**Truths**

*Mac staggered down* to the pool of his all-inclusive resort and flopped into the closest lounger. Beyond exhausted and head pounding, he laid back on the lounger. His first night in Cancun had him ‘get his drink on’ with a couple of ladies in attempt to forget about the enticing Marabella.

The five-star resort boasted spectacular surroundings but he couldn’t get into it. He would have to take it all in later when his mind wasn’t so muddled. This trip to Mexico had been his only vacation in five long years. His never-ending marathon had him burned out and running hard. The scattered pieces of life’s disappointments needed to be put back together. Even on vacation, the agency managed to give him one more assignment.

Pushing himself up into a sitting position at the edge of the lounger, he hung his head in his hands. A tiny prickle on the back of his neck caught his attention. He scanned the area across the pool. Squinting to sharpen his focus, he wanted to make sure he was seeing things correctly. He scrubbed his face with his hands. Yep, that was her. Marabella. The beauty he couldn’t forget about no matter how hard he tried. He wasn’t going to survive his holiday without falling for this *leannan*. Taken by surprise, he hadn’t thought of that word in years, the Gaelic word for sweetheart.

His hands balled into fists. She was his first thought that morning even after a night of tits and tequila. How could he ever forget how she affected him on the flight down? Releasing his hands, he folded them in prayer over his nose and mouth. He breathed out heavily, trying to figure out his next move. The pull to her was automatic and without rationale.

Two women stood next to her. He assumed they were her sisters. They had pushed their way toward her on the plane as he made his escape. But neither one of them moved him the way Marbella did. The mystery in this woman piqued his curiosity. She rolled over him like a warm ocean wave that lulled you to a peaceful place down to your soul. Stirring his emotions made him off-balance. The gods of torture had placed her right in front of him. He preferred friends with benefits for a reason. No one got hurt. But he couldn’t turn away from her. This was either going to be one hell of a train wreck or the most beautiful sunrise ever.

He studied her from across the pool. Her sisters walked away, leaving her to play with something in her lap. The black one-piece bathing suit with a short pink sarong exposed her well-toned legs and generous cleavage. She focused on her hands but the sadness never left her face. Grief traveled across the pool in waves, punching him in the chest with recognition.

He was torn between keeping his distance and wanting to show her exactly how he wanted her. Dating wasn’t his thing. No strings attached. Friends with benefits was his safest bet. He could tell that Marabella wasn’t that type of woman. His pull toward her scared the hell out of him. She rose above the women he usually met. If he stuck around, all bets were off. Curiosity would probably kill him.

An empty umbrella drink sat next to her. He wanted to disprove the hold she had on him. As he grabbed the pink drink from the outdoor bar, his hand shook slightly. Since when did he get nervous about getting a woman a drink?She was unfamiliar territory.

Wandering over, he glanced at the pool, imagining what it would be like to get her wet. He set the fruity drink down next to her and waited for her response.

She glanced over. Her eyes followed his big forearm upward. Her eyes widen at the sight of his huge shoulders under a black t-shirt. Goosebumps formed on her skin and her breathing picked up. He hadn’t even touched her.

“Is that drink for me, Mac?” Her soft tone held reserve.

“Aye, I’m not much of an umbrella drink kind of chap. I thought I would keep your appetite wet.” He wanted to push her little, gauging her reaction.

Years with the company taught him that you needed to be able to read people well or suffer the consequences—which, in this case, may end with his shattered heart. His body tensed, aware of the tug between fight and flight. He wanted to walk away but staying seemed to be winning this war.

She peeked up at him, her eyes soft and sincere. “I took you for more of a whiskey guy. Like the whole bottle, from the looks of it.” She gave him half a smile. “I want to thank you for putting up with me on the flight. You’re a real gentleman. There aren’t many of those left in the world.” Picking up her drink, she stirred it with the umbrella.

God, if she only knew, she would probably run for the hills. The dark side of him wanted to take her to edge to find out if he could bring out her wild side. He wanted to possess her until she screamed out his name, begging for release. Reel it in, mate.

“You don’t need to thank me. It was my pleasure. By the way, are you trying to tell me I look like shit after a night of drinking?” He chuckled. “I guess it’s a small world. How long are you here for?” His fingers dug into his hips. Those eyes with that body had him forgetting about any other woman on the planet. Dangerous territory. The dance between staying and fleeing continued.

