

# PEBBLES

by A.A. Abbott

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"Why are you staring at me?" Jessica Woodcott asked. She folded her arms protectively over her thin chest. In her white vest top and jeans, blonde tresses over her shoulders, she looked younger than her eighteen years.

Linda Schiff silently berated herself for losing her edge as well as her memory. "I'm sure we've never met before, but you look familiar," she said. "Tell me how I can help."

Jessica's pale blue eyes looked anxious. Still hunching her shoulders, she sipped her skinny soy milkshake.

"No one will overhear," Linda reassured her. The coffee bar played a loop of bluesy jazz. It was a summery soundtrack, designed to relax. Customers would stay for longer and indulge in cake and other treats. Marketing people were clever, she thought.

"Do you work pro bono?" Jessica asked.

"Generally not," Linda said, "but try me. What's this all about?" If she didn't bill her clients, she didn't eat, but her overheads were low. A private eye didn't need a fancy office. Anyway, her curiosity was piqued. Three times Jessica's age, she still recalled the awkwardness of adolescence, the absence of love and money. Jess probably wanted her to find an errant boyfriend.

Jessica's eyes darted around the coffee bar before she replied. "You think you recognise me, because you've seen this." She retrieved a newspaper cutting from her bag, a mugshot of a girl with long blonde hair, below a headline that screamed, 'What Lexie would look like today.'

Of course. How could she forget Lexie? The whole world knew the sad story of the angelic toddler who had disappeared from a beach in Italy twelve years before. Her distraught mother still occasionally featured in the news, desperate to stay in the media spotlight despite the unwelcome glare it shone on the men coming and going through her private life. Linda didn't envy Emma Woodcott. Her little girl must have drowned, or worse, for who would steal a child if their motives were pure? It was every parent's nightmare.

Perhaps the mother's dream would be realised now. A doubt niggled Linda, however. "You can't be Lexie," she said. "She could only be fourteen at most."

"Thirteen and three-quarters."

"Then why..." The words died in Linda's mouth. "You're the older sister."

Jessica nodded. "I lost her on that beach." Her lip trembled.

Linda reached over and squeezed Jess's hand. "You would have been what – six years old? You shouldn't have been left in charge of her on your own. You mustn't blame yourself."

"No." A tear trickled down Jessica's peachy cheek. She clenched her fists. "You don't understand, Mrs Schiff."

"It's Linda."

"Linda, I wanted her to get lost. At least, in that split-second, I did. Mum had no time for me anymore. Lexie was cranky. That's why Mum went to buy her ice cream. I'd had enough."

"So what happened?"

Jess told her. It had been a hazy, humid morning on the first day of their holiday. As they climbed down the steep steps carved into the rock, she saw the tide was out, a shimmer of blue in the distance.

Jess felt like a beast of burden, carrying everything: the bag of towels and sunscreen, her bucket and spade. Mummy was clutching two-year-old Lexie, who had thrown a tantrum rather than walk.

The beach was a long, creamy flat sweep between the foot of the cliffs and the sea. It looked idyllic, but its appearance was deceptive. There was no sand, just an endless stretch of rounded pebbles, an inch across. They sat down on the stones, though. Mummy made cushions by folding towels. Jess collected a bucketful of pebbles.

"Together, on the beach, they were indistinguishable, but really each one was different," she told Linda. "My favourite had a glittery thread running through it. Quartz. I dipped them all in a rock pool to make them shine."

Her eyes were sparkling. She was a pretty girl, Linda decided.

"Then Lexie wanted to play in the rock pool. She tried to eat a tiny crab. It pinched her. She yelled and whined until Mummy said she'd buy ice cream. She had to go back up the cliff for that, so I was meant to mind Lexie."

"But you didn't?"

"I tried. It seemed ages, although Mummy said it was five minutes. Lexie was still in a temper. She emptied my bucket. I couldn't find my special pebble." Jess was crying again. "I wanted to hit her, but I knew I shouldn't. To stop myself, I ran away, towards the sea."

"The media reports didn't mention that," Linda said.

Jess shrugged. "I wasn't the main focus. How could I be? I was found, and Lexie wasn't."

"Do you have any idea where she went? Did you see anything, or anyone else nearby?"

Jess shook her head. "No. I'd turned my back on my baby sister, and she disappeared."

"How did you feel then?"

