



## An Earl in Want of a Wife (The Eastway Cousins)

By Laura Martin

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## **Editorial Review**

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Lizzie peered out of the carriage window and tried to calm her racing pulse. Never before in her life had she felt so alone. Before boarding the boat bound for London she'd heard so much about the city, but now she was here she couldn't quite believe how busy and crowded it was. Momentarily she longed for the rolling hills just outside Bombay, but then silently reprimanded herself. She hadn't been happy there, not truly. This was the opportunity she'd been waiting for her entire life.

As the carriage slowed Lizzie let the curtain fall back into place and tried to put herself into the role she was to play for the next few weeks. For at least a fortnight she was no longer to be Miss Elizabeth Eastway, orphaned daughter of a penniless second son. Instead she would play the role of Miss Amelia Eastway, cherished only child and heiress to a substantial fortune. She found herself smiling ruefully, knowing Amelia was the only person in the world who could have persuaded her to go along with such a ruse. If anyone else had asked, she would have laughed and shook her head, then proceeded to bury it in whatever book it was she was reading, but Amelia was different. Amelia was the sister she'd never had, her only champion and friend in a world that did not favour penniless orphans. Lizzie knew she would jump in the path of a crazed horse to save Amelia, so when her cousin had asked her to swap identities for a couple of weeks she could hardly say no.

Of course, Amelia hadn't thought the whole thing through. Lizzie knew by agreeing to swap identities with her cousin it would be she who suffered in the long-term. She didn't have a large dowry or a substantial inheritance; people would forgive Amelia, but penniless Lizzie would be ruined. If her cousin had realised that, Lizzie knew she wouldn't have asked, but as always Amelia hadn't even stopped to consider the consequences. In Lizzie's mind she didn't have much to lose, so when Amelia asked, she agreed. It wasn't as though she ever expected to make a good marriage or start a family, so Lizzie kept telling herself she wasn't sacrificing that much for her beloved cousin.

The carriage rolled to a stop and Lizzie took a second to compose herself, trying to mimic the sunny smile that came so easily to Amelia's face. She had to be cheerful and outgoing these next few weeks; there was no one to hide behind, no one to take the focus off her. All her life Lizzie had been kept in the shadows and she'd rather got used to it there. Now she was being pushed into the light and she just hoped she didn't let her cousin down.

A footman opened her door and Lizzie allowed him to help her down. She stared up in awe of the mansion they'd stopped across the street from and had to remind herself not to gawp.

'If you'd just follow me, miss,' the footman said, indicating they were to cross the road and ascend the steps to the very house she was in awe of.

Lizzie nodded, stepping out on to the street.

Immediately she heard a man shout and a horse let out a snort. Spinning to her left, Lizzie cowered backwards. The beast was almost upon her, rearing up, hooves flying through the air towards her face. Lizzie stumbled and lost her balance, landing with a jarring thud on the dusty street. She wished she could close her eyes, wished she could look away, but it was as though she were entranced. As if in slow motion she saw the rider pull on the reins, trying desperately to bring the beast under control, but Lizzie knew it was too late.

The horse would trample her and there was nothing she or the rider could do about it.

With an almighty shout the rider threw himself off the horse and used the momentum to push the beast to one side. The horse's hooves met the ground just inches from Lizzie's head and she shuddered at the sound of the impact.

For a long few seconds the entire street was silent, as if digesting the near tragedy. Then the horse whinnied and the spell was broken. Half a dozen people rushed towards her and the rider, but he motioned for them to stay back. Slowly he rose from the ground, limping slightly from where he had landed on one leg, and approached his horse. Lizzie watched as he soothed the beast, stroking its mane and speaking quietly in a gentle tone. After handing the reins to a young lad he turned back to Lizzie.

Lizzie swallowed and tried to meet his stare, but she could tell he was furious. Slowly he walked towards her and she felt at a distinct disadvantage sitting on the dusty ground, her skirts tangled between her legs and her body still shaking from fear.

He stopped when he was almost directly above her, his body blocking out the sun. Lizzie swallowed and offered a weak smile.

'What were you thinking?' he asked in clipped tones.

Lizzie opened her mouth to answer but found no sound would come out. She motioned vaguely with one hand.

The rider stared at her for what felt like an eternity, then offered his hand.

Lizzie reached up and took it, and allowed him to effortlessly pull her to her feet.