“My sisters and I are here for ten days. I needed this getaway to rethink and recharge.” Sadness pulled at her face.

“Do you mind if I sit down?” She nodded. He moved around her, pulling the lounger over so he was right next to her.

He sat close enough so the honeysuckle scent of her hair drifted to him bringing him back to his childhood. The Creighton family farm had rows of honeysuckle bushes that bloomed twice a year as the smell permeated the air. A lump formed in his throat at the memory. A bolt of lightning went through him. Her scent transported him to a place of laughter and peace. He could almost feel his sister tapping him on the shoulder. The power of those memories signaled that he needed to proceed with caution. Things inside his heart were starting to pay close attention trying to push away the fear.

She gazed down at her piece of clay that started to take shape. He regarded the blob, wondering why she would bring clay to a pool. Then he remembered Eros, her safety net.

“I hope Eros had a safe landing. Do you take clay wherever you go?” He said with a serious tone.

Her chin came up. “For your information, I’m a sculptor and yes, I take clay wherever I go. It helps me think and unwind. My hands and head work together. They always have.” Her gaze returned to the clay in her lap.

“Do you make anything else?” He leaned in to get a closer look.

Her head popped up and her smile made an appearance. “I’ve created other pieces like small pigs, lamb, and fish. My collection grew over the years.” Her fingers feathered over the red clay. “I donated one of my bigger free-spirit pieces to the hospital. Then they asked me to make something for the children’s wing. I thought it would be a great opportunity to hand them out to the sick kids. Smiles lit up their faces. They loved to touch the little sculptures.” Her eyes sparkled.

“I volunteer once a month to help the kids make their own creatures. I hope having their own muse would help them get through their illness. Making their own little creature is unique and colorful experience for them.” Her smile slipped. “The two things that seemed to be missing in my life.”

The knife struck his heart at the mention of sick kids. “So you’re an artist?” His fascination continued as he waded into deeper water.

“I create dancers in motion and free-spirited creatures. Then I caste them in bronze putting them in permanent motion.” She gave him a weak smile as if she didn’t quite believe it herself. “So what do you do to relieve stress?” she said prickly.

He took off his sunglasses and leaned into her hoping to smell more of her scent. She gasped as his breath lightly brushed along her neck. Unlike on the plane, he wanted her full attention. She closed her eyes for a moment and when she opened them, he scrutinized her intently. “My head and hands work together, too. I could show you how I relieve stress. However, it usually includes someone of the female persuasion.” He used his artillery of charm, pushing her to see what she would do with it.

Blush tinted her cheeks. The women he kept company with wouldn’t have batted an eyelash at his retort. Seeing her blush had him craving more. His cock started to come to life, which amazed him considering his intake of tequila the night before. He wanted this woman underneath him. His reaction to her was visceral. He would dive in and never come up. Those thoughts and emotions clouded his judgment and his control started to slip. God, when was the last time just talking to a woman had his body on full alert?

“Well, how do you know I want you to show me? Look around you. There are plenty of females for you to persuade.” She came right back at him, challenging him with those intense blue eyes and sharp words.

He moved around uncomfortably as he tried to manage his full salute. Kitten has sass, too. Her mouth would get her into trouble, in more ways than one. This was going to get interesting. The devil crept up on his shoulder.

He loved a good challenge. Mystified by her response, she was a contradiction in so many ways, from her coyness to her innocent blush. He let his gaze follow down her gorgeous, toned legs and back up to her large, supple breasts, resting on her beautifully flawless face.

He responded, “Oh, I think you want me to show you. I can tell by the shine in your eyes, the blush in your cheeks, and the way your breath makes your luscious cleavage go up and down. You’re a dead giveaway. By the way, there’s only one woman here I’m interested in persuading.” Let the sparring begin.

Her nipples stood at attention. As her hands came up to cover them, the clay dragon slipped onto the pool deck.

He caught her hands and put them in her lap. “Don’t hide. I like you like this.” He squeezed her hands.

She sucked in her breath, which puzzled him. Why would she be surprised that he would want to look at her? He adored exquisite women. The wheel of questions began to turn in his head. He’d let her off the hook this time.

