

SANCTIFIED

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MC/IR- Paranormal/Erotic

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EXCERPT:

Diego stood, the sheets clinging stubbornly to flesh of his bare buttocks before slipping free. He went to the dresser, carrying The Blessed Mother with him, forever immortalized upon the canvas of his back. *La Virgen Maria* had watched his back during his days spent in Fallujah. She'd been with him for the past year since his return to civilian life.

He slid into loose-fit jeans, and then slipped his feet into a pair of rubber sport sandals. Foregoing a shirt, he grabbed his flashlight from the bottom drawer. When the bulb flickered, he smacked the handle of the flashlight hard against his open palm until the light remained steady.

As he stepped outside, he quickly ascertained that the problem extended beyond a blown fuse. He stared over the rooftops across the street, comprehending that the city skyline in the distance had vanished, the silhouette of the buildings barely discernible by the wan light of the crescent moon.

Shutting off his flashlight, he walked up to the woman who stood on the sidewalk, also staring at the blank patch of night sky. He'd seen her in passing since he'd moved in a few months ago, but she'd always been with her boyfriend, and Diego was not one to look at or make conversation with another man's girl for too long—even if he did have a weakness for redheads.

But from what Diego had gathered, his neighbor's boyfriend had recently moved out. Wistfully, he admired the long tendrils of her auburn curls, envying their path where they rippled down the curves of her shapely backside. Resisting the urge to reach out and stroke just one wayward lock, he went to stand beside her.

"That's not a sight you see often," he commented, nodding toward the invisible skyline.

"Yeah, it's rather surreal. I guess everyone's been running their air too much." She glanced up at him and cocked one eyebrow. "So, how do you like our luxury condos?"

He shrugged and laughed, charmed by her wry humor. "I've lived in worse." He extended his hand, reminding himself not to preface his name with *Sergeant*. "Diego Peralez."

"Moirá Henley."

As their fingers brushed, Diego was struck by her porcelain-smooth features, incandescent in the dark. While he couldn't help but note her subtle beauty, it was the vague sense of recognition, followed by a strange current which thrilled up his arm, that found him wholly entranced.

Moira smiled shyly. Her eyes drifted downward and went wide. "Wow, you have a lot of tattoos."

"Oh, it's just a couple of pieces," he shrugged with a grin, yet inside he trembled, the warmth of her touch still lingering on the palm of his hand. Not one to show off his body art, as he'd commissioned it for very personal reasons; he suddenly grew self-conscious of his shirtless status. He crossed his arms and nodded up at the sky.

"Look, you can see all the stars."

Moira followed his gaze and uttered a tiny gasp. "I haven't seen the Milky Way shine that bright in years. I guess that's one of the drawbacks to urban living."

They both jumped, startled, as a car alarm sounded directly down the street. On cue, a siren wailed just blocks away, followed shortly by another.

"I don't know if it's too safe to be standing out here," Diego warned, the soldier in him at full alert.

"Yeah, I guess I'd better head inside." She wrapped her arms about her despite the heat. "Guess I'll see you around?"

"Sure thing," he said. "Nice to meet you, Moira."

Her name, it sounded so much like Maria...

"You too, Diego."

He watched her walk up the stairs, her hips swaying gently, her skirt draped enticingly low. He hadn't dated since leaving behind his last girlfriend for the war. He'd come home to find she'd understandably moved on. No woman had caught his interest since.

Until tonight. Maybe next time he saw Moira, he'd ask her out for a drink. Maybe talk her into going for a drive, to a lake a few hours outside of town, where the stars burned bright, every night...