

## The Luna Choosing Game by Jane Above Story Chapter 1

Chapter 0001 Working 14 straight hours at a restaurant was hard enough, but to do so while my daughter was sick, threatened to pull my heart out. On top of worrying about the overflowing orders, my daughter's fever, I had to avoid the wandering hands of my boss. "Just a minute, Piper," he said, sliding up beside me. Before I could escape, he placed his hand on my butt. "I need to inspect this." His eyes were on the food, but his hand squeezed my bottom. I snapped, "Move your hand, Boss. Or so help me, I will dump these plates straight onto your head."

He grinned like I amused him. "You wouldn't dare." He was right, and I hated that. The current economy in the Werewolf Kingdom was bad for everyone. So many people were out on the streets, unable to support themselves. Without this job, I'd likely be out there among them. As a single mom. Boss turned into me. He slid his free hand around my waist and pulled me against him in a mockery of a hug. He used the closeness to openly stare down the front of my shirt. "I have to take out the food." I swallowed down the bile rising in my throat.

"The customers are waiting." "Let them wait." Boss licked his lips. His breath smelled like cigarettes. I tilted my head away. "We'll get complaints." He leaned into me, pressed his nose to the side of my neck, and inhaled. I barely repressed a tremor of revulsion. My stomach flipped. To my side, someone laughed. An older waitress plucked a roll of paper towels off the top shelf. "You shouldn't resist, honey," she said. "Everyone knows you don't have a man at home. Unless..." She laughed again, loud and cruel. "Were you hoping to be chosen as Queen of the Selection?" Recently, the royal family announced that they were selecting potential brides for three princes. With updates regularly released over the news broadcasts, people flooded in to watch the televisions hanging in our restaurant. As far as I could tell, everyone was invested in the Luna

Choosing Game – except me. Boss laughed too. Some spittle hit my cheek. “You are daydreaming if you think you’ve got a shot, wolf-less.” Roughly, he yanked me backwards so he could rub himself against the curve of my backside. The twitch of interest in his pants nearly made me throw up. He reached around me, hands gripping the shelves to my right and left, and boxed me in. “I’ll give you three days to decide, Piper. Either you come to me at night or you’re fired.” The rejection sat primed on my tongue. But he wasn’t done. “Aren’t your daughter’s medical bills due next week? How tragic, if you couldn’t afford them.” He smiled as he spoke, enjoying his own cruelty. All of the blood drained from my face. My daughter, Elva, had recently contracted werewolf pneumonia. I needed money for her treatments and her medicines. She still wasn’t recovered. Boss moved away from me then, leaving me in a daze. The rest of the shift was a blur. After work, I returned home to my small two-bedroom apartment. My roommate and best friend Anna stood in the doorway to the bedroom I shared with Elva. “How is she?” I asked. Anna watched Elva for me while I was at work. “She had a mild fever, but it just broke,” Anna said. “She’s okay now?” I couldn’t keep the worry from my voice. “She is.” I sank against the side of the counter. Exhaustion pulled at my muscles. “Did something happen at work?” Anna asked. She’d been my friend a long time, so she probably already knew the answer just from looking at me. I didn’t want to worry her, so I kept my explanation vague.

“Boss acted weird again. But it’s nothing I can’t handle.” “That bastard,” Anna cursed. She’d seen right through me. “You shouldn’t have to deal with his behavior. Heck, you shouldn’t be treated like this at all!” “Anna...” “No, Piper. I’m tired of this. You were a top student at the Royal Academy. That has to mean something.” It had meant something once, a long time ago. “That’s not me, anymore.” Now I was just a wolf-less single woman, trying to support myself and my child. I sighed. Anna crossed her arms. “This is your sister’s fault. You never should have sacrificed yourself for that drug-addict and her abandoned baby. And your ex-boyfriend... Piper, you were dating a noble!” I don’t need to be reminded that Elva isn’t my biological daughter. In my heart, she is. And I’m not sacrificing anything for her; she deserves everything. This was a familiar argument

between Anna and I. I knew she meant well, so I never got angry. I only felt more tired – worn down to my bones. I tried to smile, but it was bitter. “You are forgetting that there was always an insurmountable class difference between him and me, even before my sacrifice. And once I lost my wolf... The gap was just too big.” When we parted, Anna went to turn on the television, while I quickly checked in on Elva. The darling girl was sleeping soundly. I tucked the blankets more snugly against her sides. After watching her steady breathing for a moment, I quietly made my way from the room. In the living room, Anna had turned on the evening news. The scrawl at the bottom of the screen read, The Luna Selection: Latest Developments! Any woman could be considered, from princess to peasant, but only three would marry the princes. From those three, only one would become Queen. Watching me, Anna held the remote aloft, ready to flip channels. I knew she was excited about the selection. Everyone in the entire kingdom was. I might have been too, if I actually allowed myself to dream anymore. But who had time for dreaming when life was as it was: work and sleep and work and bills. I had no room for dreams in my life. I could only focus on survival. Anna had the volume low, so as not to wake Elva. When the newscasters talked, I only heard every fourth or so word. “The three princes... selection... first public appearance...” “I was wondering how they would do this, since the selection is supposed to be a public spectacle,” Anna said. “I thought for a while they might hide the princes behind a curtain or something.”

The royal family were notoriously private. Only the King and Queen’s faces were well-known, and only because they were on all of our money. “Piper,” Anna gasped. She pointed at the screen, which displayed new footage of the princes waving to a crowd. “Isn’t that...?” I saw what she saw, and I couldn’t believe my eyes. My heart knew the truth though, suddenly jolting like it intended to leap straight from my chest. I knew that smile. Right there on the screen... That prince in the line... That was my ex-boyfriend. Nicholas.