35. EXTENDED FAMILY

Over the next couple of weeks, the Cullen household became Grand Central Station for a growing collection of motley characters. It seemed, for instance, that we had acquired an entire wolf pack of our own. Carlisle had been right about Embry and Quil—they missed Jacob. Because there was no longer any animosity between the two packs, Embry and Quil could choose which Alpha they wanted to follow and they joined Jacob’s pack. Sam’s pack had grown to seven wolves with the addition of Colin and Brady, so the defections evened up the numbers.

The two wolf packs informally divided their territory, with Sam’s pack retaining responsibility for reservation land and Jacob’s pack watching over Forks and the surrounding area up to the reservation border. There were no hard rules—all of the wolves were free to cross the lines—but if any trouble arose, the packs would adopt the lines for patrolling purposes.

Taking charge of Forks and the surrounding area kept Jacob near the center of his territory when he was on Cullen property. Therefore, he and his pack had become semi-permanent residents of our home. They came and went, but when they didn’t return to their family homes at night, they slept outside our house in their wolf forms. Jacob kept two wolves—usually himself and one other member of his pack—always on the property, or if we took Renesmee somewhere, he would go along with her and leave two other wolves at the Cullen house. He wanted to sleep outside the cottage at night, but he received an emphatic “No!” to that idea. Bella and I needed at least some semblance of privacy.

Jacob had made Leah his second-in-command and she kept up a running communication between him and the rest of the pack. Since Jacob spent a lot of time in his human form with Renesmee, Leah came into the house quite often, but didn’t stay for long. She had never gotten comfortable with the werewolf/vampire alliance, though she was less vocal with her opinions than in the past. As Sam had said, Jacob couldn’t leave Renesmee and the pack couldn’t abandon him, so everybody had to adjust to the changes. None of the other wolves had a problem with it, mostly because Renesmee was so lovable that she overcame their natural discomfort around vampires.

Seth had made the Cullen house his second home. It was natural given that Charlie and Sue spent a majority of their weekend afternoons and weekday evenings at our house. We had invited Billy to visit, since Jacob was with us so much of the time, but the triangle between Charlie and Billy and Sue had not completely resolved itself. Billy had been harboring more serious intentions towards Sue than he would admit to.

Emmett had struck up a friendship with Quil and Embry. I’d warned Carlisle about Emmett’s intentions to fight them, worried that my brother would hurt one of them. I
thought he might have something to prove because he was losing so often to Bella in their almost daily arm-wrestling matches. Bella told him that she hadn’t noticed a lessening of her newborn strength, but Emmett kept insisting that it was a fluke, or that he just needed to perfect his technique, or that he hadn’t hunted enough recently. It seemed impossible for him to accept that he was not the strongest vampire in the family.

Carlisle spoke with Emmett about not fighting the wolves. Though they healed fast, they were not as rugged as vampires and could die from organic causes when injured. Since our battle with the newborn army, Carlisle had been studying veterinary science and the Canis lupis species in particular. He had acquired some veterinary medical equipment on the chance that one of the wolves became injured and couldn’t phase to human form. Still, there was no guarantee that Carlisle could help a severely injured wolf and none of the wolves could go to the local hospital in human form because of their physical anomalies—body temperature, for instance. Emmett promised that if the wolves would fight with him, he’d take precautions to make sure they didn’t get hurt. Carlisle was not pleased, but he wasn’t the kind of father who issued ultimatums.

Quil and Embry were as excited about fighting as Emmett was and the three of them sneaked off to the woods to have a go at each other. The wolves were nearly as cocky as Emmett, so they didn’t think twice about fighting him one-on-one. When they discovered how trivial it was for Emmett to roll a wolf with his supernatural strength, speed, and reflexes, they agreed that two-on-one would be more fair. The fights instantly became more interesting when the wolves attacked Emmett from two different directions.

