

LILIAN'S VOYAGE

TO THE MANOR BORN BOOK 3



KATHY LEIGH



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



GLOUCESTERSHIRE, 1886...

Boredom seeped into every corner of Lilian's soul with each drop of the rain she could see from the schoolroom window. It had been falling in uninterrupted sheets for four days without a break, and she was beginning to think that it would never stop. And she was bored. She was bored with the long weeks of being on her own, bored with the monotonous hemming of bed linen, bored with the few books on the schoolroom shelves that she had read over and over again, and bored with the weather that kept her confined indoors. The continuous rain prevented her from enjoying the one pleasure she might have found in the dull weeks since her aunt and cousins had left Fairmount Manor. She could not even take a walk on the usually pleasant grounds of her cousin Gerald's estate. The rain would not allow even that much break in her tedium.

With a sigh and a shake of her glossy blonde head, Lilian turned from the window. Her frown eased as her eyes rested on a childishly drawn portrait of her uncle who had died four years ago. The

charcoal drawing was not very proficient, but a young Thomas had captured both the stateliness and kindness of Uncle Roland. When her parents had died of fever, leaving their eight-year-old daughter orphaned, Uncle Roland, her mother's brother, had gladly agreed to bring her to Fairmount. And for a few years, she had been happy here. But Uncle Roland's death when Lilian was fourteen had left her in the care of his wife, Aunt Euphemia. Her aunt by marriage had never considered Lilian a positive addition to the family.

As she gazed at the portrait, Lilian, not for the first time, wondered how different her life would have been if Uncle Roland were still alive. Would she even now be preparing to enjoy the delights that society offered a young debutante during the London season? At almost nineteen, she should be indulging in the pleasures other girls of her age enjoyed, the dances and soirees and dinners and outings to the theatre and exhibitions that her girlish heart longed for. That filled her thoughts and crowded her dreams.

Lilian's dreams were pieced together from the boastful comments made by her cousin Hortense when she returned from her frequent trips to London and from the descriptions in the magazines she managed to rescue from the discarded piles in the kitchens. But her dreams became something so vivid, they were almost real when she let her thoughts linger on a certain pair of deep blue eyes and a rich baritone voice.

Now, in the gloom of a late wintery afternoon, Lilian closed her eyes and let her dream loose. She spun around the schoolroom, imagining how this handsome gentleman of her dreams would forsake all others in a crowded ballroom and seek her out. A glimmer of a smile would hover around his firm mouth as he led her onto the dance floor, his tall frame and lithe body easing her way through the dazzling crowds of the most celebrated ball of the season. He would guide her around the glittering dance floor with steady hands and sure steps. As he danced a waltz with her, holding her confidently in his strong arms, he would amuse her with lively observations about the other dancers. They would share insights

about art and music and books, his eyes focused on her, acknowledging her views as worthy of consideration.

And his deep blue eyes would smolder with admiration and desire as he concentrated on her. When the dance drew to an end, he would smile at her, a smile that declared she was the only lady in the crowded ballroom who attracted his attention, with whom he wanted to form an attachment. And as he returned her to her chaperone, he would promise to take her riding out in his curricule, letting all of London know that he was courting her—that he loved her, that he wanted to marry her.

Lilian came to a standstill in front of her work table and shook her head. She began to fold the sheet she had been hemming. Thoughts about magnificent dream lovers were better kept for the evenings when she was alone in her bed. Such thoughts usually led to strange and unusual longings that sent tingles and thrills throughout her body that made her feel exceptionally excited and delighted and could usually only be tamed when she touched her body and fondled her breasts and ran her fingers through parts of her body that she was not supposed to mention. These were the kinds of thoughts and feelings that governesses had admonished her to avoid. She had been told good girls were not supposed to feel this way and yet they made her feel so good.

With a huff of frustration, she placed the folded sheet in her work basket. In a few months' time, she would be expected to warn her own pupils that such feelings and thoughts were improper. Very soon, she would be a governess who would be expected to model perfect behavior. She bit her lip as she wondered, not for the first time, if she was so innately wicked that her character could not be reformed, if she was destined to be wanton and end in some unspecified disgrace, as the wicked girls in the pamphlets governesses made her read so often did. She had never let anyone know how wicked her thoughts were, how much she desired the pleasure she sought when she was alone at night or how much she enjoyed the way her body responded when she touched it as she thought of her dream lover. Whenever she succumbed to such

thoughts, she worked even harder to appear decent and respectable so no one would ever suspect that beneath her sober and dutiful façade, was a swirling mass of wickedness that would cause any decent person to sever ties with her. Her aunt and cousin would surely not allow her to stay at Fairmount if they knew how she lacked propriety. And no one would employ her to look after children if she had even a suggestion of wickedness about her. So, she tried to be good, to appear respectable.

