

MAYFIELD
FAMILY
SERIES

Promises
AND *Primroses*



PROPER ROMANCE

JOSI S. KILPACK

Lord Elliott Mayfield has done his best to take care of his family, first his siblings and now his nieces and nephews. Unfortunately, he sees this new generation moving in the same direction of bad matches and scandalous relationships as the last. In hopes to change their course, he establishes a “marriage campaign” to motivate them to improve themselves through making respectable matches. With his heart in the right place, what could possibly go wrong?

Peter, Elliott’s eldest nephew, thinks the entire idea is ridiculous. A widower with two young daughters, he simply needs a governess, not a wife. Julia Hollingsworth certainly has the credentials and the experience, but is altogether too young and pretty for such a job. So why can’t he stop thinking about her?

Julia loves working as a governess, despite the objections of her mother, Amelia. And as it turns out, Amelia has a lot to say about the Mayfield men—none of it good. But Julia dismisses the rumors of ruined reputations and instead concentrates on helping Peter with his children and his fledgling business in canine husbandry. His kindness and gentleness is endearing—and increasingly attractive.

But Amelia, whose heart was broken thirty years ago by none other than Elliott Mayfield, is determined to prevent any relationship from blooming either between Peter and Julia—or between herself and Elliott.

Hearts and history collide as both couples must face their pasts and decide if risking it all is worth the promise of new love and a new future.

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The English Primrose

Typically, the English primrose is a pale shade of yellow, though it can also be found in blue, pink, white, and purple. The primrose symbolizes youth, womanhood, patience, and gentleness. Primroses are a perennial flower, returning each year in a clustered arrangement that is easily divided and replanted. They are easy to grow and edible, tasting similar to lettuce. When given as a gift, primroses are used to tell someone you can't live without them.

DO NOT DUPLICATE

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Married: RACHEL

DO NOT DUPLICATE

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Chapter One

ELLIOTT

March 15, 1822

Elliott Mayfield, the fifth Viscount Howardsford, looked across the desk at Peter, his eldest nephew and heir. *Destiny and opportunity are not that different*, he reminded himself in an effort to bolster his courage. As far as Peter knew, this was their usual quarterly review of the holdings that Peter would one day inherit. The meeting would be far more than that by the end, however.

“Thank you, Mr. Poole,” Elliott said to his steward as he closed his book of accounts. “That will be all.”

Mr. Poole inclined his head and left the study. Once they were alone, Elliott turned toward Peter. “Have you any questions for me?”

“I don’t think so.” Peter looked over the notes he’d been taking. “I’m eager to see how the new pasture rotation works in practice. You’ll let me know if you need help purchasing the additional stock?”

“I will, but we won’t need help. Mr. Poole is eager to grow the flock, and I am bored enough with this gentlemanly life that I plan to attend the stockyards with him in work boots and a

homespun shirt.” He imagined himself in the disguise of a common man so that he might blend in at market. It sounded like fun.

Peter smiled, looking very much like his father, Teddy, Elliott’s younger brother. Teddy had been dead thirty years now, and it was nice to catch a glimpse of him in his son.

“You should raise dogs,” Peter offered. Not for the first time. The boy was obsessed. “They fill many a dull hour.”

“I am sure they do,” Elliott said. “However, seeing as how I had dog on my plate more than once during my time in India, I’m afraid it has ruined me for the species.”

Peter shuddered. “That is horrific.”

“Quite.” Elliott leaned forward and put his forearms on the table. “There is another matter I would like to discuss with you, Peter, if you’ve time.”

Peter took his pocket watch—a scratched and battered thing that had once belonged to Elliott’s father—from his waistcoat. “I shall need to leave on the hour as I’ve an appointment to interview governess candidates in Norwich, but I am at your disposal until then.”

“You don’t mind if I move through the summation rather quickly, then, so that I might get through it before you need to leave?”

Peter spread his arms and sat back as though at his leisure, though that was rarely the case. Peter kept himself busy most hours of the day. To run from his thoughts, perhaps. Memories. Regrets. Elliott could relate. He had been a similar young man when he had arrived in India with his shirtsleeves rolled up, begging for someone to put a tool in his hand so he might lose himself in sweat and purpose.

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“You have quite captured my attention with the introduction of your topic, Uncle. I am eager to hear the whole of it.”

