



All the Reasons Why Aylah50

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Summary

Bella's countdown brought them together, but Edward is still haunted by his past, his fears and doubts threatening to rip them apart. The follow-up future-take to ABC Countdown, and my submission for Fandom4SAA.

Chapter 1

Thank so much to Kyla713 and Awesomesauce76 for always being there. Thanks also to Coldplaywhore for running Fandom4SAA with me.

This is the follow up story to ABC Countdown. Make sure you check out the amazing banner Heatherdawn made for this story (on my blog and my profile) as well as the beautiful video made for both stories by Jaimearkin.

Disclaimer: Stephenie Meyer owns all things Twilight.

EPOV

"Time to get up, baby." Bella's breath teased along my neck as she leaned in to kiss my cheek.

I opened one eye to peer up at her, my head still heavy with sleep. No matter how much I enjoyed waking up to Bella's beautiful face, it was still far too early in the morning.

"I don't *want* to," I whined. "It's August!"

"Well, I guess you shouldn't have agreed to do this curriculum development workshop, then."

She mussed my hair affectionately. I groaned, burying my face in my pillow.

Bella was right; I shouldn't have signed up for a week of seminars discussing how to revamp the reading and writing programs at Forks Elementary. Even though the workshops would only be for the morning, it was *summer*. Teachers weren't supposed to work in the summer. It was a crime against nature or something.

"Well, maybe *you* shouldn't have kept me up so late," I accused her, a smile playing on my lips. "I'm worn out."

The sound of Bella's soft laughter made me peel one eye open again. "You're so adorable when you're grumpy," she said with a smile.

Reason #6: She can see through all my moods.

The night before, I'd begun a mental list of all the ways Bella made me happy. I hadn't consciously been aware of starting it, but everything I liked about her kept coming to mind. Number six, however, was the first one that had to do with her actual personality. Everything else I'd listed so far related various parts of her body, such as number two: *the way she bites her lip*. As a matter of fact, numbers three through five all had to do with Bella's incredibly talented lips and tongue.

"I didn't hear you complaining last night," she countered, grinning wickedly at me.

"Hmm, you're right. My mouth *was* busy doing...other things." I snaked an arm around her waist, pulling her back down under the covers next to me. "As was yours." She giggled and tried to hide her face, blushing from my words.

It had been in the early hours of the morning, when we both laid panting in each other's arms, that I'd started my list. I might have thought it would embarrass Bella, but that was highly doubtful, considering the fact that our relationship had started from a list of her own.

Bella had warped the primary grade teachers' celebratory countdown of the last twenty-six days of school into a list of all the ways she wanted me. At first, she'd been mortified when I'd found her "ABC Countdown". Since then, however, it had only served as a to-do list of our desires. She'd been unbelievably creative, surprising me with all her naughty fantasies.

#7: Her dirty little mind.

"Come on, *Mr. Cullen*," Bella said playfully. "Let's get you ready for school."

She slid her hand under my t-shirt, running her nails enticingly along my back. I stifled a moan as her light touches sent ripples of pleasure down my spine, making my morning hard-on impossible to ignore.

"Keep that up, and I'll *never* get to work on time," I warned her, tickling her side. Bella squealed and squirmed out of my grasp, crawling back to the edge of the mattress. Propping myself up on one arm, I gazed up at her.

Her hair had curled from the summer humidity, and it fell in waves down her back. The smooth line of her collarbone and lush swell of her breasts peeked out from her little tank top, the bottoms hugging her curves enticingly.

#8: She looks incredibly sexy in her pajamas.

"Couldn't we just stay in bed all day?" I asked. "There's already some... *development* going on under the covers here."

Bella smirked at my innuendo, rising from the bed to grab her robe. I groaned in protest as she wrapped herself in terrycloth, hiding her delicious body from my sight. "There's fresh coffee in the kitchen," she told me, smiling demurely before leaving the bedroom.

Falling back down on the bed in defeat, I added number nine to the list: *The way she teases me.*

A short while later, I was reluctantly leaving my house, walking down my driveway with Bella's hand in mine. She was heading back home to her recuperating father.

Chief Swan was part of the reason Bella had moved to Forks from Phoenix; someone had to take care of him after he'd been hurt on the job. She'd uprooted her entire life to help him, and still was, even though by that point, it seemed he was mostly healed. At least, he appeared that way to me when we'd shared a beer back in June. Bella still cooked their meals and took care the cleaning and the laundry, something she said she didn't mind since her father was all alone.

#10: She has an amazing heart.

"Have a good day," she said as she hopped into her behemoth of a truck. "I hope it's not too awful."

"Me too," I answered, leaning my forearms on her open window. "I really hate this thing, you know."

"I know." She smiled and kissed me, starting the engine with a slightly defiant grin on her face. I shook my head as she drove off. Her spunkiness was cataloged as reason number eleven as I stepped into my Volvo and headed in the opposite direction.

I really did hate that she still drove that thing. I'd had fleeting thoughts of bribing Emmett to do some irreparable damage to it, but Bella would probably figure out that it hadn't died of natural causes. She always waved off my fears of it spontaneously combusting, saying it wasn't *that* bad.

The truth was, though, that she only used the truck when we weren't together. And I had come to hate it whenever she and I were apart.

In fact, I realized with a start that I hated the truck because I wanted Bella with me all the time.

Cringing slightly at my own thoughts, I turned into the high school's parking lot, pulling into a spot and shutting off the engine. I ran my fingers through my hair, tugging at the unruly strands, before rubbing my hands roughly over my face.

Am I ready for this?

