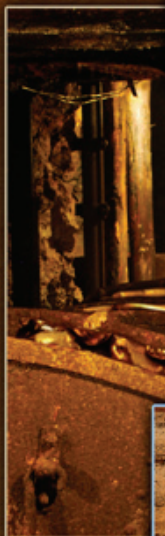


GOLD TRAP

*A Tale of High Adventure and
Divine Appointment*



FLIP
Lilly Mantree



Gold Trap

Lilly Maytree

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Dedication

To all who dream of living their dreams, and to my
own wonderful family who let me.

1

A Face in the Rain

"Monsieur is brave, bright, and fascinating..."

Mary Kingsley

There is a sidewalk cafe in Paris where they say you will meet someone you know, wherever you come from in the world. Not that Megan Jennings was the type to chase after such things. But it seemed fitting that on the eve of her great adventure, she should set out with a bit of fanfare. If such a thing did occur, she would take it as a confirmation that for the first time in her life, she was truly on the right track.

Of course, she had no intention of changing her plans if the little enchantment didn't happen. The die was already cast. She had put on a black vintage traveling suit that one might have seen on the likes of a long line of famous lady adventurers from the Victorian era. She even had an antique brooch pinned to the high-neck collar. But most importantly, she had chosen a pair of dark riding boots with laces, which were about as close as she could come to jumping into the shoes of that amazing and intrepid explorer, Mary Kingsley. And Meg was prepared to let them carry her as far back into time as it was humanly possible to go.

Figuratively speaking. The idea was also part of an

experiment to see what effect a person out of the past might have on modern surroundings. Because if there was no effect, if she merely wandered ghostlike through crowds that were so accepting of outlandish styles they were no longer impressionable, then the impact of her entire project would be greatly reduced.

Maybe even worthless.

So, it was on this overcast late afternoon that Meg settled herself at a small corner table in front of the famous cafe, where she had a direct view of the Eiffel Tower in the distance, and could smell the heavenly scent of roses that were being sold from a picturesque flower cart across the street. She ordered coffee in the first words of French she had spoken to anyone other than the voices of the language instructors on her home study course back in the States, and was pleasantly surprised when the young waiter smiled appreciatively and actually understood. So far, so good.

She looked around at the people seated at other tables. No one she knew, yet. And even if, by chance, there was anyone who was scheduled to go out on the same African tour that she was leaving on tonight, she would not recognize them. She had purposely come here first, instead of heading directly for the airport. Visiting this sidewalk cafe was one of the few items on her *"List of Small Things to Accomplish"* that wouldn't take much time.

Meg reached into the side pocket of her carry-all (that had come free with the tour), took out a leather-bound journal that held a finely engraved gold and silver pen in a pocket on the inside cover, and flipped about halfway through until she came to the next blank page. It was at that point her coffee came, and she set

things aside long enough to thank the waiter and add cream and sugar from the miniature white bowl and pitcher on the table. She blew softly on the hot mixture and took a sip...delicious.

Then she pulled a pair of delicate gold reading glasses down from the top of her lighter-than-auburn hair (done up into a twist of curls held in place by an antique tortoise shell clasp), picked up her pen again, and wrote: *Question—Is it possible to miss a divine appointment simply because you fail to recognize the moment?*

Hmmm...Meg wondered then if a person could actually go looking for divine appointments, and, if they got good at it, might even qualify for more. Now, that was an interesting thought.

In fact, it put a whole new perspective on that scripture (what was it, again? oh, yes...) that one in Hebrews that talked about strong things belonging to those who practiced enough to be able to tell the difference between good and evil. Definitely something to look into. Because that sort of skill just might prove invaluable considering the places she was headed for. So, she made a note to herself, in parentheses, to research that subject further.

It was at that moment she distinctly felt someone's gaze upon her, and looked up in time to make a direct connection with a man seated near a large front window of the cafe. But other than noticing his eyes were an arresting shade of blue in contrast to his dark, wavy hair and mustache, she could not tell whether or not she might know him.

Peering over the top of her glasses, she could make out a rather distinguished-looking gray suit with a vest. But if there had been a tie, it had long since been

removed and stashed somewhere else, and his white shirt was unbuttoned at the collar. He was seated with a fashionably-dressed older woman who was talking over the menu in rapid, fluid French. When he broke off looking at Meg long enough to answer in the same, no further evidence was needed as to whether she knew this person, or not.

Meg didn't know any French people.

