I heard her panic in the silence shortly after dawn. I grabbed a pillow and leaped from the bed at the same moment.

“Renesmee!” I called her name, both in reassurance to her and in warning to her mother. Bella was right behind me, dragging a sheet from the mattress. I held the pillow over my groin and in an instant was through her door and at her bedside. She was sitting up, gripping the iron bars of her crib.

Renesmee didn’t speak or cry, but when I lifted her as calmly as possible from her bed, she slapped her palm to my cheek and showed me her empty room through the bars of her crib. She had never been alone, not for a single second since she was born, and it frightened her. We should have foreseen this. Damn!

“Everything is fine, Nessie. Momma and Daddy were right here the whole time.”

“Poor baby, were you afraid?” Bella smiled and reached for Nessie with one hand, while gripping the sheet above her breasts with the other. I set her in her mother’s arms and went to pull on some pants. I didn’t have a problem with the idea that nudity is natural and one can raise children in a naturist family without negative repercussions. However, Bella and I hadn’t discussed it and I wasn’t going to pretend that I knew exactly how to go about such a thing, having never studied the theory of it or known any naturists. (Though they are reputedly abundant in the Pacific Northwest where natural hot springs abound in the volcanic mountain ranges.)

When I came back, Bella was sitting in the rocking chair, letting Nessie vent her feelings with vigorous smacks of her palm. I noted to myself that we’d have to teach her to touch “soft,” as she might actually hurt her human friends. It was nothing to us, though.

“Renesmee, are you thirsty?” I asked to distract her from her distress.

She was. Alice had mentioned that the cottage originally had a kitchen off the living room. Esme had turned it into a den area, but after Nessie was born, Alice said they planned to outfit it as a kitchenette for Renesmee. Sure enough, when I looked around the main room of the cottage, I noticed that a small area to the left side of the hallway had been redone since the day before. A mini-refrigerator stood on the floor with a short countertop above it on which sat a small microwave oven. A sink was installed in the original sink’s location with the useful addition of running water.

Checking the fridge, I found several pints of blood, and on a nearby shelf I located some glassware and two metal cups. Rosalie’s doing, no doubt. She and Carlisle had originally figured out how to feed Renesmee and she’d been doing it longer than anyone else, including me. She had made it possible for the baby’s parents to have a leisurely
“breakfast” with their child before joining the rest of the family. It was extremely thoughtful of her.

I heated a cup’s worth of blood, transferred it to Nessie’s cup, and walked back to her bedroom. I held it up to show Bella and she immediately stood up.

“Daddy’s going to feed you now while I get dressed,” she explained to Nessie. I sat down and rocked the baby gently while she drank and retold her troubles to me with her hand.

We’d have to figure out a better way to handle mornings. She needed to learn that she was not abandoned just because she was alone for a few minutes. It might take a bit of time now that we’d traumatized her. *Crap!* This parenting stuff was not as easy as whistling Dixie. With a flash of intuition, I glanced at the bookshelves to my left and saw a section on the top shelf that was undoubtedly meant for me.

*The Baby Owner’s Manual*

*The Baby Book: Everything You Need to Know from Birth to Age Two*

*Dr. Spock’s Baby and Child Care: 8th Edition*

*What to Expect: the First Year*

*What to Expect: the Toddler Years*

*Toddler Psychology*

*Parenting for Dummies*

I smiled to myself. Esme knew that when I wanted to learn about something I was just like my father—I’d reach for a book and then reach for ten more. I guess she thought this collection would get me started.

When Nessie finished her breakfast, I walked with her down the hallway to the kitchennette, rinsed the cup in the sink, and headed back to her room to dress her. She was inquiring about the day ahead by showing me pictures of everyone with a “Where are they?” question mark.

“We’ll go to the big house in a few minutes and you can see Auntie Rose, Jacob, Nana, and Popop.” The latter was Carlisle’s name for himself to distinguish him from Grandpa Charlie. Was it a British nickname for grandfather? No, it was probably Italian or Greek. “Grandpa” sounded ridiculous when applied to Carlisle, anyway.

I responded to her next picture, too. “Yes, Grandpa Charlie will visit you in the evening and he’ll be bringing a friend named Sue who also wants to meet you. Sue is Leah and Seth’s mother.”

Renesmee showed me an image of Jacob in his wolf form as a question. It took me a moment to realize that she wanted to know if Seth and Leah’s mother was a wolf-person, like Jacob! We hadn’t told Renesmee about the wolves yet, but judging by the image in her mind, Jacob had phased in front of her!