Bella and I had only been together for two months. As much as I cared for her, it felt like everything was happening way too fast. Things were going well between us - she made me smile all the time, and the sex was incredible - but that wasn't enough to keep me from worrying that everything would blow up in our faces. After all, it hadn't been long since I'd divorced the bitch who'd stomped on my heart with her sharp, stiletto heels.

That bitch was Tanya. We'd married young, before either one of us knew a damn thing, before we were old enough to realize how awful we were for one another. Sure, we'd had fun at first, but soon we discovered we wanted different things. Months of fighting turned into years, and by the time Bella had appeared in my life the previous September, I was finally coming to terms with the fact that my marriage was falling apart.

I still remembered the first moment I saw Bella. Nervous and unsure, she chewed her lip as she shyly stepped into the office on the first day of school. She was beautiful - breathtakingly, *painfully* beautiful - and I had stared at her for much longer than I should have.

At first, I'd hated her - her gentle smile, her easy friendship with my sister, her evident love for children. It was as if she was a demon sent to torture me; to serve as a cruel reminder of the kind of person I could never have. As time passed, though, hate turned to longing. I wanted to know everything about her; who she was, why she was here, what made her blush, what made her smile. But I was married, for better or for worse, and I wasn't going to break my vows, no matter how horrible things were between Tanya and me.

My wife, apparently, had no such plans.

After I'd caught her cheating on me with Riley, one of the male models at her agency, my personal life was thrust into the spotlight. I'd always tried to be a private person, which was damn near impossible in a town where everyone knew everyone else's business. However, we soon became the hot topic for the TV and newspaper

reporters in Forks; a Cullen divorce was the juiciest story they'd had in a long time.

The man Bella would get to know after that was angry, jaded. Despite that, she still cared about me; she wanted me, wanted to *be* with me. And God, I wanted to be with her, too. I cared about her so much...maybe even...loved her.

But I'd thought I'd loved Tanya once, too. If that was true, did I have a fucking clue what love really was?

I sighed as I stepped out of my car, nodding at a few colleagues I recognized on my way across the lot.

"Morning Edward!"

My jaw clenched as soon as I recognized the high-pitched screech. My-coworker, Jessica Stanley, was waving frantically at me from the building's entrance.

It was going to be a long morning.

ABC

After a few hours spent in a sweltering classroom, I was finally free. The sun was high in the sky as I walked swiftly toward my car, the air heavy with the fumes of baking asphalt.

The workshop hadn't been too terrible, aside from the oppressively hot room, the school too ancient and the weather usually too mild in Forks to warrant air conditioning. That day, however, was an exception.

Jessica had complained about the heat all morning, constantly interrupting our workshop leader to ask if the school had a fan. Exasperated, she finally pushed away from her seat and marched over to the window, shoving it open as far as she could and practically falling out of it in the process.

I chuckled to myself as she attempted to turn around gracefully, her awkward movements bringing my thoughts right back to Bella.

12: Her persistent penchant for clumsiness.

Bella had to be one of the most accident-prone people I'd ever met, a trait she often found humiliating. For me, it was just another thing that made her wonderful, made her *Bella*.

As we began to discuss revamping our reading assessment program, I started adding other things to my list on the edge of my paper, but quickly folded it over when I noticed Jessica trying to catch a glance of my writing.

She's the same nosy pain in the ass she was in high school.

When we were let go for the day, Jessica followed me out to the parking lot, sticking to me like a parasite. She chewed my ear off for a good ten minutes, trying not-so-slyly to find out about me and Bella, but I kept changing the subject. I was only able to escape when my cell phone rang.

"I'm sorry, Jessica, but I have to go. I'm late." I waved and hurried to my car. "Thank *God* you called."

Emmett's laugh in my ear immediately deflated my annoyance. "What, did they ask you to be Superintendent or something?"

"No," I mumbled, wincing as I slid onto the burning leather of my driver's seat. "Stanley was giving me the third degree."

"That's what you get for roping yourself into shit like this over the summer," he chuckled. "Now, could you hurry your over-achieving ass up? Jasper and I are starving."

"I'm on my way."

As I drove to the diner, Emmett's words reminded me of another aspect of my girlfriend: ropes.

#16: She lets me tie her up.

Bella was incredibly adventurous in bed, another trait that set her far apart from my ex.

Not long after we were married, Tanya and I discovered that we weren't exactly copasetic in bed. Not only was she turned off by my more kinky desires, but she was downright offended by some. I knew I wasn't *that* far out there - it wasn't like I wanted to build a dungeon in our basement or anything - but I really liked being in charge. The first time I'd admitted I wanted to spank her ass until it was red, Tanya didn't speak to me for days.

Bella, on the other hand, loved it.

It had been a while since we'd done anything like that, though; an error I hoped we'd rectify soon. Unable to tame the grin on my face, I quickly sent her a text when I stopped at a red light.

Remember "T" day?

I thought back to late June, when Bella's countdown was up to the letter 'T'. I'd asked her if she'd ever been tied up before - something I'd been aching to do to her. She was so perfectly naughty that night; letting me spank her, tie her to her headboard, and do things no one had ever willingly allowed me before.

My phone buzzed with her reply as I arrived at the diner.

Yes. I can't believe you're bringing that up when I'm with my Dad! *blush*

I loved that I could make her cheeks flush without even being next to her. Number seventeen would definitely have to be the way her blush always gave her feelings away.

Well, I hope you won't be...tied up...too late tonight. ;)

I knew by that moment her cheeks would be scarlet red, and she'd be hiding her face from her father.

You're killing me, baby.

I headed inside with a triumphant grin, finding my brother and Jasper waiting at a table in the corner.