“Excellent.” Elliott took a deep breath and laced his fingers together. “I’ve devised a plan I hope will save our family from the, er, dissolute course it has been on for a few generations now.” Peter’s face immediately went hard, but Elliott held the younger man’s eyes. “Let us talk as men. You know as well as I that the Mayfield family is off course, though you are the exception.”

Peter’s jaw was still tight, but he nodded.

Elliott ignored the squirming in his own gut and continued. “Your father shall always have my respect for having done right by your mother and yourself, but that does not change the difficult lives you and your siblings have endured for their poor choices.” Elliott paused, waiting until Peter acknowledged the truth with another nod.

They had never discussed the details of Peter’s parents’ relationship, but it loomed heavy above them both. Teddy had been the twenty-one-year-old second son of a viscount; Mara, a seventeen-year-old chambermaid. Their marriage had taken place only weeks before Peter’s birth, making him legitimate, but his mother was as unsuited for the circumstance she had married into as Teddy had been for the role of a husband or a father. They had made one another miserable until Teddy’s death eight years later, during which time, they’d had a daughter, Donna. Their third child, Timothy, was born three months after Teddy’s burial in the family plot. Mara became a recluse for the decade that followed Teddy’s death, refusing to leave her home and treating her various maladies with gin or laudanum, or both.

Elliott continued. “My sisters—your aunts, who I realize you never met in person—made equally poor use of their privilege, and I fear that their children are following in their footsteps.”

“I have attempted to live far above any censure, Uncle. If I have displeased—”

“I do not include you in my generalization, Peter. I could not be more proud of the life you have lived and the choices you have made. It is, in fact, your example that has led me to make a decision on behalf of *all* my nieces and nephews. I want to heal this family, mend the broken bonds, and help my relations find purpose in their lives by striving for more than what is in their grasp right now.”

Peter’s tension did not dissipate. He raked a hand through his dark hair, which was beginning to gray at the temples, and shifted anxiously. He glanced out the large window as if he would give anything to be on his way to Norwich rather than in this chair listening to Elliott’s bungling attempts to explain what had seemed a very well-considered plan until just now.

There was nothing to do but move forward. “I have created a campaign that could save the others from their current courses by gifting them each a generous settlement upon an appropriate marriage. Your cousins are all of age, and with my sister Jane’s passing last year, I have no more family to stand in my way.” He attempted a smile, then realized he had made a jest that his siblings and their respective spouses—including Peter’s parents—were dead. Perhaps not the best way to go about lightening the mood.

Peter looked less uncomfortable but more suspect. “A campaign?”

“A marriage campaign, you might say. I have seven nieces and nephews, all of whom I have cared for, but you are the only one who has married successfully and enjoyed the security and self-respect of a solid and loving union.”

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Peter looked at the desk and squared up the edges of the notebook with the table.

Perhaps it would have been better for Elliott to have relayed the entire plan in a letter where he could have found the perfect words to explain. In a letter, the recipient need never know how many drafts existed between first and final. For Elliott, those drafts often counted into double digits.

“I know you miss Sybil very much,” Elliott said, his voice softening even as the awkwardness in the room increased. “Your daughters will benefit from the steadiness of their parents’ characters for the rest of their lives. I would like my other nieces and nephews to find similar happiness as you had with Sybil.”

Peter leaned toward one side of his chair, rested one hand on the wooden armrest, and tapped his finger. “With all due respect, Uncle, my match with Sybil was not the result of a *campaign*, and I can’t imagine we would have found happiness together had our relationship not started with love, commitment, and respect. I struggle to see how your . . . enticements will change anyone’s course. A life of virtue and integrity cannot be forced or, in regard to this situation, bought. It must be an individual choice.”

“I understand your concern,” Elliott admitted with a nod. “But I fear that without my *enticements*, as you call them, the others will never change their current courses. I need them to *see* the benefits of an upstanding life, and I believe this is an opportunity to frame the future into something that it is both clear and attainable.” He paused and took another breath. “This family is everything to me, Peter. I have sacrificed a great deal to provide for those over whom I have charge, but the hope that my efforts will heal the broken generations is faltering. There is no unity, no commitment to future generations—yourself excluded—and a pattern of poor choices is beginning to be sewn into our family

tapestry yet again. We have been given a noble trust of land, wealth, position, and opportunity. I cannot in good conscience do nothing to prevent it from being completely squandered.”