I seethed. Once again, Jacob had taken it upon himself to make decisions for our family that were not his to make. I would be giving him a piece of my mind later or, better yet, maybe I’d let Bella handle it. She had that great newborn excuse for attacking him.
On second thought…Seth and Leah had been hanging around the property as wolves since the first day and Nessie had seen Seth change to human form after Bella hurt him. Jacob must have explained it to her and showed her how he could phase. I was rather surprised that I hadn’t read that episode in Jacob’s thoughts. Perhaps he hadn’t thought about it when he was around me.

“We’re finished with the drinking part,” I called to Bella and she joined us in Nessie’s room.

“Let’s wrap Renesmee in her afghan and take her to the main house to wash and dress her. I wouldn’t mind having a shower myself, actually.”


She tried to chastise me with a scowl and a sideways glance at Renesmee, but her reluctant grin won out.

“Ah, you’re right,” I teased. “I’m the one with the wicket.” She rolled her eyes.

“Esme put in a little kitchen for us with a sink and running water. We could bathe Nessie here if you want to.”

“Hmm…I wonder if they added a hot water heater too,” she replied.

“Good point.” We were impervious to cold water, but our daughter was not. Though she seemed to tolerate our cold body temperatures, she was still a warm-blooded creature. Huh. Maybe that’s why the vampire/human hybrid has such a high temperature—to counteract the chill of her vampire parents’ skin. Interesting thought.

“Why don’t you get a shirt and we can go then?”

“Okay. Renesmee’s already wondering where the family is. She was asleep when we left last night.”

I grabbed Dr. Spock’s Baby and Child Care book before leaving the room and flicked to the Table of Contents. A couple of chapters caught my eye: “Parents’ Sexual Relations After Delivery,” and “Crying and Comforting.” The first two issues we’d run into. Then there was “Trust Yourself,” a chapter that sounded comforting to me and “The Diversity of Families.” Our family had to be the all-time winner in that category. I tucked the paperback book into the waistband of my khakis.

Back at the “big house,” Carlisle was ready with his measuring tape—we were late. Everyone rushed over and hovered when we entered, greeting Renesmee like she’d been gone for days. The family was used to having her there around the clock, so all of us were adjusting.

“Oh, Esme!” Bella cried. “The nursery is…unbelievable. It’s perfect. Thank you so much! And thanks to everyone else who worked on it…Rose…Jasper…Carlisle…”

“I knitted the baby blanket,” Alice interrupted.

“You did? When?” Bella asked, surprised.
“While you and Edward were off doing your thing in the car.” Her mental image of us was a little too close for comfort, but at least Alice was discreet.

“But the colors!”
“I already knew what colors Nessie would pick. Simple.”
“Thank you, Alice. It’s beautiful. And the walls and Peter Rabbit and all the books and toys…. It’s just…." Bella started to choke up.

“We were bowled over,” I finished for her. “And thanks for the instruction manuals, Esme. They definitely will be useful. Already I’m making mistakes!”

“All parents make mistakes, Edward,” she said in her kindly way. “It comes with the territory. Come here little one! We missed you!” she added, reaching for the baby. Renesmee immediately put her hand on Esme’s cheek and showed her the empty bedroom looking through the iron bars.

“Renesmee was a little frightened this morning when she woke up alone,” I explained.

“Ah…,” Carlisle nodded his head. He was wondering what Esme’s confused expression meant.

“Has she drunk this morning?” Rosalie inquired.

“Yes,” I replied. “Thanks for the kitchen. That came in handy.” Rose and Esme looked at each other and smiled. In their thoughts, I could hear that Esme had equipped it and Rosalie had done the plumbing and stocked the fridge. Rose had gotten squirted in the face when she first tested the faucet. I chuckled, but shook my head when Bella looked at me inquiringly. I’d tell her about it later.

Jasper’s thoughts were churning. He was standing behind Alice, a look of concern on his face.

Oh! He’s right! I realized.

“Bella,” Jasper remarked, “You’ll want to go hunting today.” It was more of a statement than a question.

“Yes, you must be thirsty! I wasn’t thinking!” My thoughtlessness irritated me, but Bella just shrugged.

“Yes, it’s probably a good idea since Charlie and Sue are coming over tonight. I don’t want to slip up.” She grimaced. “Rose, can you look after Renesmee this afternoon while we go?”

“Sure. Alice and I were going to Seattle, but we can go tomorrow. Right Alice?”