"It's about time," Jasper admonished, checking his watch. "But Alice did say you'd be late."

Emmett chucked a menu at me as I sat down. "I don't know how the hell she knows these things," I mumbled. My sister's bizarre E.S.P. drove us all a little bat-shit crazy.

"Imagine being married to her!" Jasper added. "I can't ever win an argument. She always knows what I'm going to say."

"Can you two psychoanalyze The Predicting Pixie *after* we order, please?" Emmett complained.

"You'd better not let Alice know you're using that nickname," I told him as I perused the menu. "She might kick your ass again."

"She never kicked my ass!" he balked, then frowned, remembering an eleven-year-old Alice pinning him to the ground in our parents' backyard. "She was just...a lot taller than me the last time I used it."

Once we finally had food on the table, the two of them started grilling me. "So how's it going with you and Bella?" Jasper asked.

I tried to hide my wince behind my sandwich. "Guys, do we *have* to do this?"

"Uhh, yeah we do!" Emmett teased through a mouth full of French fries. "You two haven't come up for air since July fourth. Rosie thought we were going to have send in a search and rescue team."

I rolled my eyes at them, but I could see there was no getting out of this one. "Well, it's going great. Really great, actually."

Jasper smiled, telling me he was happy for me, but my caveman of a brother wouldn't let up. "I bet she's a real freak in the bedroom."

"Dude. Not cool." I warned Emmett, but had to look away before he caught my wry smile. *If you guys only knew how twisted she really was.*

"See? Look at his face. I'm right! Bow chicka-wow-wow!"

He started dancing in his seat, and Jasper shook his head. "You're disgusting."

"Are we done with the inquisition now?" I interrupted as Emmett began to gyrate in his chair.

They finally gave in, and the rest of lunch thankfully passed without any more questions about Bella and me. But telling them how well things were going with us somehow made me less anxious about the whole thing.

Afterward, we each headed to our cars, agreeing that our significant others probably had a barbeque planned for all of us in the near future.

#18: My family adores her.

My worries from earlier that morning starting to fade, I felt myself settle into the

idea that things might actually be okay for Bella and me.

ABC

The following day went pretty much the same. Bella woke me with a smile, sending me off on my way. She'd packed me a snack, though, throwing it into my bag when I wasn't looking. I was surprised to find an apple and a water bottle with a post it note on it, that said 'Just in case the teacher gets too hot!'

#22: She anticipates my needs.

I'd come up with several more things to add to my list in the shower that morning, wondering if I'd be able to get to fifty. As we lay in bed later that evening, I realized that the hard part might be *stopping* at fifty.

"What was your favorite letter in the countdown?" The bedroom was dark but cool, the air conditioner humming softly. I was lying on my back with Bella nestled against my chest, my fingers running idly through her hair.

"O'," she replied without hesitation. "No contest."

I chuckled, remembering my promise to give Bella several orgasms that day.

#23: Her countdown. Nothing in my life ever made me feel so wanted.

"You?" she asked.

"Hmm, it's a toss-up between 'M' and 'V'."

Bella shifted so she could look up at me, twisting her body and resting her chin on my stomach. "'Mirrors' and 'Videos'?"

I nodded, smiling wickedly, lifting strands of hair off her neck and letting them fall. We'd certainly had our share of kink when getting to the last words in the alphabet, that was for sure.

"Such a bad boy."

"You love it," I teased huskily, lowering my fingers to caress her lips. I looked at her pointedly, heatedly, and she licked her lips involuntarily, her soft, wet tongue brushing along my thumb.

#24: The reaction I can get from her with just a look.

"What about 'I'?" she questioned, lowering her lashes as she began to crawl up my body.

"'Icing'?" I asked. "Should I go to the kitchen and get you some?"

"No," Bella murmured, placing a soft kiss on my lips. "I like the way *you* taste just fine."

Her tongue slipped into my mouth, leaving me breathless as always. I rolled us over and kissed her deeply, taking us to a place where no letters or words mattered, just her body under mine in the darkness.

ABC

Wednesday's workshop was unbearably boring and disgustingly hot. At one point, we were all sitting there, fanning ourselves, barely talking, when suddenly our darling principal, Jane, showed up, "just to check on things." Obviously, the stick she had shoved up her ass didn't take a summer vacation.

Snickering to myself on the way out that day, I remembered Bella using the students' nickname for Jane - "Umbridge." Even under stress, she managed to make me laugh.

#30: Her sense of humor.

In the afternoon, I met my father for a round of golf while Bella and my mother enjoyed iced teas in the clubhouse. My family was among Forks' small elite, belonging to the best clubs and dinner parties. My parents' money never mattered much to me, but it was exactly the kind of prestige Tanya had hunted.

Bella never seemed to care about any of it.

#31: We have the same values.

She and I joined them for an early dinner, and I loved sitting back, watching how comfortable Bella was with my parents. Still, my lingering fears and doubts continued to gnaw at my mind, constantly buzzing around my head like mosquitoes on a hot summer night.

That evening, Bella was sprawled out on my porch. She was planning a new layout

for her classroom, sticky notes scattered all around her. I sat in a chair, going through reading for the next day of curriculum. The evening was hot, a thick haze in the air, lightning bugs twinkling on the front lawn. A couple of kids on bikes rode by, former students, and they waved happily at us, yelling out greetings.

Bella waved back, and for just a second, I saw the two of us sitting on that very porch, old and grey, watching the scenery and our lives pass by.