Still, there was something about him she couldn't quite put her finger on. Of course, it could be her clothes he was staring at so intently. She had nearly forgotten about them, so she flipped back to an earlier page of her journal titled "*Effects of the Past on Modern-Day Crowds,*" and wrote: (*Mostly ignored, but longer than normal looks from a few particular individuals.*)

Then she took another sip of her coffee. At which point she felt a drop of water against her hand, and then another splattered onto her writing.

"Oh, of all things!" she muttered as she closed the journal and returned it to her carry-all. Now she would either have to cut her visit short or move inside. The few others in the sidewalk dining area that weren't beneath table umbrellas picked up their things and began moving toward the door. No doubt, it would be crowded in there. Since Meg's table was too small for an umbrella, it would probably be best to save this activity for the end of the trip, after all. There were plenty of other things she could do while waiting for her flight.

The waiter returned with a tray and handed her a slip of paper before he began clearing off tables nearby that were already deserted. She turned it over to see what she owed, and was startled to find that it was a personal note instead of a bill. But it was in French.

Which she might have been able to translate if she could take her time and it didn't look as if it was about to rain in earnest at any moment.

"Excuse me..." She forgot all about speaking French and reached out to touch the waiter's sleeve before he moved too far away. "Would you be so kind as to tell me what this says?"

"Yes, certainly. With pleasure, *mademoiselle*." He scrutinized the note with a flair of youthful enthusiasm and pronounced, "This gentleman he will come to you, as soon as" — there was a brief pause before he rattled off the last part in a final burst of confidence — "as soon as the lady she leaves!"

"What?"

"Shall you be waiting inside?" He handed the paper back with a triumphant smile.

"But I'm not waiting for anybody, and I certainly don't...how much do I owe you?"

"Nothing, nothing. Your gentleman, he has already paid."

"I don't have a gentleman, I..." Her gaze turned, almost by reflex, to the man near the window who'd been watching her. It was just in time to see him enter the cafe with a protective arm around the shoulders of the silver-haired lady, and then settle at a table on the other side of the window. But then he looked her way again, and the intensity of that gaze suddenly began to send butterfly sensations all through her.

Along with a very disturbing thought.

What had gotten into her to come traipsing into a restaurant all alone and stare so openly at everyone? In France, of all places! No one but herself knew what she was really doing, and it was no wonder people would naturally assume the most obvious thing. That she was

merely a type of...(Oh, dear!). Whatever enchantment she might have been beguiled with suddenly dissolved into a sea of reason. What had gotten into her? Well, whatever it was, it was gone now, and she'd better get herself to the airport and her tour group where she belonged. Before somebody did more than pay for her coffee.

Two taxis had pulled up simultaneously to the curb in front of the crowded cafe in anticipation of the rain, and Meg decided to forego any more sightseeing of enchanted places and take one. She reached for her carry-all and got to her feet.

The waiter smiled approvingly and said, "I will find you a table inside."

"No, thank you," She shook her head for emphasis. "I'm going to catch one of those..."

That was when the man at the window stood up and actually started for the outside door. Why...he was coming in her direction! Meg had a moment of alarm, which was odd, considering she was not the type to scare easily. She dropped her carry-all, then picked it up, again, and finally darted toward the taxi before he could catch up with her.

After a hasty—"Airport, please!"—to the olive-eyed driver, she turned to look out the back window as they drove away. At the same time, there was a resounding clap of thunder and the start of a heavy downpour, but the man made no move to get out of it, only stood there at the curb and watched her disappear into traffic.

"Well, for heaven's sake..." she murmured to herself. "He's just standing there getting drenched!" She felt a slight prick of conscience. "I...I suppose I should have at least thanked him for the coffee. I really

don't know what came over me."

"Not to worry, *mademoiselle*." Answered the driver over his shoulder. "He will forgive you, I'm sure, and then love you even more for it!" Then he laughed at the pleasure of his own philosophic comment.

"Goodness...he doesn't even know me!" Meg watched until another car obscured the vision and then turned around to face front. However, the image of him standing there was indelibly imprinted on her mind. When she realized that she was still clutching his note, she turned it over to look more closely at it.

The handwriting was bold and decisive, and there seemed to be quite a few more words than what the waiter had translated for her. "Miss," it began (one was either a Miss or a Mrs. in this country, so that certainly didn't imply anything other than courtesy.) "I cannot let such an extraordinary woman leave without speaking to her. Will you..." Now what was that word? It looked familiar but she couldn't place it.

She leaned over the seat and asked the driver. "Do you know what *nôtres* means?"

"Oh, it can mean many things, *mademoiselle*, depending on how it is used. Ours, our own, one of us, or even..."

"As it is used in the phrase, *voulez-vous etre des nôtres*."