“I don’t want Renesmee to look like a street urchin in her photographs,” Alice complained. “I think we should go as soon as possible.”

“Where’s Jacob?” Bella asked, suddenly realizing that there was a Jacob-sized empty space in the room.

“The dogs went hunting this morning. The girl mutt needed to eat and she doesn’t like our hospitality. She should just go home.” Rosalie was being ungracious, as usual,
though Leah was pretty hard to take. I suddenly wondered why Leah didn’t go home. The trouble between the Quileute and the Cullens was over.

“Two more guys came over this morning to hunt with them,” Emmett told me and he was rather happy about it. He was thinking about asking one or both of them to fight him just for fun. I would have to warn Carlisle. Emmett wasn’t known for his restraint and Carlisle didn’t need any more broken wolves on his hands, even if they did heal quickly.

“Who?” Bella asked.

“His best friends, what’re their names? Quil and Ember?” Rosalie snickered at Emmett’s name butchery.

“Embry,” Carlisle corrected. “The two of them seem to be missing Jacob. I wouldn’t be surprised if we saw a couple more defections from Sam’s pack.”

“More dogs hanging around? Ew!”

“Well, Rosalie, it would seem that our baby girl…” —Carlisle tickled Nessie under the chin, making her smile— “…is bridging the gap between us and them. When Sam and I discussed the treaty, he pointed out that we are essentially extended family now. Jacob can’t leave Renesmee and they won’t leave him, so—”

“Ew! I am not related to any stinking mongrels.”

“Rose, please!” Esme gave her a sharp look and cast her eyes meaningfully at the baby. Rose grunted, but said no more.

“Rose?” Bella asked. “Would you help me bathe Renesmee?”

“And I’ll get her an outfit to wear!” Alice turned and headed up the stairs. Rosalie took the baby from Esme and followed Alice. Bella looked at me and stroked my hand once.

“No, Edward, you can’t come!” Alice warbled. “You and Bella can shower together later!” She laughed loudly.

Alice! She must have seen my decision earlier. I’d been looking forward to soaping down my wife in the shower. But we were parents now. We had to be good.

Actually, we were extremely lucky parents in many ways. We had unlimited, safe and free childcare; our child slept twelve hours a night, though we didn’t sleep at all; Renesmee didn’t need diapers or potty training as long as her sole diet was blood (or so we guessed); our child didn’t scream or cry or throw tantrums (she didn’t need to, since her needs were attended to instantly); she was infinitely lovable, it seemed, extremely bright, and had an extraordinary gift for communication.

There were a few downsides to our parenthood experience too, though. Our child drank human blood, which was awkward (to say the least) and not as easy to acquire in quantity as one might wish; our child was unique and exceptionally gifted, which made her a perfect target of acquisition for the Volturi; our baby might only have the lifespan of a small dog. That last thought was so disturbing that I aborted the list-making immediately. It was our terror, our grief, our dreaded nightmare, though none of us talked about it.
The whole family was trying to avoid thinking about it, but with our vampire’s skill for numbers, we all knew that at her current rate of growth, Renesmee would be full-grown by age four and elderly by age fifteen. Fifteen years! It was too small a number to contemplate, especially for those of us who could live forever. As such, we suffered loss all the time…loss of human acquaintances or friends, loss of community every few years, and loss of our entire way of life every forty or fifty years. Times changed, but we did not—at least not without great effort or pain. But the loss of a child after only fifteen years! It was too painful to consider.

I needed to pick up the research that Jasper, Emmett, and Carlisle had done during Bella’s pregnancy. We now needed to research human/vampire hybrids. I remembered clearly the conversation I’d had with Kaure on Esme’s Island. She knew about Renesmee…or at least knew legends of children such as Renesmee. She had been terribly distressed when she realized Bella was pregnant by me. She had called our unborn child “Death.” It turned out that carrying Renesmee had caused Bella’s human death.

Emmett interrupted my worries when he hollered up the stairs after Bella: “Hey, little sister! You owe me a wrestling rematch. You can’t worm out of it just because your dad is visiting. Don’t forget!”

I could hear Bella sigh all the way from the second floor. He wasn’t going to let go of it. He would insist on wrestling her every day until her newborn strength had waned and he could win. That was probably how we would all know when Bella had reverted to a mere immortal like the rest of us. I chuckled to myself, remembering her physical superiority. At least with Emmett, I could predict his moves and beat him to the punch, or rather, dodge his punch. I had no such advantage with Bella.