*How can I be thinking this **already**?*

I bent my head down, pushing my hair back roughly with one hand. I wasn't ready for that, for talk of marriage with Bella, despite how happy I knew she made me. I kept telling myself over and over again that things with her could never go the way they'd gone with Tanya...but, what if everything between us fell apart? We worked together - I couldn't handle all our co-workers seeing my life shatter into pieces again.

"You okay?"

I snapped my head up, realizing that my hair was probably arched up in crazy angles from the way I was worrying at it.

"Yeah!" I threw a smile at her. "I'm fine."

#32: When I get distant, she brings me back again.

Bella clucked her tongue, rearranging the sticky notes she'd placed on the ground. "That's not a real smile!" Her voice was singsong, teasing. Number thirty-three would have to be how she knew each and every one of my grins.

"I'm fine, I promise," I assured her, but as we went back to our tasks, I couldn't help but question if my list was a way for me to convince myself that it was real, that everything couldn't all blow up in my face again.

That living happily ever after could actually be possible for me.

ABC

When I awoke the following morning, I was still wrapped up in my thoughts. We sat quietly at breakfast, with me in too much of a funk to see the worried glances Bella kept sending my way.

Finally, as we were cleaning up, she asked, "Are you sure you're okay?"

Gulping down my last sip of coffee and checking my watch, I replied, "Of course!" I leaned in to kiss her cheek. "I've gotta get going."

"All right." She chewed her lip, looking like she didn't quite believe me, but didn't push the issue. "I'm going shopping with Rose and Alice this afternoon. I might not be back 'til after dinner."

I told her to have fun, and flashed her what I hoped was a signature smile, as I hurried out the door. Bella was obviously uneasy with my mood, and as much as I knew I could be totally honest with her, I just couldn't vocalize what was going on in my head.

#34: She gives me space to deal with my shit.

That day, instead of small group workshops, we sat through a lecture about how to run Book Clubs. It annoyed the crap out of me, since I'd been teaching for years. But, at least we were able to spend some time in the dark, cool space of the high school auditorium, instead of the steam bath of a classroom. It afforded some tiny relief, both from the weather and from Jessica's incessant complaining.

I grabbed a bite to eat afterward, wondering what I was going to do to fill my time until Bella came home. I knew I'd been kind of distant and thought I should find a way to make it up to her.

As I paid my bill and headed out to my car, I decided on picking up some flowers and a bottle of wine. I had just reached for my car door handle, but then I froze, catching a shock of platinum blonde out of the corner of my eye.

"Hello, Edward."

The voice was icy, heartless, and my whole body went rigid at the sound. My fingers wrapped around metal hard enough to break it, my knuckles showing white.

Fucking hell.

I felt her stepping closer to me, and I swallowed down the bile that rose up from my stomach. Releasing the door handle, I turned to face her, my teeth grinding together and my jaw set in a firm line.

"Tanya." My acknowledgement came out low, hard. She looked the same as

always, Botox and implants - everything about her fake, a show. Her lip curled up into a smile that was more like a sneer. Riley stood quietly behind her, like a well-trained dog.

"You look well." Her words were biting. Tanya held her head high, the sarcasm in her compliment barely masked.

"I am." I cleared my throat and gazed pointedly, angrily, at her. "...Now."

She narrowed her eyes at me, her smile mocking.

*"Don't you ever want anything more than **this**?" She waves her hand around our living room, as if to discount everything - our home, our marriage, the entire town of Forks - in a single movement. "Or do you just want to stay **here** all your life? A teacher in this nothing little town?"*

The memories began to hit me like a tsunami. I closed my eyes tightly, trying to fight them off.

*"This **is** what I want!" I shout back at her. "Living here, starting a family - that's all I **ever** wanted. You've always known that, since we were kids!"*

She turns away from me, folding her arms across her chest. I step toward her, wanting to appease her, wanting to do anything but fight more. My voice softens. "I thought that was what you wanted, too."

"Maybe I did want that, once." Her eyes are burning, full of hatred, as she looks back at me over her shoulder. "But I don't. Not anymore."

"Are you still at the elementary school?"

Tanya brought a perfectly manicured hand to her face, studying her nails, her question an obvious dismissal of my less-than-lofty career ambitions. When her modeling agency started to gain prestige, she began pushing me to work my way up the ladder, to try to be principal, or some member of the administration.

Nothing I did was ever good enough for her.

"Yes," I replied, my jaw beginning to ache. "Still there."

She glanced up at my face again, her eyes piercing, her smile sinister. "I hear you're seeing someone?"

"You heard that, did you?" I asked tersely. My ex-wife raised her eyebrows, grinning victoriously; she could see she was getting to me. Even after all the time that had passed, Tanya could still incite me to rage.

"She's a *teacher*, too, isn't she?"

My stomach lurched, my hands balling into fists. It was one thing for her to have put down my career for years; I would not let her speak that way about Bella.

Unthinking, I took a step toward her, my chest tight, my breathing coming fast and heavy through my nose. I wanted to wipe that smirk straight off her face. I wanted to push *her* buttons, to hurt her the way she'd hurt me.

Riley stepped in closer to her, glaring at me defensively. Tanya seemed shocked by my threatening stance, and suddenly, I saw a tiny flash of doubt in her eyes, a flicker of regret. It caught me by surprise, and for a moment, I saw the girl I'd once shared a life with; the woman whose hand I'd taken before my entire family and promised to cherish for the rest of my days.

But, then she blinked and stepped back into Riley's protective embrace. "Well, I hope you're happy now." There was nothing sincere in her words, the mask firmly back in place.

"I am," I growled. "I've never been happier."

Turning away abruptly, I headed for my car. They didn't deserve my goodbye.