"Ah...it means will you join us. To make one of our group. You see?"

"Nothing that suggests meeting alone?"

"No, not that phrase," he insisted. "Clearly it means more than one."

"Well, of all things." She sighed and sat back against the seat, again. "That waiter didn't speak English any better than I can speak French. I'd have

been quite willing to join the two of them, but the way he put it made me think..."

"Not to worry," said the driver. "We French do not mind such things because we like the tourists. Shall I help you practice your French, *mademoiselle*?"

"Thank you, but it's a little late."

"I can drive faster, if you wish. What time is your plane to leave?"

"I meant it was too late to help the restaurant situation. My plane doesn't leave until this evening. But thank you, anyway."

She went back to studying the note, and the next phrase she figured out showed her just where the misunderstanding had been made. It said, "If you are waiting for someone, we would be happy to meet with you later." Now, she really did feel badly, because, looking at it this way, she had been quite rude. Especially, since she hadn't even paid for her coffee. Under normal circumstances Meg had always considered herself to be polite and sociable. With everybody. And she had a great deal of respect for foreigners, too. She really did. In fact, the word prejudice was hardly even part of her vocabulary.

Must have been all those precautionary lectures from family and friends about the dangers of women traveling alone. It had made her start thinking the worst of people. Now, at the very least she had missed out on something that might have turned out to be pleasant. Maybe even enlightening. And wasn't that what she was looking for? Why, it was what this entire trip was about! How in the world could she ever expect to step out into a new and exciting future, if she allowed the restrictions of her past to keep her from even getting through the door? Then the next thought

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was practically unbearable...

What if she had just missed a divine appointment?

“Stop!” She clutched the driver’s shoulder so fast he tromped on the brakes out of reflex. “I mean...could you please turn around? I...I have to get back to that cafe!”

2

A Bad Omen

"I wouldn't go there if I were you."

Mary Kingsley

There was a barrage of French words that had not been included in Meg's language course as the taxi screeched to a halt. The driver turned around in his seat with an exaggerated gesture of throwing up his hands and implored, "You...you stop the heart...*mad'-moiselle!*"

"I'm sure I'm very sorry, but it suddenly occurred to me..."

Now, there was a blast of someone's car horn from behind them, and while Meg turned to look out the back window at who was shouting, her driver stuck his hands and head out of his own window and hollered out an indignant reply. In more French she couldn't understand. After a few moments of verbal sparring, several other cars began to honk, and the two combatants finally drew apart as the taxi eased over to the curb and the irate drivers behind them zoomed around.

During the time it took to turn back and head for the cafe, Meg had the vague sensation they were taking

the long way. Under other circumstances she might have complained, but considering the incident she had already caused, she decided it best to be gracious. However, by the time they finally got there, it was only to discover that "her gentleman" and his lady friend had already left.

So, she rode the rest of the way to the airport, silently asking for another chance at divine appointments. Because the knack for recognizing them was clearly going to take more skill than she possessed at present. Still, the small loss left her with a rather melancholy feeling that somewhat dampened her enthusiasm for starting up conversations with her fellow tour participants. That is, until she first looked them all over carefully to see if she felt any "inklings" toward someone in particular.

Not a one.

And hardly a spark of interest in much of anything other than a new compulsion to look for men with mustaches. Of all things! She had definitely not spent nearly six month's salary and flown halfway around the world to suddenly take up some oddly-inspired search for eligible men. For heaven's sake, she had a job to do. Besides, she had fairly well given that idea up years ago, when the avid pursuit of her career seemed to drive most ordinary suitors away. It was a decision she came to reluctantly, after the rather disturbing realization that there was very little about herself that she could describe as ordinary.

So it was that she had made a conscious effort to throw herself into her work in the hopes that her peculiar talents might be more blessing than curse. That she might even be set aside for a certain destiny. But there had been quite the opposition over that

philosophy, too. People were forever telling her that her entire focus would change when she finally met the right person.

It was love that was the secret (this from her own mother) because that was the very thing that could suddenly turn an ordinary somebody into the man of her dreams. Well, she had spent a lot of years waiting, and looking, and even praying that just such a thing would happen to her. Only it never had. What's more, she had come away from it all with the growing impression that she had wasted far too much time trying to do what everyone else insisted were the practical ways to go about it.

Now, she had come to this.

Sitting alone in a crowded airport, with every intention of skipping out on most of a tour (for which she'd paid good money). Dressed in her black Victorian outfit (quite the comfortable thing, actually) that had the surprising effect of making her feel prettier than she had for a long time. Must be the feel of the smooth silk and lace of the old-fashioned undergarments beneath. She had gone to great lengths to make sure the mid-length costume was as authentic as it could possibly be. She had even traded modern suitcases for a single canvas duffel of the sort that Mary Kingsley, herself, had taken along on her first trip to West Africa.