Now she was standing Lizzie felt a little more at ease, but only a little. He still held her hand in his own, so their bodies were quite close together and for the first time Lizzie was able to make out his features. She gulped. Trust her to be almost trampled to death by the most handsome man in London.

As she studied him Lizzie felt his eyes roaming over her features. Immediately she stiffened. Lizzie knew she wasn't a hideous crone, but she also knew she wasn't what society deemed to be attractive. Her hair was just a little too brown, her skin had a few too many freckles, and where men seemed to admire petite women Lizzie could look most men in the eye without straining. Many she even had a good view of their bald spots.

It had happened so many times that she could see this man's thoughts as he looked her over. Within two seconds he had dismissed her.

'Be more careful in future,' he said with authority.

Lizzie found herself nodding despite his imperious tone. She wished she had mastered Amelia's haughty look. Her cousin could slay a man merely by raising an eyebrow. Lizzie supposed it came with confidence and probably being a stunning petite blonde didn't hurt, either.

She watched as he strode back to his horse, athletically mounted the beast and moved off. Their whole encounter couldn't have lasted for more than a minute, but it had been enough to crush any confidence Lizzie had summoned to face the world as Miss Amelia Eastway.

The footman appeared back at her side.

'Are you harmed, miss?' he asked, his face ashen.

Lizzie smiled at him kindly, knowing he would likely get the blame for her clumsiness.

'Not at all,' she said with a false bravado. 'Just a little shaken.'

Carefully they crossed the road and ascended the steps. As they reached the top the front door opened and Lizzie was ushered inside.

'My dear Amelia, what on earth happened?' A woman in her midforties rushed forward to greet her.

Lizzie supposed this was Amelia's aunt Mathilda. And the young woman standing in the corner with a smug grin on her face was probably her odious cousin Harriet.

Lizzie felt the colour start to rise in her cheeks as she began to mumble something about falling over, then she realised this would never do. She was meant to be Miss Amelia Eastway, the sort of young woman other people admired. She needed to start acting the part.

'It was most harrowing,' she said, pressing her fingers to her temple. 'I was crossing the street and I was almost trampled by a careless rider.'

Aunt Mathilda rushed to her side and took her hand.

'What an awful ordeal for you, my dear, why don't you come and sit down?'

Lizzie allowed the older woman to lead her into a drawing room, but as she left the hall she caught a glimpse of the expression on Harriet's face. Lizzie knew then that Harriet had seen the whole episode and knew that Lizzie's carelessness was to blame.

'You must be exhausted after such a long journey.'

'It was only an hour from the dock.'

'Mother meant from India,' Harriet said as she followed them into the room.

'Oh, of course,' Lizzie mumbled.

'Although I never understand why people insist that travelling wearies them. It's not as though you have to sail the ship yourself.'

Lizzie thought of the endless days of nausea and disequilibrium, the nights she'd spent staring at the rocking ceiling and wishing it were all over. Even now, hours after disembarking, she still felt a little wobbly.

'Have you ever been on a long sea voyage?' she asked sweetly.

Harriet shook her head.

'No, I didn't think so.'

Lizzie perched on the edge of an uncomfortable armchair and watched as the young woman's eyes narrowed to slits, and realised she'd just made a big mistake. Her life for the next couple of weeks would be hard enough without making an enemy in the place that was supposed to be her sanctuary.

Either Aunt Mathilda didn't notice the animosity between the two girls, or she deliberately ignored it.

'I can't believe my dear little niece Amelia is here sitting in my drawing room,' Aunt Mathilda said. 'The last time I saw you, you were a lovely little thing with pigtails and a gap between your front teeth.'

Lizzie smiled serenely, trying to quell the sickness in her stomach. No doubt Aunt Mathilda was remembering the sweet little blonde-haired girl and wondering when she had turned into this tall brunette. Luckily Amelia's father had settled in India fourteen years ago and Amelia hadn't seen her aunt since. Hopefully the older woman would just assume time had changed her sister's daughter beyond recognition.

'We've got such a busy week planned, my dear,' Aunt Mathilda said as she rang the bell for a maid. 'We've got dress fittings and shopping trips galore, and at the end of the week you shall make your *début*.'

Lizzie's eyes widened.