Slamming the Volvo's door, I gunned the engine and backed out of the lot, my tires screeching as I switched gears. I drove faster than I should have through the quiet streets, taking out my frustration on the road. I had forgotten all about the wine and flowers I'd planned to buy Bella. By the time I reached my house, my anger was still barely contained.

Unable to get Tanya's condescending words out of my mind, I paced inside my doorway, like a caged animal. Who the hell was *she* to make me feel this way? I needed to scream, needed to punch something.

I needed a drink.

Knowing what a bad idea that was, given the fact that curriculum development the following morning would suck even harder with a hangover, I abstained. Instead, I changed into shorts and a t-shirt, grabbing a basketball from the hall closet and

heading back outside.

I dribbled against the driveway, hearing the satisfactory slam of the ball bouncing against the pavement. Lining up a shot, I let myself stew in regret, for not being harder on Tanya in the parking lot. For not walking away, and being the bigger person, saying nothing to her at all. For the years of my life I'd lost trying to make her happy.

As the ball bounced off the backboard, in my mind I was suddenly fourteen again, backpack slung over my shoulder on the first day of ninth grade.

"Dude." Jasper nods toward the row of yellow school buses. "Who's the new girl?"

And that's when I see her. Amidst a sea of nervous freshman, she stands confident, aloof. Blonde and pale, in a tight top and short skirt, with legs that went on for miles. She's every teenage boy's wet dream, and she knows it.

I don't waste a second walking over to her, pushing my way through the throng of upper-classmen, all hoping to give her a tour of the school.

"Hello." Her ice-blue eyes meet mine, and she raises an eyebrow, sizing me up. "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Edward Cullen."

She smiles. It is unlike any other smile I've ever seen.

My stomach rolled with the memory. Little did I know then that her smile was one of acquisition; to her, I was simply a means to an end. Tanya wanted to ensnare a big name in this small town. In me, she'd caught her prey, swallowed me up, and I was too blind to see it.

I aimed again, but that time, the ball bounced off the garage door. I caught it and I jogged around the driveway, sweat beginning to drip down my neck as I slammed the ball harder on the ground.

Another recollection came to mind - one from years later.

*"You're so beautiful," I murmur, my lips pressed to her neck. She shifts on the couch underneath me, opening up for more. My hand grips her hip, my thumb rubbing across the soft fabric of her tiny shorts, inches away from touching her **there**.*

I kiss the spot where her neck meets her shoulder. She always leaves me hanging

and I'm hungry, desperate for more. "You should be a model."

"Mmm, Edward." Tanya loves compliments. Last time I said this, we got to third base.

*It's the end of senior year. We're almost eighteen, on a futon in the cool basement of my house. My parents are gone for the weekend, and I'm having a big blow-out party. Everyone else is outside at the pool. Today's **gotta** be the day we go all the way.*

But she moves my hand away from her hip, pouting at me. "You know I want to, but..."

She trails off, lowering her lashes. I know this trick – she wants me to ask, egging me on.

It works every time.

"But?"

Her eyes are back on me, pleading. "But I won't do it unless we're married."

Furious, I paused, squeezing the rubber ball hard between my palms. Tanya always did know how to manipulate me. The summer after graduating high school, we were married, and in the photographs later, I could see the worry in my parents' faces behind their smiles.

I dribbled up and down my driveway, trying to drown out the raging thoughts that refused to be silenced.

"Why don't we try for a baby?" I nuzzle Tanya's hair and flex my hips against her ass. She's lying next to me in bed wearing a silk negligee. I don't know why she bothers; it's been weeks since she let me touch her.

She stiffens at my words.

"A baby? Now?" Tanya practically laughs as she shifts away from me on the mattress. "When my agency is doing so well?"

"Why not?" I want to reach for her, coax her back, but I'm afraid she'll push me away, so I keep talking. "I've had tenure for a while now, my job is good-"

"Oh, please!" Tanya snorts and climbs out of the bed, walking to the dresser. She starts running a brush through her now-bleached hair, checking her reflection in the mirror. "I wouldn't exactly call your job 'successful,' Edward."

My jaw tenses. We've had this fight before. "There is nothing wrong with being a teacher, Tanya."

*She ignores me and sighs. "Besides, I don't want to make a baby the way **you** do it."*

My wife turns around and looks me square in the eye. "The stuff you like to do? It really freaks me out. If I had known you were into that kind of kinky crap, I never would have married you."

Years later, the words still stung.

That was when the end really began, when she scorned me and everything I was, making me feel like I was barely even a man.

"Bella's not like that," I mumbled aloud to no one but myself.

#39: She never, ever puts me down.

I wiped my forehead with a corner of my drenched shirt, set up another shot, watching as it swished through the net.

Out of breath, I paused and pulled my phone from my pocket to check the time. It was only three in the afternoon - hours before Bella would be back. So I kept slamming rubber against pavement as the memories relentlessly flooded my mind, ten years' worth of love gone sour.

ABC

By the time Bella's truck rattled into my driveway, my anger was a poorly-tamed beast, slightly calmer and breathing heavily underneath a freshly-showered exterior.

I'd pounded out my aggression on the driveway throughout the afternoon. However, my disgust at having wasted a decade of my life with someone who seemed determined to hate everything about me still lingered, like the distant hum of electrical wires crackling in the fading twilight.

"I'm back!" Bella opened the front door with her key, then paused, confused. The

whole house was dark. "Edward?"

"In here."

She followed the sound of my voice until she found me in the kitchen. I was standing by the back door, nursing a beer and staring out into my yard. When I bought the house, I'd envisioned room for a swing set, giggling children running around barefoot. Years later, that area was barren, empty. Mocking.