Not even her closest friend, Thomas, the nephew of her aunt by marriage, had any idea of what thoughts and desires hid beneath her surface. She shared so much with him. When Thomas had been a school boy, he had taught her to ride and swim and climb trees. They had spent much time together, and often after a day of running around outside, of rowing on the lake and clambering in the woods surrounding Fairmount, the two had fallen asleep in the same bed. They had whispered secrets to each other. But this, she could not share. What would he think of her if he knew what she was really like?

Lilian grimaced at the window. The greyness of the afternoon made it difficult to continue sewing, and Lilian did not dare ask the housekeeper, Mrs. Diggory, for a light before six o' clock, even though she had not finished the sewing allocated to her for the day.

As she packed the cotton sheet away, her thoughts returned to the kinds of pleasures and delights that her aunt Euphemia and cousin Hortense had abandoned the wintry bleakness of Gloucestershire to seek in London. Of course, Aunt Euphemia excluded Lilian from all such entertainments and amusements, constantly reminding her she was not destined for high society. Lilian was never to have a season, never to seek the entertainments and delights that could be found in the city. She was never to see if she might attract a man she could love and who would love her enough to marry her. Never to see her dream lover become a real one.

Lilian sighed again. Over the years, she had become used to being alone, but at times, such as today, her loneliness rankled, encroaching on her usual cheerfulness and filling her with a vague

despair. Before Uncle Roland had died, he had encouraged her to spend time with him in his library, a place her aunt had now exiled her from. And being with her uncle had also meant spending time with her much older cousin, Gerald. When she had arrived at Fairmount as a quiet and wary orphan, he had already been a quite grown up and remote sixteen-year-old. She had always found him a bit intimidating, but he had patiently taught her to play chess and he had listened to her rambling childish stories with kindly amusement. And even now, when he did spend time at Fairmount, he treated her with consideration.

But best of all, her uncle's arrangement had meant spending time with Thomas. Thomas was only two years older than she was, and the two of them had become good friends. He was also a ward of Uncle Roland's, the son of Aunt Euphemia's sister. Lilian and Thomas were cousins only by marriage, but they had formed a special bond over the years. Thomas's liveliness had encouraged her to attempt activities she might have thought were only the preserve of boys if she had spent all her time with Aunt Euphemia, Hortense and the staid governesses. She knew how to shoot and could throw a cricket ball as straight as most boys could. And when Thomas's exuberance threatened to become overwhelming and land him in trouble, Lilian eased his restlessness by reading to him or playing on the piano.

But in the last few years, especially since Uncle Roland's death, Gerald and Thomas had not spent much time at Fairmount. Thomas was up at Cambridge. And Gerald was a young man in his late twenties focused more on pursuing the pleasures of a large acquaintance and the sophisticated entertainments that young men enjoyed in the company of other young people, than on staying placidly at home. Lilian missed her cousin and her friend.

Once her workbasket was on its shelf, Lilian wandered over to the solid table that stood in the middle of the schoolroom. Her writing box lay open on it and a brief smile lightened her face as she picked up the most recent letter Thomas had sent to her. She cast her eye over the sprawling words that filled the three pages.

Her blue-grey eyes gleamed brightly. Tommy had written most enthusiastically and wittily of Gerald's assiduous courtship of Marion Bishop. Lilian was delighted to know that her rather grim older cousin was falling in love. But she shook her head as she turned the pages of the letter. Gerald was not going to return to Fairmount any time soon. He had been away since before Christmas, spending time with friends and most especially with the Bishops in Hampshire.

As Lilian perused the letter, a light blush tinged her cheeks. She paused and slowly read the lines that she had read so many times before that she knew them by heart. Thomas had given a detailed and delightful description of a hunt. But the focus of his description had been on Lord Edmund Moreland, Viscount Ridley, son and heir to the Earl of Cumberwell. He had also been a guest of the Bishops, and Thomas had been most thorough in writing about Lord Edmund's new stallion and how the viscount had jumped various hedges. Tommy's letters often made such references to Viscount Ridley. He did not know how eagerly Lilian gathered these tidbits as if they were diamonds, that she used them to fuel her dreams of the dark-haired, blue-eyed suitor who was the focus of her fantasies.