Glancing at her pert nipples, he picked up the dragon and examined it. “Seems like the beginnings of a dragon. Is this one to keep Eros company?” He found her fascination with dragons adorable, strengthening that invisible cord between them. “Red dragons can represent some dark stuff, like death, anger, aggression, and danger. It can even be a warning.” His tone held no amusement.

“Well, that would make sense considering what’s happened lately in my life. You might say I’m at a crossroads. It’s time for a new muse to help me sort through it. Maybe the danger has already passed.” Her eyes were weary.

“What crossroads are you at? It sounds interesting.” His finger skimmed her jaw. “Don’t keep me guessing.” He stayed focused on her, wanting her to reveal a little more of her broken parts. What kind of danger was she in? His body went on alert, hazards of the job.

She took a deep breath. “I lost my husband about three months ago. Some things are starting to come to light that I would have liked to stay in the dark.” A flash of anger crossed her face.

Leaning back, he shut his eyes briefly as a painful memory hit him full force. “Saying sorry isn’t enough. I know what it’s like to lose someone you’re close to. I lost someone, too. It was a living hell to watch, not being able to do anything about it. Sometimes, people leave behind huge holes.”

He hadn’t spoken to anyone about her. Those words were long overdue. Sharing this fragment of himself scared him shitless. Her death bled him like an open wound, leaving a gaping hole. Loved ones could be gone in an instant. Life could turn on a dime. He teetered between wanting to tell Marabella everything to not wanting her to see the man he had become. The one who was closed off and alone.

As she spoke her next words, he was certain he would be sharing all of it with her. He would fight through his pain to get to the other side.

“I can tell by the pain in your eyes that the person was very special to you. You’re right. Sometimes, sorry isn’t enough. My husband died in a suspicious car accident. No one can figure out what he was doing in that part of New York City at that time of night. As some things have come to light, I’m not sure I knew him at all.” Her lips made a thin line.

Her words hit him hard. She really believed she didn’t know the man she called her husband. He couldn’t think of a worse betrayal.

He stared at her flawless face, made up to perfection. Every lash was in place with enough blush to appear natural. The foundation and eyeliner put on to enhance her features. She didn’t need it. He wanted to peel away the mask, itching to know more about the workings of the woman.

Reaching out his hand, just like on the plane, he opened his palm to her. He wouldn’t feel her energy again. It was an in the moment experience. Given the current revelations about her past, he wondered if she was rolling in waves of emotions he that were so familiar to him.

“What are you smiling about?” She tilted her head to peek up at him.

“I’m wondering how lightning strikes twice. What are the chances that you and I would be staying in the same place?”

His eyes devoured her. The wolf to her kitten. He was one-step away from crossing the abyss from no return. He had never entertained the thought of fate. She had him questioning everything.

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*Mara turned her* body toward him. He smelled heavenly as the combination of clean, citrus and spice filled her senses. The way a real man should smell after a shower, not the heavy musk of her late husband’s expensive cologne. Dragon wings fluttered in her stomach as a lump caught in her throat. This man made her heart race and her palms sweat.

She couldn’t help but feel like she knew him from somewhere. When she opened her eyes, it was just the two of them, as the world seemed to fall away.

She chanced putting her hand in his as a hot tingle flowed to her toes. He was the eye of her storm. Her body relaxed as her safety net returned. Another rivet holding the steel tightly shut started to come out as a sliver of light weaved between the sheets of metal. The warming light made her think that she might not have to protect the image of her marriage.

There were things she wanted to share with him but feared he might use it against her in the end. Her lack of trust in men reared its ugly head again. But he affected her, his voice and—God help her—that Scottish accent. She hoped he wouldn’t judge her. She could step out from behind her fortress of steel. With each thing she revealed, there seemed to be more freedom from her confines. This man made her burn when he touched her. Craving his touch, she needed to get inside him.

She volleyed back with a smart retort. “Well, I think you followed me here so I could hold your hand.” Oh, she felt a little cocky. Why not? She needed a distraction and wanted to bring his charming self down a notch.

“Are you sure it’s not the other way around? I remember someone grabbing my hand during the plane ride here. I bet there are a lot of things you can do with those talented hands. I think you might be a little smitten.” He gave her a cheeky grin, his eyes full of wonderment, daring her to come out and play with him.