"Edward...what is it?"

I sighed deeply and took a sip of my beer, still looking out into the darkness. She reached up and gently squeezed my arm, urging me to turn around. I moved to face her, seeing deep brown eyes that were wide and concerned as she studied my vacant, wounded expression.

"What happened?"

I shook my head, taking a deep pull from the sweating bottle in my hand before setting it down on the counter top. "I don't want to talk about it."

Her crestfallen expression pricked at my heart. Bella's brow was tight, troubled, her teeth tugging at her lower lip. Her long, dark hair was swept back into a messy ponytail, making her look so soft...so *real*. Nothing like the overly made up woman I had once shared a passionless bed with every night.

#40: She doesn't need anything fake to make her look beautiful.

"I missed you," I croaked, my throat suddenly dry. I reached up to stroke her cheek, and Bella leaned into my touch, her relieved smile nervous, hopeful.

"You sure you don't want to tell me what happened?"

#41: She cares about how I feel.

I closed my eyes and leaned back against the wall, my heart pounding.

I'm frozen, unable to move. I can't believe what I'm seeing.

"Well, at least **he's** normal, Edward!" Tanya screeches, pulling her shirt on. Riley is scrambling, frantic, as he looks for something to cover up with. It appears I've walked into a 'modeling' photo-shoot gone rogue. "What the hell did you expect me

to do?"

"I expected you to be faithful to your husband!" I roar, shocking her with my tone. Her surprise is short-lived.

"Some husband! You barely make a living and you're freaking twisted in bed!" she snarls. Barely dressed, she takes a few steps forward, hissing the words that finally break me. "I want a divorce."

"Edward?"

"I *can't*, Bella!" Even I could hear the agony in my voice. I didn't want to push her away, but I couldn't talk about it, couldn't voice the pain that still threatened to bury me and make me doubt everything I felt about her...about us.

"Okay," she whispered. "It's okay."

I opened my eyes and looked down at her as she wrapped her arms around me. Feeling her so close to me, the monster trapped in my chest awoke. But, that time, it was angry at *me*. I was so disgusted with myself; how could Bella not feel the same?

"Why do you want me?" I asked. Her eyes snapped up to mine, startled.

"What?"

"Why?" I took her by the shoulders, holding her at arm's length as I repeated the question. "*Why* do you want me?"

"Why are you asking me that?" Bella seemed frightened. I could only imagine how wild the look in my eyes was.

"I need you to tell me!" I shouted. I was caving in, bottoming out, all my insecurities surging forward.

"Because!" she sputtered, flustered. "Because you're sweet and caring! You're smart and you have an amazing voice..." Bella was talking fast, searching my eyes, waiting to see if she'd said enough.

"Why else?"

"Because you make me feel beautiful, and sexy."

"Why *else*?" I growled, pushing her by the shoulders and walking her through my kitchen until her back met the fridge.

"Because of what you do to me! Things I never knew how much I wanted until I met you!" Her hands braced against the fridge door, Bella blinked rapidly. Her breathing was heavy, a tear making a slippery path down her cheek. "I *want* you, Edward! Every second of every day!"

Her words flipped a switch in me, wrecking me and setting me ablaze all at once. In a second, my mouth was on hers, my hands tangled roughly in her hair. She kissed me back with a vengeance, her hands reaching around to claw at my back.

"I'm sorry!" Gasping, I broke our kiss and rested my forehead against hers. I kept my eyes tightly shut, not wanting to see the unbearable concern in her eyes.

"Shh," she soothed, her hands reaching up into my hair. "It's all right."

#42: She forgives every damn thing I do.

Why was she so good to me? What had I done to deserve her loyalty, her unwavering affection?

I slammed one fist against the fridge in frustration, startling her. "No! It's not all right! I shouldn't treat you like this." But she was already comforting me again.

"Edward, stop! I'm fine. It's *you* I'm worried about!" She reached up to press her palms to my face, forcing me to look at her. "Whatever it is, you can tell me."

Staring into her beautiful eyes, I realized I had everything I'd ever wanted right there in my arms, and was about to seriously fuck everything up.

"No," I whispered, my need for her suddenly frantic as I leaned in to kiss along her jawline and down her throat. I panted against her neck, sucking and biting at the tender skin there. "*Not now.*"

Lifting her up, I wrapped her legs around me, carrying her out of the kitchen and down the hallway. As we moved, my lips met hers again in desperate, searing kisses. When we'd crossed the threshold into the bedroom, I slammed her against the wall, grinding my body against hers.

"I just need you so fucking much!"

She told me she knew; that it was okay. But she couldn't know how much I needed her, it wasn't possible. I needed to feel her skin, taste her body. I needed to take her, to fucking devour her.

I needed her to remind me who I was—that I was someone worth wanting.

Pulling back, I let her feet slip down to the ground. "Clothes. Off. *Now.*"

Bella responded instantly to my commanding tone, frantically pulling off her tank top as I yanked my own shirt over my head. Once she'd stepped out of her skirt and panties, I grabbed her hands, pinning them against the wall on either side of her head.

"Keep them there," I instructed, releasing her wrists. Capturing one of her supple breasts in my hand, I bent down and sucked her pert, rosy nipple into my mouth, relishing in Bella's sharp gasp.

"Tell me again," I murmured against her skin, moving over to the other breast while pinching and rolling the peak I'd just sucked. Bella only moaned, and I nipped the fleshy side of her smooth globe with my teeth, needing her words. "*Tell me you want me.*"

"I want - oh *fuck*, Edward!" She couldn't finish her sentence, her words dying on a high-pitched cry as I gently bit down on her nipple.