But Thomas had left Hampshire to return to Cambridge, and she had not received any letters from him since the term had begun. She frowned slightly, wondering why he had not written to her for so many weeks, and then shook her head. It was selfish of her to want his attention when he must be so occupied with his studies and other attractions of university life. He would not have the time or inclination to think about her. She gave herself a good talking to about not feeling sorry for herself and not being a nuisance. She did, however, decide that writing a letter to Thomas would be a pleasant way to spend the evening. Lilian glanced at the rain beating against the window. Not that there was much to say about her dreary days. Endless rain and hemming sheets did not make exciting letters.

Lilian needed to find something to occupy her mind in the long

stretches of time she was alone. March was rapidly running down toward Easter. Soon, the London season would begin in full and Lilian knew there was no hope that either Gerald or Thomas would return to Gloucestershire until late summer. A frown creased her forehead. She would have to endure many more months on her own. She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. She would not give way to melancholy thoughts. But she did sigh again as she watched the incessant rain streak the window panes.

Fairmount was a large and solitary estate and only a few servants remained to keep it open while the main family enjoyed the delights of the London season. Much of the house was already closed up and wearing the desolate look of a reclusive widow. Lilian was beginning to wish that even Aunt Euphemia would find a reason to return to Gloucestershire. Shortly after Christmas, she had hustled Hortense to London to begin preparations for what Aunt Euphemia declared would be Hortense's most glorious and successful season. Lilian smiled wryly as she recalled the accounts of Hortense's first two seasons. Hortense's simpering superficiality had not attracted the success and offers of marriage Aunt Euphemia had predicted for her pampered daughter. But Lilian was beginning to think that even Aunt Euphemia's constant carping and Hortense's snide gloating were better than weeks and weeks of being alone.

Lilian frowned up at the clock on the schoolroom wall. It was almost four o' clock. Could she risk slipping down to the kitchen and taking tea with Mrs. Barnes, the cook? Her aunt disapproved of her spending time in the kitchen and the housekeeper, Mrs. Diggory, was certain to mention such a transgression in her next letter to Aunt Euphemia.

But before Lilian could decide whether the warmth and cheerfulness of the kitchen was worth a scolding from her aunt, activity in the stable yard caught her eye. She pressed her face against the rain-streaked window, attempting to discover what had caused such a stir on a rain-drenched afternoon when all the family was away. Through the mistiness of the rain, she watched a travelling

coach being trundled into the carriage house and horses being led into comfortable stalls. Lilian squinted. The rain made it difficult for her to identify whose carriage or horses they were. If some members of the family had returned to Fairmount so unexpectedly, something very strange must have happened. Her gloom was swept away by intrigue.

Driven by curiosity to find out who had arrived and why, Lilian pushed open the schoolroom door and made her way swiftly along the dark upper corridors of the third floor. When she arrived at the top of the grand staircase that led down to the main foyer of the house, she hunched down in the shadows and peered through the banister railings.

From her perch at the top of the stairs, Lilian caught sight of her cousin Gerald handing his greatcoat and hat to Thorpe, the butler. Mrs. Diggory was hovering at the bottom of the staircase, fussing over the drops of water on the clean floor as footmen hurried off with dripping umbrellas and damp greatcoats. Footmen were bustling about and voices echoed up the stairs.

Lilian eased her tight grip on the balustrade and grinned when she heard Thomas's cheerful voice rise through the gloom of the winter's afternoon. "Well, here we are. Hope it isn't too much of a bother, Thorpe, our arriving without any warning."

Lilian grinned. No matter what odd circumstances had brought her cousin-by-marriage and dearest friend home from Cambridge in the middle of the term, his cheerful company would definitely break the monotony of her days.

Lilian stood up and was just considering rushing downstairs to greet her cousins when Gerald stepped aside.

A third traveler came into view, and all the breath rushed out of Lilian's lungs.

Standing in the foyer was Lord Edmund Moreland, Viscount Ridley, heir to the Earl of Cumberwell. Four years ago, he had been Gerald's guest at Fairmount—when life had been very different for Lilian. A time when her uncle was still alive and she had still been

an indulged young niece, protected from her aunt's contempt by the love of her uncle.

