

Chapter 4 (MMC POV):

These last few days have gone better than I expected. Not only am I gaining support, I seem to be growing in my knowledge and experience, and it's all because of Mary. I don't regret choosing her for my plan for a moment. I have to admit, I have never before met a woman like her.

Most women I used to spend my time with only cared about my money or were charmed by me. I used to get bored of the conversations I had with them; usually it was just me flirting, but when I spent time with them, they would only talk about things I owned, things I liked, or girly things like playing the piano or doing embroidery, but with her, I got to talk like I was talking to a friend.

She is smart, interesting, and independent. She is the kind of person who loves what they do and is proud of it. She doesn't let anyone make her feel small because she knows that her respect doesn't come from fancy clothes or inherited titles; it comes from her hard work. She has earned my respect, and I admire that about her, but there is something in my heart that I believe is more than respect.

Every now and then my mind gets lost in the thought of her face, her eyes, that beautiful smile, and that childlike passionate enthusiasm every time we talk about her favourite books or when we discuss our plans for the rights of women. I can tell by the look on her face that there is a fire in her that shows itself when it comes to helping others.

I have to admit, I have never met a woman who cared any less about how she looks and what she wears than she does. She wants to be recognised for her wit, not her beauty, which is something so rare that I can't help but adore it. Could it be that I like her company because she treats me more like a friend and less like a fiancé?

Oh God, I can't lie to myself anymore; it is true that I like her far more than any woman I have ever met, and that at times I imagine myself with her in such situations that even make me blush. I sometimes imagine spending long hours in the garden lying side by side and holding hands, or just holding her close to my heart, protecting her from everything evil. Good God, don't tell me this is love; even I can't believe it given my history with women. I close my eyes while lying in bed and fall into a deep sleep, hoping I don't see Mary in my dreams.

The next day, I get ready for another ball. I enter the ballroom, which is already filled with a crowd of people. The orchestra is playing a beautiful melody that is pleasing to the ears. I am approached by a group of aristocrats, and we share greetings. We are merely discussing the beauty of the ball when I glance towards the entrance and my eyes become wide.

Mary has entered the ballroom. She is dressed in a baby pink satin gown, and her beautiful hair is tied in a braid that is decorated with diamonds. God, she looks just as beautiful as an angel. I can feel my heart beating rapidly in my chest so loudly that I can hear its voice in my head. Without realising it, my feet carried me towards her without even making an excuse to the gentleman I was taking first.

As I came near, she smiled at me, and my breath caught in my throat. "Good evening. How are you doing today, my lord?" she asks politely. I try to speak, but my tongue is stumbling. I have never before felt so nervous talking to a woman, but I finally forced myself to speak. "I am doing well." "I must say you look lovely today." "I appreciate you saying that." She says, "Would you like to take a walk with me?" I ask, "Don't you want to discuss political matters with your friends?" She asks, slightly surprised by the request.

"I discuss those matters more than enough, but at the moment I am feeling a little lightheaded, and pleasant company such as yourself and some fresh air would do me good." I say she is trying to look charming.

"Very well then. "Shall we go?" She says, and I extend my arm, which she takes, and we walk out of the ballroom and into the garden.

The garden is filled with the scent of flowers and wet earth. The grounds are bathed in soft light coming from the full moon above us. The night air is fresh, and the sound of crickets is soothing. We walk in for a while until we reach a bench near a fountain that is glittering and looks lovely in the moonlight.

We sit down on the bench, and she asks me, "Are you feeling better now?" "Far better than before," I say, looking her in the eyes. We stare at each other in silence. I wanted to ask you why you didn't get married. You don't have to answer that if you don't want to. I'm just curious. I asked, hoping that I didn't offend her.

"Well, it's not that I didn't want to get married; it's just that most men don't care how well read a woman is as long as she comes with a sizable dowry." which in my case wasn't possible since I had just started my business and was left with nothing by my parents. It's not like I wasn't approached by any men; it's just that all the men I met were either rather rakes wanting to play with me for their amusement or they only thought I was suited to be a mistress. So in the end I gave up the hope to ever marry a man who wanted me for me. She says this with a look of pain in her eyes, which makes me hold her hand to comfort her, and to my relief, she doesn't pull away.