“Smitten! I think someone is a little high on himself right now.” She leaned back in her lounger, keeping her eyes locked on him, never letting go of his hand. She caught the questions swimming in his eyes.

“Really? Well, I think someone needs to cool off in the pool before she gets so turned on by me she starts to break a sweat.” With that said, he let go of her hand, stood up, and peeled off his t-shirt.

Holy Heaven, he was cut to perfection. Nice pecs and ripped abs, a sculptor’s dream.

Leaning down, he placed his hands on each side of her hips and whispered in her ear, “You have three seconds to take off your clothes before I get you wet.” His mesmerizing voice was laden with an image of hot sex.

She barely had a chance to rip off the sarong and throw her hat to the side before he grabbed her hand. He stalked toward the pool with her in tow. She squealed, trying to keep up with him, down the stairs and into the water.

He submerged them in the cool water. As it surrounded her, she started to float away. His arm wrapped around her, anchoring her to him, her back to his front. She loved the way his arm gripped her, unwilling to let her go. His warmth spread through her. She felt safe from head to toe. There was a foreign feeling of excitement as the soft whisper of wings fluttered in her stomach once again. His fingers slid across her stomach making her flinch. Her ass bumped against his tight stomach. She could feel his excitement building.

“And where do you think you’re going?” he whispered in her ear before turning her around to face him. Their noses were inches away from each other. Her breath became shallow as he touched her jaw with his wet thumb. “I hope you put sunscreen on that beautiful face. I wouldn’t want you to turn into a cooked lobster out here. However, there are other parts of your body that I would like to make hot.” He gave her a crooked smile.

Startled, it took the air out of her lungs as she moved away from him. He could be so tender with her, yet possessive and sexy. He cared about a little thing like if she got burned or not, but had sex on the brain. She never had that kind of attention from a man in...well...when was the last time anyone called her beautiful?

“Let’s play a game. Hmm? You know ‘Simon Says’, right? Well, this is Mac Says.” Mischief played in his eyes. She caught on right away.

“Well, Mara says you have to catch me first!” With that, she spun out of his arms and dove into the clear blue water. She knew he’d let her go so he could catch her again.

She hadn’t swum out far before he gripped her ankle just before she reached the other side of the pool. Shooting up out of the water, she laughed out loud. She turned and came face to face with him. He wore a huge shit-eating grin. With his hair slicked back, his eyes were written with the intent and curiosity of a panther ready to strike at his prey. He put his arms underneath hers, pinning her back to the side of the pool. Her heart pounded in her chest. She was giddy with a mix of fear. Her body tensed like it always did with a man in such close proximity.

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*Hearing her laugh* speared through the middle of Mac’s chest. Her laugh reminded him of his sister when she was young. He was fascinated by the little girl inside the woman who liked the game of chase. He visualized what she must have been like as a child. Her chestnut hair flowed behind her, running through a meadow being chased by her father.

As soon as he caught her, her body went rigid and the light left her eyes. Questions floated in his head about what would make her react like that after such playfulness. What was he going to do with the woman in his arms? He decided to push her a little.

He leaned closer. “Now that I’ve caught you, you need to give me my reward—a kiss.” Floating back, he allowed her to make a move. He waited to see if his kitten would continue to play.

Her cheeks turned red. She gazed at his lips, calculating her next move. She had the look of a pinball bouncing off confused emotions. Slowly, she leaned in for a first kiss, lingering a breath away before she whispered, “You forgot to say, ‘Mac says’.” Without warning, she dropped underneath the water, arms over her head, and swam away. He had given her a way out. Smart girl*.*

He dove in after her, not to chase but to watch her body slice through the water. She swam with the swiftness and grace of a dolphin. Her body moved fluidly as she broke through the sun-sparkled surface. His eyes followed her long, lean and athletic legs as she walked up the stairs and out of the pool. He was definitely a leg man, wondering how they would feel wrapped around his waist, as he was snug inside her.

When they reached the loungers, she turned around and threw her shoulders back in confidence and defiance. She bumped into his chest, startled by his closeness. “Are you hungry?”

He put her chin between his finger and thumb, lifting her face up to him. “You may have won this round, but I don’t give up easily. So yes, I am definitely hungry.” He bowed his head so only she could hear his words. “I will have you, guaranteed.”