#43: She loves what I do to her.

"Tell me!" I demanded.

"I want you!" she cried. "Please, please, *please* touch me!"

I pursed my lips in feigned disapproval at her pleas, but I really did love to hear her beg. Suddenly, I felt more in control, more myself again. Reaching down, I slowly caressed my fingertips along her thighs, my touch feather-light. Up and down. Circling and teasing.

"Is *this* what you need?" I whispered, my lips against her ear. Bella bucked her hips, seeking out more contact.

"No!" she keened. "Please!"

I smiled, loving the games we played, what she let me do. Although it may have

seemed that I was in control of Bella, her naked body pressed up against the wall at my request, the truth was I would do anything she asked of me. So I gave her what she needed, my palm sliding across smooth, soft skin, my fingers parting her folds to stroke against wet flesh.

"Oh!" Bella's back arched, her eyes squeezing shut as her mouth fell open in shuddering breaths. "God...yes!"

I drew tight circles against her clit, knowing exactly where to touch, exactly how she wanted it. It wasn't long before her knees were buckling, her legs barely able to hold her up, and she whimpered loudly in protest when I abruptly pulled my hand away.

"I want you on the bed, Bella. On your knees."

After a breath's hesitation, she followed instructions perfectly, walking over to the bed on shaky legs. Kneeling obediently, a small smile played at her lips as she looked back at me from over her shoulder.

The moonlight peeking in from the window lit a path to the bed, illuminating her body. I took in an unsteady breath, stunned by her beauty - the curve of her back, the way her skin shone softly. Her hair was loose and wild from my hands in it, her cheeks flushed, her eyes downcast and hooded with lust.

She was amazing.

"You're so beautiful," I murmured, and her wanton expression softened.

"Come to me, Edward. Please."

Quickly ridding myself of my pants, I threw them to the side and climbed onto the bed behind her. My aching cock grew painfully hard as she pushed her ass back against me.

"Tell me again that you want me," I begged, lifting her hair off her shoulder, pressing open-mouthed kisses to her neck.

"I want you, everything about you."

My hand reared back, coming down with a sharp smack to the curve of her ass, making her jump. "Again!" I barked, and then, softer. "*Please.*"

"I want you, Edward!" She panted as I rubbed her skin gently, soothing the sting from my slap. "I need you!"

I didn't know why I was so desperate to hear it, but her words somehow reached a place inside me that had been broken for so long. She alone could heal all my wounds.

Smoothing my palm over her hip, I brought my touch back to the apex of her thighs, sliding a finger inside. I bit down gently on her shoulder, savoring every whimper and moan as she ground against my hand. When she started to shake, her cries getting louder, I set one hand on her hip to steady her, bringing the fingers that had been inside her out to stroke along my cock.

Bella fell forward onto her hands, her head dropping down between her shoulders. I could tell she was aching to be fucked, aching to come. Whispered pleas fell off her lips as I nudged her entrance from behind with my tip. Her pleased cry drowned out my groan when I finally slid inside, her body tight and searing around me.

"Bella...oh *God*, Bella..."

I moaned her name incessantly. I had no other words - I couldn't speak, couldn't *think* of anything else. My entire existence was only her, taking me in and making me whole again. After a few deep thrusts, I was already at the brink, my will completely lost to pleasure.

"Baby... oh *fuck!* I - I can't..." I was desperately trying to hang on, my fingers digging into her hips, needing so badly to feel her come with me. She lifted an arm, and I groaned when I felt her touch brushing against where we were joined.

"Edward!" she cried out, her fingers moving faster, her walls tightening around me. "Oh...oh, *God!*"

Bella's back arched, her whole body spasming with the force of her orgasm, a sharp, ecstatic scream punctuating her movements. I quickly followed, calling out her name, my chin falling to my chest as I erupted endlessly inside her.

We collapsed onto the bed, our bodies sticky with sweat, and I had just enough presence of mind left to switch on the air conditioner before pulling a sheet over us. Bella sighed contentedly in my arms.

"Edward, you know I..." she trailed off, her voice hushed, her thought left hanging in the air, unfinished.

I knew what she was trying to say, though.

"Shh." Kissing the top of her head, I pulled her close, wrapping an arm around her. "Shh, baby. I know."

ABC

Friday morning, I woke up before Bella. When my alarm went off, she barely moved. She must have been completely exhausted. I brushed her hair off her forehead, feeling horrible for my behavior. I'd scared the shit out of her, fucked her senseless, then passed out before I told her a damn thing.

But I didn't have time to wake her and talk before curriculum, so I scribbled out a quick note that I would call her after.

A thunderstorm had passed through some time in the night, breaking the insufferable heat, the scorching grip of summer starting to loosen its hold. The room we met in that morning was actually bearable, and as we finished our tasks, submitting reports and evaluations, my mood felt lighter.

And, I realized as I sat there, that Bella's complete acceptance of me was the reason why.

Smiling to myself, I added that, as well as some other things to my list, amazed at how close to fifty I suddenly was.

When we were finally finished at school, I received a text from Bella that she had to run over to her father's. So, before heading home, I stopped at the elementary school. Soon it would be time to set up our classrooms, and I hoped Mrs. Cope would be ready with our keys.

"Well, hello there, Mr. Cullen!" she cooed from her desk as I entered the main office. We exchanged pleasantries, our conversation easy and light.

"Someone's sure smiling a lot," she noticed. "That have anything to do with Ms. Swan?"