"I am sorry to hear that. "You deserve so much better." I say gently. "You don't have to be sorry for me; it's just how the world works, and there is not much we can do about it." She says, then asks, "So why didn't you get married?" "It's only fair that you tell me your reason now that I have told you mine."

"I once loved someone and it ended badly, so I don't like to talk much about it, but after that I just wanted to forget about her, so I did what every man does: I surrounded myself with women who were hungry for my attention, and before I knew it, I was classified as a rake." He sat there, feeling slightly hurt at remembering the past.

My pain must have shown on my face, because she said in a small voice, "I'm sorry." "I didn't mean to hurt you." "It's ok, it doesn't hurt anymore like it did before, and I can say there are times when I completely forget about her, and that helps numb the pain." I reply in a gentle manner, and she squeezes my hand politely, which makes me smile slightly in comfort. "So I wanted to ask." "If you were asked to marry someone now, would you accept it?" I ask about changing the topic.

"I don't know, would you?" She asks teasingly "I would love it if that woman would truly accept me for who I am and love me even with all my flaws." I say, looking her in the eyes with a gentle voice, then I ask. "What about you?"

"I don't know, maybe I will if that person would also accept me for who I am and love me even with all my flaws." She says lost in thought "But I don't think it's likely to happen."

"So there is no point in dreaming." She says it sadly.

"I don't think it is that unlikely. I mean, if I knew you loved me, I would accept you for who you are and marry you. "I do like you; you know that's why I chose you to be my fiancé." I'm hinting at my intentions and hoping it doesn't scare her. "True, but I doubt any other man would think like you do, and besides, you don't love me and I don't love you, so there is no way your going to marry me." She says with a slight laugh, then looks at the seriousness on my face and becomes frustrated.

"Maybe I will." I say, and she looks surprised at me. A moment passes, and we stare at each other in silence. I lean a little closer without realising it, hoping to kiss her, and she doesn't back away. Then an owl screeched loudly in a nearby tree, and we came back to ourselves. She stands up and says, "I think we should head back."

"If you wish." I say as she looks a little distressed. We walk back to the ballroom, and she

spends the evening trying to avoid me. God, I hope I didn't offend her. The ball ends, and I accompany her to her carriage, and we bid each other goodnight.

Chapter 5 (FMC POV):

I am sitting in my room looking out of the window, and my mind is lost in the events that took place yesterday. Ever since the Duke hinted at his feelings for me, I have been unable to think of anything else. I keep thinking that the gentle, loving look in his eyes was true. My heart says that what I saw was real, but my mind finds it hard to believe that a man of such high status and questionable reputation would trust me.

What if he was only pretending to keep up appearances, but no matter how much I want to believe, there is a part of my heart that wishes that what I saw in his eyes was real? I don't know what to believe and what not to believe; my mind is filled with all sorts of insecurities and horrible ideas. The thoughts are running so wild that they are giving me a headache. I let out a heavy sigh and gazed absentmindedly through the window down the street.

My brain is filled with all these thoughts, and all I wish to do is talk to someone who might guide me in the right direction, someone with whom I can be honest and share all my information without worrying about them telling someone. Just at that moment, a carriage stopped in front of the house, and a lady stepped out of it dressed in lavish clothes. She has dark hair and light brown eyes; her name is Lady Sabrina Cage, and she is my best friend in the whole world.

I ran out of my room, down the stairs, and into the hall to greet her. "Sabrina God, it's been forever since I last saw you. "How are you?" I ask, giving her a tight hug, which she returns. "Let me breathe first," she says, and I let go of her. "I am well, though I am a little mad at you that you didn't give me the good news of your engagement."