Jacob never participated in the fights. He wouldn’t risk getting injured and frightening Renesmee, but Rosalie and Alice went to watch and put down money. Jasper and Seth served as umpires, running the fights like boxing matches, with timed rounds and points, to keep things as safe as possible. They conferred at the end of each match and called the win.

At home, our days had taken on a family routine. Bella and I spent an hour with Renesmee in the mornings at our cottage, feeding her and then reading books or playing with her toys before we joined the family at the big house. Then we handed her over to Carlisle to be measured and weighed.

In addition to monitoring Renesmee’s growth, my father performed medical exams that he thought were necessary, or if they were nonintrusive, to gather information. He took her temperature periodically, looked into her ears and nose, checked her blood pressure and reflexes, and listened to her heart and lungs.

On one such occasion he looked into her throat—after examining mine first to show her what he was going to do—and found that her vocal chords resembled mine, which are unlike those of a human. Vampire vocal cords are taller and wider, which allows us to make a wider range of sounds, both higher and lower, than humans. Apparently, Renesmee’s squeaks and squawks were just artifacts of her learning to use them.
After measuring Nessie and finishing any exams, Carlisle usually spent time letting his granddaughter play with his computer or choose books from his shelves. Then he passed her off to her aunts for the daily fashion show.

Renesmee outgrew her clothes at an astonishing rate, so she rarely wore the same thing twice. Before she had cycled through all the clothes Alice had purchased for her in a particular size, she had grown to a larger size. That was the reason for the thousands of photographs the aunts took. Their goal was to create an entire childhood history for Renesmee in what would be only four years if her growth rate continued at its present rate.

Alice and Rose got more and more creative with their photography. They set up a green screen like those used to film movies and snapped photos of Renesmee in front of it wearing clothes for different climates with a variety of hair arrangements, props, and accessories. Alice used her computer to add background scenery.

We had photos of Renesmee at a California beach with her parents and a beach ball, at the Oregon Coast in rubber boots and a raincoat, and wearing a baby skiing outfit in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. Renesmee went boating at Lake Chelan, swung on schoolyard swing-sets, and played with photographed children in a sandbox. Frequently, family members were called to participate in group photos in front of the green screen. Renesmee’s childhood albums became a family project with each of us proposing ideas for photos. Emmett took Renesmee fishing and Carlisle and Esme took her to the zoo. Some of these activities we’d no doubt be enacting in real life, as they prompted many curiosities in our child’s mind.

After her near-daily photo shoots, which ended as soon as Renesmee got bored or tired, one of the adults would feed her lunch and then Bella and I would take her to the cottage for quiet time for a couple of hours, allowing Jacob to keep watch outside. Though Renesmee didn’t nap, sometimes she would lie down in her crib or with one of her parents on our bed for a rest, or more often, she would choose half a dozen books for us to read or she would choose games or art supplies and we would draw, or play with her plastic animals, or Tinker Toys, or her erector set.

Jacob usually took Renesmee to play in the woods after quiet time, either searching for wildlife or identifying trees and plants, and often he told her tales of the Quileute and other Northwest coastal tribes. As I suspected, Jacob had phased in front of Renesmee during one of these afternoon outings.

“What were you thinking, Jacob?” Bella asked aggressively. “Don’t you think her parents ought to have a say about whether she sees her best friend change into a wolf?”

“You handled it just fine.”

“I wasn’t a BABY!” Bella yelled. I put my arm around her waist, remembering another time recently that Jacob had riled her.

“What do you have to say for yourself, Jacob Black?” I demanded.

“Ah, don’t get all bent outta shape,” he complained. “Nessie asked me how Seth came out of the wolf when Bella attacked. She wasn’t upset, just curious. I didn’t think it
would hurt to explain with a demonstration.”

“That wasn’t your decision to make. Please try to remember that Bella and I are her parents and we can limit your access to her if you disrespect our wishes.”

“I wasn’t dising anybody! I just answered her question!”

“Nevertheless, that was our decision to make,” I told him firmly.

“All right, all right! Don’t do anything hasty! I’ll talk to you first next time.”