“I understand that things went well with Charlie yesterday,” Carlisle commented.

“Extremely so,” I replied. “Bella was remarkable! She exhibited barely any distress at all.”

“She still needs to hunt,” Jasper reminded me.

“Of course! But she’s so well-controlled and atypical that it’s hard to remember she’s a newborn,” I responded.

“Except when she pins you down to the mattress, eh?” Emmett hadn’t promised not to harass me about my sex life. Fortunately, I didn’t mind. I made no reply to his remark, but I couldn’t stop the half-smile that crept over my face.

“He likes it!” Emmett accused merrily. Jasper snickered and Esme wisely found something to do in the kitchen.

“So, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted…”—I gave Emmett a pointed stare—“…Renesmee was great with Charlie too. He’s completely in love with her.”

“That was the impression I got from upstairs,” Carlisle replied. “I decided not to impose my company on Bella’s father for the moment, as he must be annoyed with me for
withholding the truth of Bella’s whereabouts.”

“Perhaps,” I replied. “But Charlie’s nothing if not pragmatic. He’s still angry with me too, but I believe that Renesmee will heal all of that over if she hasn’t already. He’d forgive us most anything just to have her in his life…and Bella too, of course.”

“That’s good. It doesn’t mean that we still won’t have to leave the area, though.”

“He knows that, but Bella has promised to visit him regardless. Eventually he’ll recognize that none of us is growing older, but he seems so determined to avoid knowing too much that it might work out anyway.”

“Hmm.” Emmett and Jasper had wandered off as Carlisle and I continued talking.

“Did you hear that Charlie wants to bring Sue over with him tonight?” I asked.

“Yes, I caught something about that.”

“I’m getting a sense there might be something brewing there between she and Charlie,” I said. “If that amounts to something, then he will undoubtedly be initiated into the tribe’s secrets…especially if he should become a stepfather to Seth and Leah.”

“Wouldn’t that be something?” Carlisle smiled. “Werewolves and vampires sitting down to Thanksgiving dinner together…well, metaphorically, anyway.”

I grinned. “It will be harder for them than for us, I’d wager.”

“Yes, perhaps. I’m still intrigued with the possibility of Jacob and Renesmee conceiving children.”

“Argh! I don’t even want to think about that!” I growled.

“No, of course not. Renesmee is much too young to even consider such a thing. But taking the long view, it’s a possibility…remote perhaps, but…. How little we really know!”

“Yes. I was just considering your research. I think we should proceed with it and see what we can uncover about hybrid children. Now that Bella’s pregnancy is over, we need not worry so much about that, but Renesmee’s growth cycle…well, it’s another matter.”

“Yes,” Carlisle replied. “I’ve not stopped researching. I would have mentioned it to you, but I’ve not made much progress.”

“Perhaps I can help.”

“Yes, there will be a lot of internet time and we may need to make phone calls to librarians and researchers around the country…the world actually. You know languages that I don’t, so that would be a help. I’m starting to think that Brazil is our best hope.”

Carlisle and I retreated to his office where he shared with me what he and my brothers had already done and what information he had gleaned since Renesmee’s birth. It was precious little.

From Carlisle’s office, I heard the girls laughing in the bathroom and then in Alice and Rose’s bedrooms. They were washing Nessie’s hair and bathing her, and Alice was taking fun-in-the-bath photographs while Renesmee splashed water out of the sink. They were the standard photographs that one’s parents might show one’s prospective fiancé to
have a good laugh—Renesmee in the sink, Renesmee lying on her tummy on a blanket with her naked bum in the air, Renesmee wearing poochy diapers and nothing else. (Though Renesmee didn’t need diapers, Alice thought it was a good idea to have some pictures of her in them and to keep some on hand in case things changed. For my part, I was certain Renesmee would conquer toilet training the first time we explained it to her should it ever prove necessary.)

Her aunts had dressed Renesmee in a selection of outfits and rearranged her hair in different ways for each photo—parted different ways, in Pippi Longstocking pigtails, and in a short ponytail. Alice was in heaven. She even painted the baby’s fingernails and toenails and put glitter on them. It was after noon before they stopped to feed Nessie, and Carlisle went to measure her. I put away my computer when Bella entered the office.

“Ready for a hunt?”

“Sure. Guess I better.”

“Hold on a second.” I listened for a moment. “Jasper wants to go with us. Is that okay with you?”

“Why?”

“Um…”—I listened a bit more—“…just to help out. I think he’s also curious about you and your shocking newborn abilities,” I teased, though it was true. “Maybe Alice will come too and we can make it a double date.” I smiled at her, though she seemed a little disgruntled.