"Bad. Mum hated me, and I deserved it. It was all my fault." She unwound her fists, stretching her arms in front of her at last. Crisscross lines glowed white against her wrists.

"Do your parents know about the cutting?" Linda asked.

"I don't have a dad, and Mum's more interested in her boyfriends than me. She threw me out a year ago. I'm couch-surfing until I can get a student loan." Jess's reddened eyes were hard. "It isn't the worst trouble I've been in. I'm not perfect Lexie."

"So you want me to find her?"

"No," Jess said. "I already have."

Linda couldn't avoid a sharp inhalation. "Run that past me again, Jess?"

Jess nodded. "I did one good thing in my life," she said, "and that's how I found her. You remember the Kate Norland appeal last year?"

"Yes, it was a child with bone marrow cancer, wasn't it? They were trying to uncover a match. Nobody thought they'd get one in England, but they did." The media frenzy hadn't rivalled Lexie's disappearance, but was nevertheless intense. Mr and Mrs Norland were accused of snobbery for preferring an English donor, when doctors had told them they'd have more luck in Romania.

"I'd joined Narcotics Anonymous," Jess said. "And our group decided we'd volunteer to Donate for Kate. It would make us all feel better about ourselves. And it did. I was an exact match."

"What are the chances of that?"

"Tiny. I bet it's a million to one." Jess flushed. There was pride in her voice, but anger too.

"So you're saying Kate Norland is really your Lexie? But she was adopted from an orphanage in Romania. Everyone knows that." Linda couldn't recall if Kate looked like Jessica or not. There had been photographs of a child bald from chemotherapy, clutching a teddy bear. She sighed. "Are you sure about this?"

"No, I'm not sure," Jess said, fiercely. "That's why I'm asking you to find out. I can't talk to my mum about it. Suppose I'm wrong?" She chewed her lip. "I can't talk to Kate, or her parents either. Suppose I'm right? What then? They're all so happy."

"You met them?"

Jess nodded. "They're loving and kind," she said, wistfully.

It began to make sense to Linda. "Kate has the kind of childhood you wish you'd had, doesn't she? And now you've donated, she'll grow up."

"Yes." A rare glimpse of elation appeared on Jess's face. "Like I said, I did one good thing."

Against her better judgement, Linda found herself agreeing to investigate without payment. It was the scars that persuaded her.

She waited until Jess left, then opened her laptop. First, she had to unpick fact from fiction. The odds of a bone marrow match, she discovered, weren't as low as Jess imagined, but still only one in three hundred. That rose to one in three for siblings. It didn't prove Jess and Kate were related, but they did resemble each other. Add blonde hair to images of Kate, and a younger Jessica could have been smiling from the screen.

DNA testing would prove it for sure, but she'd need samples. It wouldn't be a problem to obtain one from Jess, but Kate's might be tricky. There was the cost, too; no one was paying Linda's expenses.

Linda wondered if there was a more prosaic explanation. Jessica suspected she and Kate were both Emma Woodcott's daughters. They could still be half-sisters if they had different mothers, but the same father. Had Mr Norland been one of Emma's fly-by-night boyfriends?

She googled him. Keith and Maisie Norland lived in a palatial home in Bath. They ran a marketing company together. That explained how they'd run such a slick publicity campaign for Kate. Maybe they'd like to market a private detective's services too? She emailed them to find out, requesting a meeting with Keith.

He phoned back within minutes, suggesting she visit his home office in the morning. His voice, warm and friendly, held no hint of mistrust. Linda hoped she wouldn't have to shatter his life.

The next day, her elderly Corsa chugged up the hill to his mellow stone mansion overlooking Bath. Keith, his grey hair and moustache closely trimmed, was waiting at the front door as she pulled into the sweeping drive. He wore a yellow linen shirt and jeans. Linda was aware that her tailored black suit and coppery ponytail were not funky at all. Her little car, too, looked like a dowdy aunt next to the gleaming red Ferrari parked beside it.

"A pleasure to meet you," Keith said in the same approachable tone, ushering her into a meeting room furnished with a glass table and white webbing chairs she knew to be expensive. A large sash window revealed a spectacular view of the World Heritage city below.

He made them both Nespresso lattes and sat opposite her, brown eyes twinkling, fingers steeping his chin. "So, tell me about your business," he said.

"I've got a question for you first," Linda said.

"Fire away."

"What do you know about Lexie Woodcott?"

The twinkle vanished as Keith's eyes narrowed. He was silent.