Peter took a breath, then let it out. “I understand your motivation and admire your desire for them to rise above the pettiness of our parents, but appealing to greed does not seem to be a viable course for such a virtuous destination. The promise of wealth would not have changed Donna’s course. She had wealth.”

Donna. One of two nieces who had provided Elliott’s strongest motivations. “If Donna had not needed to secure her future, and had she not been so desperate to rise above the same beginnings you have fought to rise above, she would not have married that man.”

“Yet it is her action, not his, that has created her circumstance.”

Elliott raised his eyebrows. “You condemn your sister?”

Peter shook his head and shifted in his chair again. “I know Donna was unhappy in her marriage and she was not treated fairly, but—”

“Never mind,” Elliott broke in, sensing they were taking this tangential road too far and that Peter’s piety, which Elliott suspected was compensation for his parents’ dishonorable actions, had no place here. “This is not about Donna—it is about all of you. I want to present choices they have not had before so they might make wise decisions, not desperate ones, or, in the case of some, no decision at all. I do not believe the gifts I have arranged will appeal to greed so much as to responsibility. To say nothing of the fact that the offering gives me the opportunity to explain my position and, I hope, remind them of the place they can hold in history if they exercise the advantages.

“As our nation changes with the implementation of industry,

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I feel an undeniable anxiety regarding what the future will hold for all of us, and I feel it my duty to do all I can to restore respectability to our family name, both now and for the future.”

Peter was thoughtful, and possibly humbled, by this explanation and nodded his head. “I would never argue with a man’s convictions, Uncle. I shall set aside my initial judgment so you might explain this campaign more fully.”

Oh, bless this boy and his steady nature. Elliott spent the next ten minutes explaining how he had created an individualized gift for each niece or nephew that contained something that would assist in securing their future. He had spent the better part of a year drawing it together and finalizing it by way of his solicitors to make sure it was legal, ethical, and unbreakable should there be any disputes.

“I will not be orchestrating the matches,” Elliott said, “only approving the decision to ensure that the person they choose is of the quality required for a suitable match. Upon the marriage, I will then transfer the holdings designated for that couple as outlined in the campaign. Of course, everything entailed through the title will go to you as already stipulated. These gifts have been arranged and financed wholly through my individual interests.” Elliott had no family of his own and therefore had little more to do while in India than restore the family coffers and then grow his personal wealth. He’d returned to England a very wealthy man. The family holdings had been secured and then made profitable. Now he wanted to save their name and their futures.

Peter cleared his throat. “I fear my cousins will manipulate this situation, Uncle, and you will feel the fool.”

“They could take advantage, yes,” Elliott agreed. “I am hopeful, however, that they won’t. In addition to the offers I have tailored to each of them, I am also no longer willing to pay their way

in the world. You are the only one not living out of my pocket. The marital gifts will give them the ability to care for themselves and secure their future without my ongoing support, which I shall be withdrawing as determined by each circumstance.”

Peter raised his eyebrows. “There is a deadline for them to make a match?”

“Or to change their lifestyles to fit the income and allowances already afforded them. I spent thirty years hoping that my financial support would put my siblings’ feet back on a respectable path and set a new standard for their children. That plan failed. Therefore I have created a different one that I hope will result in self-respect, accomplishment, and success.”

Peter was listening closely, a crease forming between his eyebrows. He had stopped tapping his finger, but he had not lost the tension in his body—the strong and solid body of a man young enough to work hard every day and old enough to see how it had blessed him. “And the gifts are all financial?”

Elliott considered how much detail he wanted to disclose to Peter and then chose to be vague. “The gifts are investments with growth potential.”

If Peter were curious as to what exactly that meant, he did not betray it by even a quiver. Instead he smiled politely and leaned back in his chair as though having made a decision regarding the campaign. He had lost his defensive posture and, seemingly, his objection, but Elliott knew better. Peter had puzzled out how this related to him and determined that it did not—that was why he could be calm. Elliott had led him to that assumption on purpose. A man did not learn what Elliott had learned, built what he had built, and managed the number of people he had managed without learning a thing or two about how to approach people based upon their particular situations. He only hoped he was as

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good at that as he believed he was when he'd created each campaign. Peter's included, though he was not yet ready to broach that topic.