"I'm sorry. I have been so busy with everything—all these balls and events—that I just didn't have time for anything else. "Come let us sit upstairs." I say apologetically and take her to my room. Sabrina has been my friend for a long time, despite the differences in our status. We met first when I had my first season in the upper class. I used to sit in a corner of the ballroom usually as I was not approached by any man, and neither did Sabrina. The reason for me not being approached was my lineage, but in her case, the reason for men's inattention was that, despite being from an aristocratic family, her financial state was not good and it was no secret, so no one wanted her, and even if they did, it was to make her their mistress. For a long time, both me and Sabrina sat on the sidelines discussing our plans for the future, as we didn't have any suitors.

Sabrina and I had both given up hope of getting married, and she was probably planning to be a governess, but then one day she met a young businessman named Alexander Cage, and soon they both fell in love and decided to marry. Alexander helped Sabrina's family with their financial problems, and they both even offered me money to help with my business and provided support for me. In all honesty, if it weren't for Sabrina and her husband, I would not have been able to live independently like I do now. I owe her everything, but she has been so kind and has never made me feel small in front of her. We sit in my room and share pleasantries while I call for a maid to bring us tea. After the maid has left, I look seriously at my friend and decide to tell her all about what has happened.

"I need to tell you something," I began to say, and she looked at me worriedly. "Is everything ok? You look tired," she asked, and I continued, "There is something I want to tell you, but you have to promise not to tell anyone." "What is it?" she asked.

"I wanted to tell you that my engagement with the Duke isn't real, or at least I thought it was."

"What do you mean?" I'm afraid I don't quite understand. She asks, looking perplexed. "The truth is

that I made a deal with the duke that I will help him get women's support for the election, and he will aid me financially through out the future and protect me." "At first he had no intention of marrying me, but yesterday he hinted that if I say that I love him, he will marry me."

"So do you love him?" she asks me, and I take a moment to answer, then I say. "I don't know. I had long since given up the idea of getting married, but I will admit that the prospect of spending my life alone, without my children, and without a family always made me sad, but I thought I could live with it. And now I have an opportunity, a chance at life, and I want to take it, but I am afraid that this might just turn out to be a facade. I don't know if I can trust him given his reputation; how do I know he is not like those other men who played with my feelings just for amusement?"

I don't know what to do, Sabrina. I am really confused. "I wish I could trust him, but my mind won't allow it." I finished with a sigh. There is a moment's silence while Sabrina is lost in thought, deciding what advice to give me. Then finally, she says, "Look, Mary, I know that you have been hurt before many times, and that's why you are afraid. It is understandable for you to doubt him, but that does not mean that you should let go of the hope that he might truly love you. When I first learned of my husband's feelings for me, I also doubted him. I found it hard to believe that a man as wealthy and accomplished as him could love me when he could have had any woman he liked. But I decided to give him a chance, and with time I began to trust him, which was the right thing to do. "Just because you have been hurt before doesn't mean this time has to be the same; after all, there is a first time for everything."

"I know that you are right, but I still don't know how to trust him." I ask, and she replies in an understanding voice, "If you don't know how to trust him, then tell him to earn your trust through actions and not words." I think you should give him a chance, and I also think you should tell him about your doubts so he can clear them, and do try to keep an open mind because if you don't, you might lose something that is very hard to find: "the love of a man."

"Do you really think that it's possible that he loves me?" I ask, still unsure, "I know that it's hard to find love, but that is no excuse for not looking for it where there might be a chance." She says, "gently taking my hand and stroking it." I look at her and say with a smile, "Thank you." I say, "For what?" She asks, "For listening to me and for being such a nice friend." "It's because you were there with me during the time I was so depressed that I had the courage to go on and find the happiness I have now. "You might not realise this, but your friendship saved me through a dark time. so it's only natural that I should be there for you when you were there for me." She says, "I guess you both saved each other, didn't we?" I say this with a heartfelt smile. "I think that's what friends are for." She replies, and we both laugh.