“Does she know who the other wolves in the pack are?” Bella wanted to know, slightly calmer.

“She’s not dumb, Bells. I think she had it figured out before she even asked, if you wanna know the truth.”

“What’s done is done, but in future—” I began.

“I know, I know.”

I decided to drop the subject and lead Bella away.

“Jacob gives her whatever she wants, whenever she wants it, or in this case, whenever she asks about it. I’m not sure that our baby needs to know all this secret, confusing stuff when she’s just a few weeks old,” Bella said. I didn’t often see her this disgusted with Jacob, but I was just as irritated.

Bella and I decided to tell Renesmee what we wanted her to know about the wolves and the vampires, and of the days when the wolf-people and the vampires were enemies. We would also tell her about the humans and how her human Momma and her vampire Daddy fell in love, even though Daddy used to drink human blood like Renesmee. We wanted to have some control over how she interpreted the information and we wanted to pass along to her our family’s moral stand on hunting humans. It wasn’t at all clear that Renesmee would understand the stories until she was older, but we assumed that she would absorb whatever she could for her age.

Renesmee liked to tell her parents the events of her day, so if Jacob did anything too far out of line, we usually knew pretty quickly. Mostly, we found that Jacob just catered to Renesmee’s wishes, which was ironic, since he had always accused me indulging Bella by giving her whatever she wanted when I was courting her.

After Renesmee’s play time with Jacob, the wolves either went hunting or went home to eat, though Jacob, and sometimes Seth, ate at our house. Renesmee liked to watch them eat human food, but never seemed particularly tempted to try any of it. She got a bath after playing with Jacob, if not for the mud and moss that stuck to her due to the constant rain in the forest, then to remove the wet dog smell that clung to her like a second skin.

I got pulled into the bath-time ritual one day when Rosalie removed Nessie’s jacket and sweater, both of which were damp, and prepared to take her upstairs. Renesmee reached for Rose’s face and showed her a picture of me crouched beside the bathtub.

Edward? Rose asked silently. Do you want to bathe the baby?

“That would be fine. I haven’t done it since she outgrew the sink, but I’m sure she will tell me if I do something wrong.”
Rose smiled in agreement. *Bella is outside arm-wrestling my incorrigible husband, so I’ll come with you. Nessie probably wants to show you her boats.*

“Boats?”

*Yes, Esme bought her some floating bath toys, including a collection of boats. You’ll see.*

Renesmee reached for me and I pulled her into my arms, and then we filed upstairs to the bathroom. Rose had it right. Nessie wanted to show me her new toys and splash around in the bubbles with her *Da.* I was glad for the chance because I assumed my daughter would become gender-sensitive at some point and no longer want me there.

I found that bathing Nessie as a toddler had little to do with soaping and rinsing. It was more about zoom-zooming plastic boats and smacking foamy bubbles with a flat hand to send them flying through the air to land on both her face and mine. She also got a kick out of touching my nose and making bubbles stick to it. Before the water got cold, I put some soap on a cloth and rubbed the dirt off her face, neck, back, front, and all the way down to her feet. Then we played “This Little Piggy” with her ten toes. Renesmee squealed like a piglet herself when I wiggled her toes.

We had great fun that afternoon and it became Nessie’s habit to ask for *Da* at bath time. But I was right that it wouldn’t last. Our child eventually developed girlish modesty and after that she only wanted Mommy or Auntie Rose to bathe her. She was growing up all too quickly.

After bath time, Carlisle always measured Renesmee again and then she drank her dinner, and if it was a weekday, Charlie and Sue usually came to visit. After they left, my lovely wife and I retired to our cottage, put the baby to bed, and enjoyed each other’s company for the rest of the night.

Renesmee started crawling as soon as she discovered how to maneuver her body into the appropriate position and she became proficient at it immediately. She liked to zip around the house at supernatural speeds and sneak up on one or another of us. She especially loved it when her “victim” made a big fuss about being surprised or terrified. We enjoyed her amusement so much that we all did our best to put on a convincing performance.