Elliott held Peter's eyes. "All I can do is trust the instincts and convictions that led me to this course. Ultimate outcomes will be determined by the choices of each individual, but I hope giving them additional options will help them better understand the power they have to shape their own futures."

"I do agree that every man should be the ultimate decider of their fate. It is surely such with my dogs. Those eager to learn and please are quick to hit the markers I set for them. Those who are willful and disobedient are the first ones sold off so as to preserve the quality of my pack."

Elliott could not appreciate the analogy as well as Peter certainly hoped he would, but he smiled anyway. "Thank you, Peter." Elliott stood from the desk and went to the credenza beneath the bank of west windows that overlooked the immense estate. He had inherited it thirty-six years ago when his father had died unexpectedly, but Elliott had spent less than three full years in this house—in this *country*—since then.

He pulled open the top drawer and removed a blue leather folder from a stack. He walked back to the desk, where Peter was watching with new wariness.

Elliott resumed his seat and slid the folder across the smooth surface of the desk.

Peter looked at the folder but made no effort to pick it up. He looked at his uncle. "What is this?"

"It is the details of your wedding gift." Elliott nodded toward the folder. "I have created it especially for you."

Realization slowly dawned, and Peter's jaw tightened. His words were clipped when he spoke. "I am touched to have been

included, Uncle, but I have no desire to marry again, as I believe you are aware. With an estate already under my care and your holdings that will one day pass to me, I do not need the security you have put forward for the others, nor do I need motivation toward living a respectable life.”

“You are exactly right,” Elliott said with a deep nod. “You do not need motivation or financial security, but, as I told you, each gift is tailored to the person. Aren’t you the least bit curious as to what I devised as a gift for your future?”

Peter put his hands in his lap. “I am not.”

Elliott sighed. “You are still a young man, Peter. You deserve a companion to see you through the remaining years of your life, and your daughters deserve a mother. I believe with my whole heart that Sybil would want that for you.”

“Forgive me, uncle, but you did not know Sybil and have no basis for such an assumption.”

Elliott inclined his head, acknowledging the truth of that observation. “And the fact that you do not have an heir?”

Peter stood abruptly. With his broad shoulders and athletic physique, he was quite the commanding presence when his ire was fueled, as it was now.

He grabbed for his jacket. “Timothy’s son will be my heir just as I was heir for you.”

“Timothy has no son.”

“But he will. Especially now that he will have additional reason for doing so.” Peter’s certitude was admirable. “So, while I thank you for *this*”—he waved toward the untouched folder, barely concealing his bitterness—“I do not share the circumstances of my siblings or my cousins. I married well, I am raising my daughters in the privilege they deserve, and I am living an

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upstanding life. I have no desire for anything else. Now, if you would excuse me.”

Elliott stood and hurried around the table to take hold of Peter’s arm before the boy could escape. “I did not mean to offend you, Peter. I am sorry.”

Peter’s dark eyes were cold. “Apology accepted. I truly must be on my way, uncle.”

Elliott dropped his nephew’s arm, and Peter left, the door closing behind him with a snap. This was not how Elliott had hoped the first campaign proposal would go. He’d imagined Peter defensive at first, of course, but eventually seeing Elliott’s motivations in their purest light and being gracious and touched, not offended. Perhaps Elliott did not have the people-management skills he so highly prized after all.

Elliott walked to the east window of his study and scrubbed a hand over his face. Peter was right about Elliott having never met Sybil. But he still believed Sybil would not want her husband and daughters to be alone. Elliott had hoped the wedding campaign would bring Peter out of mourning. It had been four years.

Then again, what could Elliott say against Peter’s decision to remain a widower? Elliott had never loved anyone the way Peter had loved Sybil—though there had been a woman he *might* have loved that way.

Amelia Edwards had filled him with light, and he had expected that they would marry. Then his father had died and everything had changed. Elliott had stepped into the title, the debts, and the role as head of the family, and the young woman he’d wanted to be his wife had instead become a part of his past and his sacrifice. The life that had followed had not brought love again.

Elliott’s ambition now was to see his nieces and nephews

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secure and his family name restored for the benefit of future generations. The satisfaction of those things would make up for what he'd wanted for himself but could not have. At least that was what he had hoped. It might take a bit of time before he recovered from the unexpected conclusion of his first presentation. With a bit more attention, and perhaps tact, he vowed the next would go better.