We both talk a little more, and she tells me all about the places she has been with her husband, and I tell her all about my plans for making lives better for women and about all the new connections I have with businessmen through the Duke's help. I tell her that I intend to expand my business with the help of those connections, open new branches, and hire many widows and spinsters as my workers, and how I want to teach them to read and write.

On hearing this, she shares some of her ideas and the things she has learned and seen overseas that might help change women's perspectives on life. We talked all afternoon, and I forgot all my problems and worries, and before I knew it, it was already evening. At last, she said that it was getting late, and we bid each other goodbye as she left for home.

Once she was gone, my mind was refreshed and bursting with ideas that I wanted to share with the Duke. I wasn't scared anymore of what might happen between us. I decided to give the Duke a chance, and just then a servant came with an invitation from the Duke to visit his estate. I am happy to have received it. I can't wait to tell the Duke all about my new ideas and to clear the air between us. I am sure he will be happy to hear that, and we can once again talk to each other like friends. I

tell my aunt this, and she makes preparations for tomorrow's visit. By the time it's night, I am so tired that I lie in bed and instantly fall asleep.

Chapter 6 (MMC POV):

I am pacing back and forth in the hall, waiting for her to come. I hear a carriage stop in front of the door, and I step out to greet her. She is wearing a sea green gown, and her hair is tied in a bun. I approach her, saying, "Good day, my lady." "I am glad you accepted my invitation." I say, "The pleasure is all mine." "Shall we go inside, my Lord?" She asks, "Yes, right this way." I say give her my hand and escort her inside.

"It's still early for the evening ball; the servants are making preparations as we speak, but I wanted to show you the estate." I say leading her to the dining room. We talk about our upcoming evening, and she tells me all about her new ideas for women's betterment with such passion that I can't help but enjoy every moment of it.

We go to the greenhouse, and I show her all the beautiful flowers and rare herbs I have gathered. She tells me that she intends to teach ladies about using herbs to create medicines and work in apothecaries and also that she wishes to use flowers and herbs to make scented soaps and cosmetic products for women, an idea that she received from a close friend of hers. Afterwards, we have tea in the garden under a cherry blossom tree.

It is a bright and sunny day, with soft white clouds occasionally drifting in front of the sun. There is a soft wind blowing, causing the cherry blossom tree to shake and pink petals to fall on us.

We are discussing the weather and its beauty when Mary says to me in a small voice, "My lord, there is something I would like to discuss with you." "Please go on." "I was all ears." I replied, wondering what could be so serious. "My lord, I wanted to talk about what you said a few nights ago about marrying me." she says, and I add hastily. "I am sorry if I offended you; I didn't mean to."

"I am not offended; it's just that. "Remember, I said that I don't love you." The reason for that is that I don't know how to trust you. I'm sorry if I offended you; it's not like I don't like you. You have been kind to me, and I value your friendship; it's just that I have previously trusted many men who claimed to be interested in me and then broke my heart, and because of that, it's hard for me to believe your words. To be honest, I don't even know if you were being serious or not. So I request that if what you said was true, then I want you to help me believe you by earning my trust. She finished.

After hearing all this, I understand her feelings far better, so I say, "I'm sorry to distress you like that, but I want you to know that I meant what I said." "I might have the reputation of a rake, but I assure you that I am a man of my word, and I also understand why it's hard for you to trust me, so I promise I will do everything I can to gain your trust, but I also hope that if I fail to do so, I will still have you as a friend." I requested it politely. "I assure you, you will

still have me as a friend because I really treasure your friendship." She says with a smile that it comforts my heart.

We talk until the evening, at which point the guests start to arrive. Mary greets them along with me until the ballroom is packed with people. The guests are having a wonderful time. Usually I find it hard to entertain the guests, but with Mary by my side, it seems so easy that I imagine myself throwing parties with her as the duchess of my estate.

I wonder how she will manage the servants and make arrangements for the ball while taking care of our children. I can tell from her kind nature that she will be an excellent mother who will love and spoil our children but will also be stern with them when they do something wrong to make them take responsibility for their mistakes. I can imagine that our data will also include strong, independent women like their mother, who will be able to support themselves even without my money or name. It is obvious to say that they will be businesswomen who will share the same passion for the betterment of other women as their mother does.