Meg sighed heavily and meandered over to an empty seat to settle down for what she had learned would be another hour before boarding time. It was between two separate groups of people who seemed preoccupied enough with their own conversations that they paid little attention to any newcomers they didn't know. Which would give Meg plenty of time to collect

her thoughts and finish that bit of writing that had been interrupted by the rain.

Under normal circumstances, Megan wasn't the type of person who made a habit of listening in on other people's conversations. Only this was different. It was impossible not to hear what people were saying in such close quarters. And considering the fact that the human ear did not come equipped with an automatic shut-off when confronted with objectionable material, she must conclude that her only responsibility lay in what she did about it. Well, if it wasn't one thing, it was another.

Meg sighed heavily, again. Then she withdrew her journal from the side pocket of her carry-all and began to thumb through the first few pages. When she came to the list of her own personal rules (the ones she had kept without fail for nearly ten years), she pulled her glasses down from the top of her head and began searching out one in particular.

There it was. Rule number sixteen stated, *"I will not eavesdrop, tell other's secrets, or participate in the spreading of gossip of any kind."* Then she reached for the lovely antique pen, but it wasn't there. Bother! Left at the cafe, no doubt, in her rush to be off. So, she fished through all manner of things to finally come up with one of the common plastic variety. After which she made a note to herself, *"Does not apply to airports."*

Not that she was the type to meddle in things that were none of her business, either. Meg had no criticisms of those who did not think like she did. A distinct effort toward the practice of rule number nine: *"Live and let live."* Of course, she was familiar with the Good Samaritan story, and would have known just what to do if some poor stranger lost their purse, or

even if a person suddenly went into cardiac arrest and fell down in front of her. Crowded airport, or otherwise.

This didn't exactly resemble one of those, but in Meg's opinion, it definitely called for some sort of response. Because while Henry (who had occupied the seat next to her) was off in the men's room, his wife Ethel (one seat away) was giving out a piece of disturbing information to Vidalia (two seats down).

"He knows something's up! He was awake half the night trying to figure out where that money went. He even asked me what U.S.M., Inc. was. I had to tell him it was the company that fixed the furnace! Said he wants to see the receipts as soon as we get home."

"Don't worry, honey!" The dark-skinned woman with an even darker dapple of freckles across her large nose gave Ethel a comforting smack on the arm. "Less than a week it'll all be over. You just make sure he takes that little side trip for photographers. Everything's set up."

"Oh, he'll take it all right. It's the only part of this tour he's really excited about." Ethel opened a dark red purse that matched her pantsuit and withdrew a tube of lipstick to refresh. "I only hope I can hold out until then. I feel like he can see right through me. I don't know what's come over me, lately..." She replaced the cap and returned it to her bag. "I used to have nerves of steel."

"That's why we're partners, so's we can help each other out. Just think about having your own money from now on. Here he comes back, now." Vidalia reached into the pocket of her leopard print jacket and handed over a business card. "Better take this, like as if we just met." Then she raised her voice as Henry

returned to his chair. "Vidalia Harbin, gen-u-wine psychic. If you want a reading, you'll have to make an appointment."

"Good lord, Ethel!" The heavysset man sat down and brushed a few spots of water from his Hawaiian print shirt, then made sure none had splashed onto the camera that hung from a strap around his neck. "What sort of claptrap are you getting into now?"

"Exactly how much do you usually charge for a reading, Vidalia?" asked Ethel.

"Oh, it varies, honey. Depending on..."

It was at that point Meg shoved her glasses back up on her head, tucked her journal away, picked up her carry-all and moved three rows down. The idea! She hoped she wouldn't have to sit next to any of them when the flight finally boarded. She settled down again and then reached once more into the wide front pocket of her *Bremen Tours* carry-all (the only part of her outfit that wasn't vintage but it was quite the handy, well-made thing) and took out a bundle of brochures. Now, where was that one about the Mole National Park that had such a wonderful map of the reserve? She pulled her reading glasses down into place, again. This might be just the time to take a few practice shots of it with her new camera.

Maybe she should take a still shot, instead. Even though the new video camera could zoom in and pan across each particular point of interest, she had read somewhere that stopping the action with a dramatic photo could present quite an effect. She might even do both and decide which one to use, later. She leaned forward to take both of the cameras out, and then set them momentarily on the empty chair next to her when she felt her slip catch on the laces of her leather riding