canavera smoothed his black robe and turned to Violetta. "Shame! Yes, shame will be your fortune. Superstition. Sinful. You should get down on your knees and ask the Lord's forgiveness."

The heat rose in Violetta's face. Her color deepened. "Yes, Father," she murmured, but she dipped her chin and looked away, hoping he couldn't see the excitement she felt.

No sooner had the priest moved on than Violetta slipped into the shadows and opened her hand. Two small pebbles lay in her palm. The dark one she knew must be for tragedy and surely the white stone stood for romance and happiness. Maybe the gypsy had more to tell. Violetta searched the market square, but the red-cloaked gypsy had disappeared from sight.

Chapter 2

Red Sky in the Morning

Two smooth, round pebbles, one pure white, the other ebony black stared up at Violetta like soulful eyes. Why had the fortuneteller given them to her? What did they really mean?

In the light of a new day, she thought the gypsy's predictions were surely wrong. Although the sun darkened Stefano's skin in summer, he was more fair than dark complexioned. Besides, his hair was like the roped browns of pine tree bark, both dark and light. And if the fortuneteller was mistaken about that then surely she had to be just as wrong about some terrible tragedy. Father Canevaro was right. Fortune telling was nothing but superstition. She had wasted her money.

"Vee - o - letta," Mamma called. "Where are you? There's much to do today."

"Coming, Mamma."

She eyed the pebbles. Maybe they held a secret meaning. Was it possible? She scooped them up and dropped them into her skirt pocket. If she hurried with her chores, she planned to slip off to the olive grove early. She didn't want to miss her meeting with Stefano. At the very thought of him something stirred deep inside her. A strange delicious yearning she didn't yet understand ached to be released.

Snatching up her hairbrush, she hurried into the warm kitchen with its enticing aroma of fresh baked bread wafting through the house.

A string of garlic bulbs, and a small sack of onions hung from pegs driven into the wall. Sprigs of tarragon and rosemary dangled from a cord near the stove. “. . . because they sweeten the air around us,” Mamma always said. And they did.

Shelves stacked with plates, bowls, glasses, mugs, and canisters of flour, white beans, and coffee lined the painted plaster walls. On the very top shelf sat a round blue bowl that had belonged to her great-grandmother and was only used on Christmas, Easter, and other special occasions. A jug of olive oil sat half empty in its special place. Violetta’s father, Giovanni, stood by the stove warming his hands as her mother, Angelina, broke bits of corn bread into mugs of goat’s milk.

“*Buon giorno*, Mamma. *Buon giorno* Papa,” she said as she yanked the brush through her tangled hair. Everyone in the family had dark hair except Violetta. Hers was as golden as the sands on the shore and, unlike the others with their dark eyes, hers were a creamy blend of milk and bitter chocolate.

“You had better cover that hair of yours,” Papa teased. “I wouldn’t want the villagers discovering our family secret.”

“And what would that be, Papa?” she asked, although she already knew the answer for this was an old stale joke that he never tired of.

“Papa,” warned his wife.

Papa cocked an eyebrow. “That family secret has something to do with one of those big blond fellows from Genoa who was shipwrecked on our shore many years ago. He left his mark on your Mamma’s family.”

Violetta’s mother pulled up her apron and buried her face

in it. “Ah, Giovanni,” she cried, “I blush with shame that you say such things to our Violetta.”

Papa roared with laughter.

Mamma lowered her apron, picked up her rolling pin, and shook it hard in his direction, making him laugh all the more.

Mamma turned away and wiped her hands on her apron. “Go wake your brothers, Violetta. Then take your grandmother her breakfast.”

As Violetta left the room, she heard Mamma say, “Didn’t you hear the *scirocco* blowing in the night and see the red sky this morning, Giovanni? You know those winds from Africa mean bad weather.”

Violetta stopped, not liking what Mamma was saying about bad weather.

“I beg you, don’t go out in the boat today. Stay home and finish building the table you promised your brother Luigi.”

“My carpentry business can wait,” Papa said. “If Dominic is to be the head fisherman in our family he must learn to handle rough seas as well as calm. Besides, the big fish is not caught on land, Angelina. But I promise Dominic and I will only fish for our dinner today.”

Papa always has his own way, Violetta thought, no matter what the weather, while I’ll just have to keep my fingers crossed that it doesn’t rain.