I am so lost in thought that I don't even listen to a word that the gentleman next to me is saying. He is noticing this gap in my gaze and sees that I am staring at Mary. "I get that the lady is beautiful, but it's rude not paying attention to your guests, my grace." He says, bringing my attention back to him, "What do you mean?" I ask, trying to pretend not to have understood him.

"It is obvious what I mean." "Even a blind man could see that you are unable to look away from Miss Mary for one moment." He says it's causing me to feel embarrassed. On hearing this, another gentleman chimes in. "You know, I think it best to leave the duke alone with her; it is highly unlikely that he will hear a word of what we have to say." "It's not like that, and I do apologize for my actions." I say this apologetically. At which point the man's wife says, "Oh, come now, my dear, don't tease the young man, and you, my grace, I would advise that you either announce your marriage as soon as you can or at least dance with the young lady." "It is rude to stare, even if you are engaged."

I take the lady's advice and walk towards Mary, who is surrounded by a group of young women. "Ladies, would you excuse us?" I intend to ask Miss Mary for a dance. I asked, and for some reason they all began to giggle and scatter away. "May I have this dance?" I ask, "You may," and she says and takes my hand. We walk to the dance floor as a beautiful melody starts playing, and we begin to dance.

She is an elegant dancer. We began to talk as we danced. "I noticed you staring at me, my grace, and although I am flattered by your attention, I must ask you not to do that in front of everyone." It's embarrassing." She says it a little disdainfully.

"I apologize; I was merely wondering about what you said this afternoon about how I can earn your trust, not especially as a lady." I explained—or lied—because if I told her what I was thinking a few moments ago, she would think I was desperately in love with her, which might be true, but I don't like looking so vulnerable in front of her. "So, did you come up with any ideas?" "You looked like you were thinking really hard." She asks mockingly,

"Unfortunately, I couldn't think of anything, and not because I am dull." "I just didn't have to earn anyone's trust before." "Why is that?" she asks me. "Well, being a duke, it's usually people who try to earn my trust in order to receive my favour, but it's the first time I have to please someone." I explain. "Maybe you should learn from their example." He suggests, "I would rather not." I immediately neglected the idea.

"Why not? "What do they do to please you?" She asks curiously, "Well, as for women, they try to seduce me, bat their eyes at me, and giggle uncontrollably." "As for men, they offer me money, fancy gifts, women, and business partnerships that I doubt would work in your case," I say.

"How gentlemanly!" "And I expect those gifts." She asks sarcastically, "In most cases, if the offer is good and I have something to gain, I say yes, but otherwise, it's really tiring and boring." It makes you feel like all everyone wants is to take advantage of you in one way or another. "I highly doubt that they would bother themselves to laugh at my ridiculous jokes otherwise." I say, speaking from the heart,

"If it makes you feel better, I do think your jokes are funny, even if they are sometimes ridiculed." She says it teasingly, trying to cheer me up. Such charming words. "You truly are a little ray of sunshine, are you?" I say it sarcastically, which makes her laugh. "I can be pleased when I want to, but only with people I adore." She says, "Then I hope to do everything to become one of them." I promise myself Without noticing, we dance three more times, at which point she insists that her feet are hurting and we should stop.

I feel guilty for troubling her, but I was having so much fun that I lost track of time. Finally, the ball comes to an end, and we bid everyone goodbye. Atlas and I escort her to her carriage and say, "Thank you for this lovely evening and for giving me a chance." I say earnestly. "The pleasure was all mine. I enjoyed myself a lot too, and I hope you will not disappoint me and come up with a better way to earn my trust than money, gifts, and women." She says it with a little laugh.

"I promise I will." I say it with all my heart, and I am happy to see in her eyes that she believes me. We bid each other goodnight, and she kisses me gently on the cheek. She steps inside the carriage as its door closes, and I watch as her carriage heads home.