And the viscount had filled her thoughts and dreams ever since.

Lilian moved closer to the edge of the stairs, wanting to view Lord Edmund more clearly. And she thought that the viscount had, if possible, grown even more magnificent and more handsome in the intervening years. Even from her awkward angle at the top of the stairs, she admired just how well his tall, broad body filled the elegant navy blue travelling coat he wore with casual grace. His thick, dark brown hair was brushed back from his forehead with careless ease and he handed his hat and gloves to a footman with a smile and nod that indicated a graciousness few of the aristocracy would bother to bestow on a servant.

She had been aware of something special about Lord Edmund even when she had first met him. Along with the good looks of his predecessors and their titles and lands, Lord Edmund had also inherited their ability to command and control with grace. Altogether, he exuded confidence and composure that came from an innate awareness of his assured position in society. Four years ago, he had just graduated from Cambridge, but even then, Lilian had been conscious of the air of authority he emanated. That presence had increased over the years, and now he could only be described as imposing.

Four years ago, Lilian had been infatuated with her cousin's handsome friend. She had urged him to play chess with her in the evenings, and during the days when Gerald, Thomas, and the viscount had wandered the grounds of Fairmount fishing and shooting, she had traipsed behind them. The viscount had been kind to her, patiently assisting her when she made rash moves in chess and slowing down for her when her short legs could not keep up with the longer strides of the three men out in the fields. He had even listened sincerely to her suggestions about how the poor could be better provided for and never laughed at her thoughts on the books she was reading. He had even recommended that she

would find much of interest in Mrs. Gaskell's novels. *North and South* was now one of her favorite books.

Lilian's girlish fascination with Lord Edmund had become the essence of her dreams as she had grown into young womanhood. His elegance and physical prowess, along with his intelligence and sensibility, had aroused her admiration and captured her imagination as well as ignited her physical awareness.

Her dreams had grown out of the fortnight Lord Edmund had spent at Fairmount, embroidered by the snippets included in Thomas's letters or dropped in conversations between Gerald and Thomas over the years. She had woven many fantasies around those gleaming, deep blue eyes and rich, evocative voice. The fairy tales she told herself in bed at night, in which the viscount was her Prince Charming, were not the kind of stories found in books for children. Her stories had led her to explore her own body when she lay in her bed. The pleasure of those secret experiences was focused on the memories of Edmund's strong arms, broad shoulders, and firm thighs.

And now, he was once again at Fairmount.

Lilian blushed at her thoughts as she peered at the viscount through the banisters on this rainy March afternoon.

A thud of footsteps on the stairs roused Lilian from her memories and thoughts of the man she dreamed of, whom only a quarter of an hour ago she had imagined had been dancing with her. She did not know why he had not visited Fairmount in the last four years, but as she rubbed her cold arms, brought back to the present by the chill of the corridor, she realized that this visit would be nothing like his previous one. Everything had changed.

She shook her head ruefully, aware of how greatly her situation had altered since her uncle's death. In the four years that had passed since Lord Edmund's previous visit to Fairmount and her uncle's death a few months later, she had become a young woman; she was no longer a girl fondly tolerated by a kindly uncle and a considerate cousin. She was now very much the poor relative who depended on the charity of her aunt-by-marriage to give her a

home. And soon, she would have to begin to support herself in the only way a genteel woman with no resources could.

As she wandered back to the bleak schoolroom, her last conversation with her aunt rang clearly in her memory.



LILIAN STOOD quietly in Aunt Euphemia's dressing room while her aunt finished dressing for dinner, fussing over the perfect placement of an emerald brooch on her purple satin dress. Her aunt glared at her, shaking her head at Lilian's request to be allowed to go with them to London. "A girl of eighteen, almost nineteen, with no prospects, no beauty, no accomplishments, in short, nothing to recommend her, has no reason to be seen in society. It would be an unnecessary drain on my time and expenses to have to drag you about town with us. Hortense is attracting much attention at present and my focus will be on making a suitable match for her. I will not allow anything to impede that goal."

Lilian had flinched at her aunt's emphasis that suggested that she was an impediment. She stiffened her shoulders as her aunt continued.