Esme was the best. She got such a kick out of making Renesmee giggle that she would jump into the air and then collapse in a heap on the floor, ending up at Renesmee’s eye level. She would put a hand to her heart, breathe heavily and say, “Oh my word, child, you frightened me!”

Renesmee unfailingly burst into her kind of laughter—a series of squawks and squeaks—and Nana laughed along with her. Then Renesmee would show Nana her next victim and scurry off to find that person.
Emmett also enjoyed playing this game with Renesmee. When she “sneaked up” on him and head-butted his leg, he would fall to the floor without a word and pretend to be dead. Renesmee would use Emmett’s collapsed body to push herself into a sitting position and I’d hear her call EMMA, EMMA, EMMA in her mind as she patted him with her palm. Without warning, Emmett would open his eyes and growl or say “Boo!” and Renesmee would respond with a delighted “Aehk!” Then Emmett would pick her up and hang her upside down by her legs or hold her under the arms and swing her in circles. Sometimes he would toss her into the air and catch her upside down by her ankles. Once we figured out that it did Renesmee no harm, we let him rough-house with her. She absolutely loved it.

Carlisle was in charge of supplying his granddaughter with the beverage of her choice. His continuing efforts to convince her to drink baby formula were fruitless. None of us was willing to press her too hard, so that strategy failed. It wasn’t always easy for Carlisle to get human blood, though. The paperwork that tracked blood donations was surprisingly thorough. Ever since the HIV virus first contaminated the U.S. blood supply in 1982, control of those pints became iron-fisted.

In order to gain access to donated blood, Carlisle volunteered at the Puget Sound Blood Center and on the Bloodmobile, which was not something very many doctors did. With close proximity to the blood, Carlisle could secrete pints and carry them out in an insulated lunch box to help them stay fresh until he got home. He would not take blood that might be needed to save a human’s life, but fortunately for us, donated blood has a short shelf life and pints past their expiration date cannot be transfused. Often, Carlisle was able to divert them before they were sent to a disposal facility.

When expired pints were scarce, Carlisle tried to acquire blood that tested positive for hepatitis or HIV or other blood-borne pathogens. Blood contaminated with viruses was not dangerous to vampires and we thought it wouldn’t be to Renesmee either, both because she ingested it and because her body temperature was too high for the viruses to survive and reproduce.

Nevertheless, we heated the blood in the microwave to kill any remaining virus as a safety precaution. Also, no human other than Jacob was allowed to prepare Renesmee’s meals and Carlisle only allowed him to do so because he would not be deterred. Even if a virus got into his bloodstream, though, it would not survive long in that high-temperature environment. Still, viruses were known for mutating, so Carlisle insisted that Jacob wear gloves, a mask, and eye protection when he handled pre-sterilized blood.

Once or twice when our blood supply got very low, Jacob and his pack (except for Leah) gallantly volunteered to donate human blood for her. It was a magnanimous gesture and we were exceedingly grateful, but we declined their generosity because we weren’t sure that we could get Nessie to drink it. She didn’t like the smell of the wolves’ blood—it didn’t smell like food to her, though we did not tell them so.

So far, Carlisle had come through every time and we hadn’t had any emergency shortages. However, Renesmee continued to drink more as she grew and it was sure to
become a problem if we couldn’t get her to supplement her diet with human food. We intended to teach her how to hunt as soon as she learned to walk and run. If worse came to worst, we would hunt for her, drain an animal and put the blood in her cup. If our tastes were any indication, she was not going to like animal blood much after a steady diet of human, but we decided to cross that bridge when we came to it.

One thing I’ve discovered about having a child is that they are like sponges—they absorb everything that goes on around them. When Renesmee was almost three weeks old, Bella noticed an odd behavior. The baby crawled through the living room, no doubt en route to “scare” someone, but on her way, she stopped in front of the couch and swung out her left leg before crawling away.