“Alice and Rose are going to Nordstrom’s—and who knows where else in Seattle—to buy Renesmee a wardrobe. I don’t know how they’re going to manage that since she’s growing so fast. Alice will probably buy ten outfits in every size.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Oh…no…I guess not. That’s just Alice. And honestly, I don’t want to do all that shopping. If it were left to me, our daughter would wear baby jeans and t-shirts every day and sweats at night. I’m sure we’ll get lots of great photos for the baby album. Alice and Rose want to take pictures every day so we have enough in four years to cover her whole childhood.” Bella looked down at the floor and in an instant I knew what the problem was. I jumped up and wrapped my arms around her.

“Oh, Bella, it’s going to be okay,” I soothed, rubbing her back, though I was at least as frightened as she was. Her shoulders were shaking and she’d hidden her face in my shirt.

“I’m scared, Edward.”

“I know, darling. We’re going to do everything we can. Carlisle and I are already working on it.”

“We just got her…I don’t want to lose her.”

There was nothing I could say that would be both comforting and true. We really didn’t know how long Renesmee might live. I had hope that if her genetics were the same as the wolves, her growth might slow down or stop when she reached her teens. We knew that the Quileute with the wolf gene stopped aging during that period in their lives as long
as vampires were present. But we also knew that when the wolves stopped phasing, they returned to natural aging and died. The elder Quil Ateara had aged into an old man and Ephraim Black was long dead. But really, we didn’t know if any of that information applied to Renesmee. The Quileute shape-shifters might have no genetic connection to vampire/human hybrids at all. I simply stood there holding Bella, rubbing her back and stroking her hair until her vampire tears subsided.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Bella finally said.

She had been “not fine” for quite a long time for her. Normally, she tried to suppress any evidence of her own pain as quickly as possible. The only other time I’d seen her this distressed was after she officially ended her relationship with Jacob. That had been truly horrendous, but this was bad enough.

I vowed to do everything in my power to take this pain away, though I knew that Renesmee’s future was far beyond my control. I felt a momentary sense of despair, but crushed it before it could get ahead of me. Bella needed me to be strong. We would do whatever we had to do…whatever we could do. And if…God forbid!…there was nothing we could do, we would love our daughter to the best of our abilities for as long as God granted her to us. That we’d gotten her at all was a true miracle.

Standing there, I couldn’t help but recall what Bella and I and Renesmee had been through in that room. Images of blood filled my mind…pooled on the floor, spattered on the walls, puddled on the overflowing table…covering Bella, Jacob, Rosalie, and me. Other memories came too…cutting into my wife with a scalpel, releasing our miracle baby, the panic of Bella’s heart stopping, the joy of its restarting, the fear in waiting, the solemn ritual of washing her dead body. I squeezed her harder as my love for her threatened to overwhelm me.

I took Bella’s face in my hands and kissed her gently on the forehead. Then she raised her lips to mine. Sadness to passion, just like that! There was something to the idea that all emotions were essentially the same…arousal was arousal, emotional or otherwise. We took a few minutes there in the office to remember what our lives were all about…each other.

Bella ran her hands over my shoulders and down my arms, then up my hips to my stomach and on to my chest. She slipped her fingers between the buttons of my oxford shirt and dragged them across the light hair on my chest. Mmm… Though I was sorely tempted to lock the door and pull my wife onto the floor or haul her upstairs to our bedroom, I knew I should help her with balancing her priorities.

“Hunting?” I whispered, but my wife, her arms around my neck, had suddenly hopped up and wrapped her legs around my waist. Mmm...so tempting! I spun in a circle a couple of times, just feeling the joy of love and lust for my wife. Then Bella separated her lips from mine and looked toward the door, then back at me.

“Later, my darling?” I murmured.
“Yes, you’re right.” Bella groaned and released her legs, landing gracefully on her feet. It put me in mind of another time, seemingly long ago, when she had tried to jump off my back and fell on her butt in the mud.

“Okay,” I said, suppressing a laugh. I took her hand and we proceeded down the stairs. “Jasper,” I called. “We’re going hunting if you want to come.” He appeared next to us.

“Is that all right with you, Bella?” he asked my wife politely.

“Sure, sure,” Bella said. It was the generic “whatever” reply I’d heard Jacob use when he wanted to get Bella off his back about something. Jasper didn’t realize it was not as enthusiastic as it sounded. Just as well.