'So soon?' she managed to ask, her voice breaking a little with the surprise. Amelia had assured her it would be weeks before she was meant to make her *début*. The plan had always been for Lizzie to step into her shoes for a fortnight at the most, and that fortnight would be spent settling into London life, going shopping and strolling round the parks. Neither of them had ever expected Lizzie would actually have to go out in public as Miss Amelia Eastway.

'Your father was quite insistent,' Aunt Mathilda said softly. 'He instructed that you make your *début* as soon as possible.'

Of course it was all Uncle Robert's doing. Even Lizzie had to admit Amelia had become a handful in the past few months, although she, of course, knew the reason behind this rebellion. Amelia's father had sent his daughter to London so she would find a husband and settle down, and by extension not be his problem any longer. It made sense that he had wanted Amelia to be out husband-hunting as soon as possible—it meant less time for her to cause mischief.

Lizzie knew she couldn't be introduced to London society as Amelia, but right now she couldn't think of a good reason to give Aunt Mathilda, so instead she just smiled and nodded. She would have to feign an illness, or invent some family tragedy that required a period of mourning. Anything that would push back the *début* until Amelia returned. Her cousin had promised she would not leave Lizzie alone in London for more than a week, two at the most, and flighty though Amelia was she normally kept her promises. Amelia simply wanted to have a few days of freedom to find the young officer she was enamoured with before being introduced to society. Lizzie had no doubt they would both get into trouble for this ruse, but she was certain Aunt Mathilda would want to keep any hint of the scandal quiet and that would only be possible if she hadn't been presented to London as the season's most eligible heiress.

'But let's not get ahead of ourselves,' Aunt Mathilda said. 'You've had a long and tiring journey and I'm sure you just want to settle in and rest. I will have one of the maids bring some light refreshments to your room.'

'Thank you,' Lizzie said and stood. She smiled at her aunt and cousin and exited, but instinct made her pause outside the door, just out of sight.

'It's a good job she's rich,' Harriet said quietly.

Lizzie heard Aunt Mathilda tut at her daughter, but no reprimand was forthcoming.

'Don't tell me you're not thinking the same, Mother. She's hardly beautiful and she's one of the most awkward people I've ever seen.'

'Don't complain, Harriet, you'll have enough to contend with when the gentlemen hear how much her dowry is. We want you to make a good match as well, remember.'

'It's so unfair,' the younger woman said. 'She'll get to marry someone titled and be a great lady, all because her father has made money in trade. She doesn't deserve it. Not after what her father did to us.'

Lizzie realised she didn't want to hear any more. Quietly she slipped away, following a maid upstairs and trying to fight the tears that were forming in her eyes.

## *Chapter Two*

Daniel was in a foul mood and he knew he only had himself to blame. He was standing on the perimeter of the Prestons' ballroom trying to look inconspicuous. And failing quite spectacularly. Already the eligible young women were beginning to flutter their eyelashes in his direction and, even worse, their mothers were looking at him with undisguised interest. He hadn't attended a society event like this in years; in fact, he could count the number he'd shown his face at on one hand.

Which meant all the young ladies of marriageable age were immediately intrigued, and convinced he must be there to search for a wife.

Daniel groaned. He was there to look for a wife. As little as he wanted his current lifestyle to change, a visit to his accountant that afternoon had put things into perspective. He needed money, and he needed it soon. Hence his presence at the Prestons' ball this evening, and his need to be sociable and personable.

'What on earth brings you here, Blackburn?' A familiar voice broke into Daniel's thoughts.

Daniel turned and smiled his first genuine smile all evening. The night wouldn't be such a disaster with Fletcher by his side.

'I'd have thought that was obvious,' Daniel said, keeping his expression impassive. 'I'm here for the scintillating company.'

Fletcher moved to Daniel's side and perused the ballroom.

'You're creating quite the stir. I've heard the name Lord Burwell mentioned at least a dozen times and I've only been here five minutes.'

Daniel knew he should be pleased, he should want every eligible young woman with a good dowry thrown at him that evening, but he couldn't quite conjure up the enthusiasm.

Fletcher looked at him appraisingly. 'You're looking for a wife,' he said in a matter-of-fact tone after a few seconds.

'Good God, is it that obvious?' Daniel asked, hoping he wasn't coming off as desperate.

'There are only three reasons a man comes to these events,' Fletcher explained. 'And seeing as you don't have any female relatives to escort and you don't need to do any social climbing, it must be to look for a wife.'

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