“What the heck was that?” Bella asked, startled. I hated to tell her that the baby’s thought while she performed the maneuver was shhhhh. It was funny in a disturbing sort of way.

“Um...well...I think she was marking her territory,” I said, trying not to laugh.

“Oh, nooo!” Bella groaned. “That’s what we get for letting her hang around with dogs!”

“Yes. There was a reason I was disturbed by the wolves’ phasing in front of her. As it turns out, she’s taken all that in stride—it even seems normal to her. Unfortunately, some of the normal behaviors of a canine are more offensive for a hybrid-human girl to act out than the abnormal ones are.”

“What are we going to do?” Bella moaned.

“What we always do, I suppose. Explain to her what it means and teach her that it’s something wolves do, but not little girls.”

“Do you think that will work?”

“It’s worked so far. Social mores are difficult to explain, though, because many of them don’t make logical sense. They’re just ‘accepted modes of behavior,’ which is a little tough to make convincing.”

“Have you seen her do anything else like that?” Bella asked. I was afraid she would ask that question.

“Yes...” I hesitated. “I’ve seen her squat like a girl dog too.”

“You’re kidding me! Really?”

“Yes, though it looked less like the real thing, so I wasn’t sure what she was doing. I’m sure now, though. I think she wants to squirt water out of her hind end like the dogs do, but can’t figure out how to do it.” I tried to bite back my smile, but didn’t quite succeed.

“Oh, my gawd!” Bella put her head in her hands.

“Darling, all babies do embarrassing things until they’re taught not to. In Parenting for Dummies, it says that many babies think poo floating in the toilet is a great treat.”

“Ew! Gross!”

“Exactly. At least this isn’t as bad as that.”
“You’re right. We could get her a baby potty, I guess, and teach her species-appropriate toilet behavior. Anyway, it looks like we’ll be having a talk about the human digestive system tomorrow during rest time.”
“I’ll bet the ‘birds and the bees’ talk won’t be far behind.”
“What do you mean? What would make her even think of that?” Bella asked in astonishment.
“Well, she does spend a lot of time seeking out wildlife in the woods. I’ve seen the image in her mind of two rabbits ‘playing piggyback.’”
“You’re kidding me! Why didn’t you tell me?”
“I was trying to find the right way to break it to you,” I said, chuckling.
“Did she ask Jacob about it?”
“I think so. She was thinking the word ‘piggyback,’ though it took me a while to figure that out from icky-pak.”
“Did you ask Jacob?”
“Uh…no. I thought I’d leave that one to you.” I laughed and Bella gave me a light punch on the arm.

It had also occurred to me that one of these days—if Jacob weren’t careful, or if he had to phase quickly for some reason—Renesmee was going to get an eyeful of body parts she hadn’t seen before and there would be a lot of questions to answer.

Perhaps I should have a preemptive chat with Jacob about that. Maybe he could find out how Quil handled it with Claire, since Claire was only two years old when they met and they’d been glued to each other ever since.

Thinking about Jacob and Renesmee, I suddenly realized how Nessie had learned the word piggyback—by playing one of her favorite games with him. While they were in the woods, Nessie liked to climb around on Jacob the Wolf. After phasing, he’d lie down on the forest duff and Renesmee would crawl up his nose onto his back and then sit or lie down and play with his fur. Sometimes, she would pull his ears or his tail or poke her fingers up his nose. It always surprised me how extremely tolerant Jacob was with our daughter. Renesmee could do no wrong.

In fact, since his imprinting, Jacob was an altogether altered person. As our daughter’s caretaker, he was much softer than he’d ever been before. Everything about him was gentle, attentive, indulgent, entertaining, and loving. There was no longer any sign of the angry Jacob I used to know so well. Even when I chastised him for one thing or another, he might disagree, but he didn’t become resentful like he used to. The boiling kettle inside him seemed to have cooled.