"I'm certain you can tell me something," Linda said. "If you won't, I'll be forced to share my suspicions with the police."



Keith's shoulders slumped. "Don't try blackmailing me," he said, all trace of affability gone. "I just might call the police myself."

"This isn't blackmail," Linda said. "I've been retained by a client to find Lexie, and the trail leads here."

Keith seemed to have aged a decade in an instant. His face was haggard, paling beneath his tan. "Your client's Miss Emma Woodcott, isn't she? I assume she's snagged another rich drug dealer boyfriend." He collected himself. "No. That's not fair. She has every right to search for her child, whatever her lifestyle. I've been looking over my shoulder ever since I met that girl."

"Jess?"

"Yes." Despair oozed from his expression. "As soon as I saw her, I knew. She was the older child on that beach. But Kate needed the transplant. We couldn't afford to turn it down."

"You say you'd seen Jessica on the beach?"

"I'd seen Emma with her children at breakfast, with her squeeze. He was obviously a dealer. Tried to sell me coke." Keith's lips tightened. "I was visiting the holiday resort on business, developing a marketing plan. As I was checking out later, I saw Emma again. She was with him, heading for the bar. I heard her tell him she'd left the girls on the beach. They'd be okay, she said, because the older one was sensible and the tide would be out for four hours. I ask you, Linda, what would you have done?"

"What did you do?" Linda could guess.

"I saw red. I raced down to the beach. Kate was almost drowning in a rock pool, her big sister nowhere in sight. I picked up my little girl and carried her to my car."

"She was Kate already then, Keith?"

"To me, I guess she was." His voice softened.

"What were your thoughts of Jessica at that moment? And Emma?"

Rage and contempt flitted across his features. "That woman didn't deserve kids. When I consider how hard Maisie and I tried... I mean, my wife loves children, always has done. She did a gap year at that orphanage in Romania."

"Convenient," Linda murmured.

Keith ignored her. "We did five cycles of IVF, and nothing. Meanwhile, that airhead just popped kids out and forgot about them. I didn't simply abandon Jessica either. I scoured the beach for her when I was down there. At the top of the cliffs, as soon as I had a signal, I phoned the carabinieri about her. Then I drove non-stop to Bucharest."

"How much did you bribe the orphanage?"

Keith scowled. "That's an ugly word, 'bribe'. We were already sponsoring the orphanage. They were only too pleased to help."

Linda visualised the long rows of cots. Just as a single pebble would never be found on the beach, if you wanted to hide one baby, how better than among scores of them? "So, you had your little angel at last?" she prompted him.

“Yes.” Suddenly, the fire seemed to leave Keith. Misery clouded him once more. “What will you do?”

Linda stared out of the window, at the garden and the beautiful view. In her mind, she imagined Emma Woodcott’s sorrow turning to bliss as she was reunited with her lost daughter. Then, she recollected the scars displayed by the child that Emma kept.

She returned her gaze to Keith. His eyes were filled with grief, a complete absence of hope. He would go to prison if the truth were known, she supposed. Worse, the happy home he’d created for Kate, all the certainty and security in her life, would vanish forever.

Keith had broken a family once. Now, that power rested with Linda.

“I’m doing nothing,” she said. “Tissue matches aren’t exceptional, whatever your Donate for Kate campaign implied. That’s what I’m telling my client.”

Linda saw optimism return to his face. She wasn’t excusing him so lightly. “You could do something, though,” she said.

Keith recoiled. “I knew you wanted to blackmail me,” he accused.

“That’s such an ugly word, Keith,” Linda said, forcing a smile. “I don’t want money. Just remember the girl you left behind. Jessica’s had precious little joy in her life. Right now, she doesn’t even have a roof over her head.”

“She saved my daughter’s life,” Keith said. “Maisie wanted to help her, but it’s no use. I can’t afford to get close to her. What if she twigs who Kate is?”

“Why can’t you support her anonymously?” Linda asked, reflecting that marketers might not be that clever after all. Perhaps it was men who made life complicated. Maisie, she was sure, could have arrived at the same answer. However, Linda was equally certain that Keith’s wife had no idea who Kate really was.

“I’ll work something out,” Keith said. “Jessica’s worth it.”

Finally, Linda agreed with him. Like a single thread of quartz, there was a spark within Jess that lifted her above her surroundings. At last, it would have a chance to shine.

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