No sooner had Violetta shut the kitchen door behind her, than the door at the top of the worn stone steps flew open. Dominic, her older brother, bounded down the stairs singing. She smiled at his bold baritone voice resounding off the rough walls. Blocking her way, Dominic opened his arms and sang out. “Figaro, Figaro. Figaro.” She ducked under his arm, but

not before he tweaked her ear. She watched after him as he continued singing in earnest, holding notes, adding flourishes, spreading his arms majestically as he headed for the kitchen.

Violetta always thought of herself as cheerful in the morning but no one surpassed Dominic. Still smiling, she shook her head and climbed the remaining steps to the room where her little brothers slept.

Opening their door, she sang out, "Time for school."

Francesco pulled his quilt over his head and moaned. "Let me sleep."

She gave him a poke.

"Five long years," he grumbled, "wasted in school. I'm glad this is my last year. I can't wait to take Papa's place in our fishing boat. Then he can spend all his time making furniture." Francesco's head came out from under the covers. "I will be a great fisherman, Violetta, and an even greater business man."

"Only if you learn your numbers well, Francesco," she said as she whipped back his covers.

Unlike his sleepyhead brother, Gino had bounded out of bed, talking the first chance he had and flinging his arms about, always eager for a new day.

"The schoolmaster is going to read us the letter from his brother in America today, Violetta. Did you know that if you take a ship from Genoa you must travel south to the Mediterranean, then sail west between the coasts of Africa and Spain and all the way across the Atlantic before you reach America?"

Ah, another letter from America where the streets were

paved with gold! How she wished she could go to school with Gino and hear the latest news. But she knew Gino would tell all at the dinner table. Besides, the schoolmaster would be passing the letter about in the *taverna* and the village square. And he was not too shy to read it aloud should someone ask.

Leaving the boys to dress, she returned to the kitchen. She slipped an apron over her head and tied it behind her waist. As she poured Papa another cup of coffee, Dominic reached up and gave her wild tresses a yank. "If Stefano saw your hair tumbling down the way it is now, he'd find himself someone else to chase after."

She blushed and slapped his hand away, but she was pleased that Dominic had noticed that Stefano noticed her.

"Stop your teasing," Mamma said, but Papa arched his eyebrow.

She held her breath. Papa didn't approve of her talking to any boys, even those her own age. And Stefano at nineteen was three years older and so very charming. She didn't want to think about what Papa would say if he knew their plan to meet under the olive trees.

Luckily, Papa continued to sip his coffee and Dominic winked to show he meant no harm.

"How are you feeling today, Nonna?" Violetta asked, pushing aside the curtain that separated the kitchen from the alcove where her grandmother slept. She fluffed her Nonna's bed pillows and helped her pull herself up until her back was snug against them.

"Oh, my *bella* Violetta. May you never know my pain. Every bone in my body aches so. I tell you there is a big storm coming, a very big storm."

Violetta almost moaned aloud. First Mamma, now Nonna, talking about storms. Rain would spoil everything! And who knew if Stefano would ask her to go walking again? It was useless to worry. That's what Nonna always said, but how could she help it. She turned to Nonna and offered her one of the mugs of milk and bread sop she'd set on the bedside table.

Nonna waved her hand, "You eat, Violetta. Take my cup and yours too. Eat! Eat! You pick at your food like a beautiful little bird, but so tiny and flighty. One day you will be lifted on a breeze and fly away with your hair trailing like the tail feathers of the swallows."

Violetta laughed. "I think I would like being a swallow, Nonna. Then I could fly all over the world."

"Such a dreamer. Why should you want to be anywhere but here? Vernicchio is the most beautiful village in the world. It's where you belong."

Violetta turned away to keep from laughing. Nonna had never even traveled to the next town. What did she know about the world?

After eating, Nonna brushed the tangles from Violetta's hair and helped her adjust her scarf so her hair was pulled back and nearly covered. Violetta tied the scarf at the nape of her neck, kissed Nonna's cheek, and left to do her chores.

She made her bed, passed back through the kitchen where her little brothers had joined the others, and on into the rooms at the front of the house. She threw open the tall green shutters and studied the sky. In the east the sun had yet to clear the mountain top. The sky was still rosy but had a strange yellow glow to it. She turned her head and looked west, out to sea. Far off the coast dark clouds gathered.