Aunt Euphemia picked up a letter and smiled smugly as she glanced at it. "Yes, Hortense's prospects are looking very good indeed. She will be nothing less than a countess if nothing is allowed to detract me. But you," she scowled at Lilian, "are nothing like her. Even if Hortense did not have a decent dowry, she is so pretty and has such charming manners that suitors cannot stay away. You, as I have often noted, have nothing to recommend you. Plain features, bad family, surly disposition, and no dowry."

Aunt Euphemia had swept past Lilian on her way downstairs, pausing to strike home with a parting shot. "And I cannot keep you here indefinitely. No, you shall have to find a suitable position. As soon as Hortense is settled, I shall turn my attention to finding someone who will take you on as a companion or governess. Until then, you will remain at Fairmount and try to make yourself useful somehow."



LILIAN HAD MEEKLY ACCEPTED her aunt's injunction, along with the piles of sheets that needed hemming, which was her aunt's way of making her useful. She had no illusions about her place in society. Her aunt's words simply confirmed what she already knew. She did not have the qualities that would make her a success in society or that would make any gentleman want to seek a meaningful attachment with her. No gentleman who moved in the highest ranks of society, as Lord Edmund did, would spare more than half a thought on Lilian Bailey at all.

Lilian knew that she would have to spend her life catering to the needs and wants of a querulous elderly widow or assisting surly young girls to acquire a few social graces. Her own ideas, opinions, wishes, and dreams would be put aside forever.

She had no illusions about herself. Mirrors showed her what any man could see at a glance: straight, soft, light blonde hair, grey-blue eyes, pale skin. She often thought of herself as a wraith, someone who was almost invisible, who hovered on the edges of society and drifted through the world unnoticed. Nothing could give her the curls and rosy complexion so praised in magazines and novels that gave snap and vivacity to lauded beauties.

Lilian pulled her arms around herself to ward off the cold of the schoolroom. Her thoughts were still occupied with her shortcomings, with why Lord Edmund would not even spare a thought for her, even if she had a dowry and an unmarred past.

She was not accomplished in the polished and sophisticated conduct that society admired so much. Her French was fluent, as she had spent much time with a French nursemaid when she had first arrived at Fairmount. But she had never developed the knack of sprinkling a few foreign phrases charmingly into her conversation while flirtatiously simpering at a gentleman. She had never managed to paint a watercolor that could be hung in a drawing room, and she hated all kinds of sewing, even fancy work. The hours of intricate stitching bored her. And while she enjoyed playing the piano, her aunt often complained that her playing was too intense, too emotional, to be pleasing to any polite social gath-

ering. Indeed, Aunt Euphemia had forbidden her from performing in front of guests because respectable company would find her passionate performance on the piano unsettling.

And so, she spent her days conforming to her aunt's dictates of what a good woman should do: sitting quietly in the schoolroom and sewing, taking genteel walks in the dignified parts of the garden, and reading only magazines and books approved by her aunt. She hardly ever played the piano anymore.

Lilian knew she would not make a good society wife. She was too emotional, too opinionated, too unfashionable, too plain. And she did not even have a large dowry with which she could gild her foibles and oddities, which would allow them to be passed off as interesting eccentricities.

But the sudden arrival of Lord Edmund churned up her deep-seated yearnings. As she wandered back to the window and watched the rain beat against the panes, she wished that her future was not as bleak as the wintry landscape she could see outside. A tightly guarded portion of her heart yearned for the love of a man such as Edmund Moreland, Viscount Ridley, with his strong shoulders, kind smile, and intelligent eyes. She wanted passion to be stirred in her deepest being. She wanted her heart to flourish under the care of a man like him, as the meadows would when spring finally came—to be filled with life, color, joy, and love.

She bit her lip as she sank into a chair, covering her face with her hands in a childish attempt to block out any sight or sound of the man of her dreams. She did not know why Gerald, Thomas, and Lord Edmund had come to Fairmount just as the London season was about to begin. But she knew that Lord Edmund could only remain a vague but pleasant memory to weave into her dreams. He would not be interested in Lilian Bailey, poor cousin, soon to be governess, with her pale features and unfashionable opinions.

And if the viscount was at Fairmount as Gerald's guest, then it would not be proper or polite for her to go downstairs and partake of tea with her cousins and their guest. Aunt Euphemia had made it

very clear that Lilian was not welcome to join the family for meals when guests, especially titled ones, were being entertained at Fairmount.

With a sigh, Lilian resigned herself to a solitary tea in the dreary schoolroom.