Lately, everything I saw between Jacob and Nessie, I saw through Nessie’s eyes. I was beginning to suspect that Jacob was developing some skill at shielding his thoughts from me. When we first met, he was a completely open book. I saw virtually everything he thought whether I wanted to or not. Now, though, if I wanted to read something in Jacob’s head, I had to make an effort and occasionally, I would still get nothing.
I hadn’t run into anything like that before where someone’s once-open mind became opaque. I could either read them or I could not and the “could nots” were few and far between. Perhaps the change in Jacob had something to do with his imprinting on Renesmee. Imprinting was such a profound alteration that it made sense that his mind might be altered in other ways as well. It was just as well. If Jacob was going to be attached to my daughter for the rest of his life, it would be better for everybody if his mind were opaque to me.

My relationship with Jacob had settled into a comfortable pattern, more or less. He had to respect my wishes as Nessie’s father. Otherwise, I could restrict his access to her, which was something he couldn’t tolerate. Until my daughter was at least four years old, Bella and I would make the rules and we would require him to comply. By that age, if her current progression continued, she would be the equivalent of a young adult and able to make her own decisions. I hoped that she had a close enough relationship with her parents that she would seek our guidance on her choices, but I had no control over that. At least Carlisle and Esme had provided me with admirable examples of how to parent grown children.

Bella’s mother was another story. Bella loved her mother and for that reason, I was willing to handle Renee in whatever way Bella wanted. However, I agreed with Charlie that Renee should not know about Bella’s new life. She was extremely intuitive and if she spent any time near us, she would see us for what we were sooner or later. And Renee wouldn’t be able to let it go, unlike Charlie, who could see, adjust, and move on without having to fully understand everything.

I was surprised that Renee hadn’t insisted on seeing Bella when Carlisle told her the CDC story. Apparently, she hammered Charlie with questions and called frequently in semi-hysterics wondering how her daughter was doing. At least now Charlie could tell her that Bella was in recovery. Perhaps we would say that Bella was well enough to carry on a phone conversation once a week, but that her immune system was compromised, so she couldn’t see visitors. I was a little concerned that she would drive to Atlanta one of these days and make a nuisance of herself at the CDC. We’d have to invent a special clinic in northern Switzerland or Germany where Bella was being cared for under strict environmental controls. Whatever we told her, it was going to be a complicated fiction.

It was good that Renee had attended our wedding, met Bella’s in-laws, and befriended Esme. It gave her some peace of mind to talk to Esme about Bella’s illness and to know that Carlisle was looking after her. It seemed to be easier for her to let Bella go, knowing that she was in good hands and with a family who loved her. It was also helpful that her husband, Phil, was back on the road with his baseball career. The traveling might keep Renee occupied enough that Bella could satisfy her with telephone conversations. Bella was practicing making her voice sound coarse for that purpose.

We had a more pressing concern intruding on our happy life. Bella had received a wedding gift from Aro. A personal note tucked into it said, “I so look forward to meeting
the new Mrs. Cullen in person.” It felt like a veiled threat. Alice had foreseen Caius’s intention to send a contingent of the Volturi guard to verify Bella’s condition. The last thing we wanted were the Volturi showing up on our side of the water.

The gift itself was extravagant in the extreme. It was a golden rope necklace with a diamond the size of a golf ball dangling from it. Carlisle recognized it immediately as part of the crown jewels that John of England had lost in the thirteenth century. Did Aro value the jewel so little that he would send it to a woman whom he had only barely met, or did he value Bella so much that he would give her such a priceless ornament?

If the latter, did he value her so much that he would steal her from her family, along with Alice and me? If so, Aro knew that he would have to take us by force, because I would never comply with any request to join the Volturi guard.

And then there was Renesmee—beautiful, unique, gifted Renesmee—so far, a secret from the outside world. She was the rarest and, therefore, the most valuable of all of us in Aro’s eyes. If would be best if he never learned of her existence.

Would the Volturi dare to take us by force? If so, what would happen to the rest of the Cullen clan? Would they simply be destroyed? One thing was certain—Aro was a jealous governor and Carlisle Cullen’s family gave him much to be jealous of.