

Excerpt from *A Promise for the Baby*, by Jennifer Lohmann

Just as he determined that the living room was empty, he noticed Vivian leaning against the rail on his terrace, looking north over the skyline of Chicago. With the room lit up against the dark night sky, Karl could only make out contours of her slim body. When he turned off the lights in the living room, her form gained substance. She reached up with her arm, pulling her hair off her neck and over her shoulder, exposing skin to the cold.

The night they'd spent together existed in a dream world, but his memories of the morning after were clear and sharp. He remembered waking up to find her sleeping, her black hair spread across the pillow and her neck exposed. He remembered looking at the knobs of her spine as they trailed from her nape down her back and under the covers. How kissable those knobs had looked. But then he'd gotten out of the bed to make coffee, found the marriage certificate and any thought of kissing her neck was gone.

Stepping outside into the cold pushed away those memories. They were married, she was in Chicago, and kissing the slim line of her neck had never been further away from possible. "Do you have a winter coat?"

She was standing outside in jeans, her sweater and pink argyle socks. "I'm not cold."

Even in the hazy moonlight he could see goose bumps dotting her neck, but she didn't shiver or tuck her hands around her body for warmth.

"I bought the apartment for this view," he said, folding his arms on the railing of the terrace and leaning forward to look out over the city with her.

"What are the names of some of the buildings?"

He pointed out the Aon Center and Smurfit-Stone Building. "If you're still here in the summer, maybe you can go on an architecture boat tour. Or they have walking tours year-round."

"You don't have curtains."

"No." Removing the curtains was one of the few changes he'd made when Jessica had moved out.

"Not even in your bedroom?"

"I value openness."

"You should come west."

"I've been to Vegas." He slid closer to her on the terrace. Not so close that their arms touched, but close enough to feel her presence. She still smelled like jasmine.

"Not Vegas. Vegas is the flashy west. I mean southern Idaho, where you can see for miles in every direction and there's nothing but sky and canyons."

"Is that where you're from?"

"I graduated high school in Jackpot, Nevada. It's right across the border."

He'd married a blackjack dealer from a town called Jackpot. The world had an unfortunate sense of humor. "It would've been a shorter drive from Vegas to Jackpot."

She turned her head to the side to look at him, the corners of her mouth turned up in a mysterious smile. “Shorter, yes, but there’s nothing for me in Jackpot. Plus, it would be wrong not to let you know you’re going to be a father.”

“A phone call would’ve sufficed.”

“Would you want to learn that you’re going to be a father with a phone call from a stranger?” She didn’t slip again and admit to not being able to go home, as she had when they’d been talking in the living room.

He didn’t have an answer to that question. If asked this morning, he would’ve said yes. Now, standing next to Vivian on his terrace, looking at the lights sparkle across Grant Park and smelling her jasmine perfume, he wasn’t so sure. Her neck was even more kissable up close.

“Dinner’s getting cold.” He pushed off the railing and walked back into the apartment, not looking to see if she followed.