I paused, unable to stifle my grin, staring at the shiny, waxed floor. I'd been trying to avoid telling anyone anything about my personal life ever since my divorce, but suddenly, in the wake of the previous night's events, it didn't seem to matter so much.

"Yes," I told her. "Yes, it is."

#48: Everyone can see how happy Bella makes me.

"Well, you make sure to say hi to her for me. By the way, your sister has both of your keys."

My brow furrowed in confusion. "My sister?"

"Oh yes," she nodded. "Mrs. Whitlock is in your classroom right now. She said you should meet her there."

*How the **hell** did she know I was coming?*

I thanked her and hurried down the hall, finding Alice sitting on my desk.

"Have you gotten your head out of your ass yet, Edward?" she asked without looking up.

"Did Bella say that?" Alice shook her head, making me ask the inevitable question. "How did you know?"

She hopped down to the floor. "It's *you*, Edward. It was only a matter of time before you got all emo on things."

I chuckled uneasily and crossed the room, sitting down in my chair. My sister studied me silently.

"Why are you still punishing yourself?" she asked.

I sighed, resting my elbows on my desk, my chin on interlaced fingers. "I'm just so damn scared it's all going to fall apart again."

"Bella isn't Tanya."

I let out an aggravated exhale. "So? How can I be so sure about Bella now, when I was just as certain about Tanya once?"

Alice snorted. "No you weren't! Even when we were kids, she just had you wrapped around her finger. You were never really happy or certain about a damn thing." She paused, her voice softer. "She abused you, Edward."

I made a face. "I wouldn't go *that* far."

"Maybe not in the conventional sense." Alice shrugged. "She broke down your self-confidence day by day with cruel words and actions. We all saw it. Abuse can be verbal, too."

I looked up at her, listening intently.

"You need to let the past go," she continued. "Think about what's right in front of you, about what's real. It's okay for you to be happy, Edward."

"But, it's all happened so quickly," I protested.

"So?" she laughed. "Bella's your match, Edward. She loves you, despite all your crazy-ass mood swings."

My stomach flopped at the word *love*.

#49: She loves me.

Bella loved me. I realized *that* was the key difference between her and Tanya...the difference that meant everything.

I sat back in my chair, a smile making its way to my lips. "How are you so sure?"

"I just am."

"Predicting pixie," I muttered under my breath.

"*What* was that?"

Crap. She heard me. "Uhh, nothing!" I stammered.

"Did you just use Emmett's awful nickname on me? Because if you did, I'll take you down right here and now! You know I will!"

With a chuckle, I raised my hands in surrender, rolling my chair as far away from her as I could. Alice grinned, satisfied. Then she leaned in, reached a hand to my head, and proceeded to flick my forehead.

"Now, go fix this, dumbass."

She turned on her heel, heading for the door.

"I can't believe you just flicked me!" I called out, but she merely waved, leaving me to my thoughts in an empty room.

For a moment, I just sat there, stewing in my thoughts. I mused over the past couple of months - to the first few weeks of freedom from my marriage, thinking I would enjoy bachelorhood, when the truth was that I hated my house being so empty.

I thought about watching Bella at school, wondering if there was the slightest chance she had feelings for me, and the resulting euphoria when I discovered she did. And I recalled the weeks of hidden encounters, of ignoring her in school, of the fears that threatened to dismantle the whole damn thing before it had even begun.

I had been so worried Bella and I wouldn't last, that I couldn't possibly make anything work, but I'd been wrong all along. I'd been wrong for half my life, until she showed up and made everything right.

#50: I love her.

Quickly, I pulled out my phone. Bella picked up on the first ring.

"Hi?" She sounded nervous.

"Hey, if you're almost done at your dad's, do you think you could meet me in the park?" I hoped I sounded reassuring; I had to make sure I did this right. We agreed to meet in a half hour, and my body was buzzing with nervous energy as I hung up the phone.

And then, I turned on my computer, and began to type.

ABC

I arrived at the park when we'd promised to meet, my eyes scanning the loping green for her face, a piece of paper folded up awkwardly in my back pocket. It was hard to find her through the throngs of people enjoying the afternoon sunshine.

As I walked along, I saw both former and future students enjoying the last days of August before freedom and playtime slipped away to falling leaves and homework. Parents I recognized waved at me from park benches, and I raised a hand in return.

And when I reached the middle of the park, laughter and the squeak of swings flying through the air all faded to silence. It was as if I had a fever that now was broken, a heavy darkness lifted.

Because all I could see then was her.

Bella sat on the ground in jeans and a yellow shirt, the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. Amidst the grass and wildflowers growing around her, her hair spilling softly over her shoulders; she looked natural, radiant.

And incredibly nervous.

She was picking idly at a stalk of grass as I stepped toward her, her teeth sinking deeply into her lower lip. As if she could sense my presence, she quickly looked up, offering me an apprehensive smile.

I sat down next to her. "Hey."

Bella tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, her shoulders rolling up slightly toward her ears; another adorably anxious habit of hers. "Hey, yourself."

Taking her hand in mine, I brought it to my lips and kissed a knuckle tenderly, coaxing a smile from her. "I'm sorry about last night."

She shook her head quickly from side to side, her brow coming together. "Don't be."

"Will you let me explain?" I waited for her nod, and then took a deep breath, steeling myself. "Tanya happened."

Bella's eyes flew open wide, blinking repeatedly until she found her voice. "Tanya...and...you?"

It took me a minute to catch up, but when I realized she was implying that Tanya and I might be back together, I doubled over in laughter.

So then, I told her. Everything. All the things I'd never said, every single bitter memory, all my ghosts and demons, brought out into the daylight. And when I was finished she took my hand in hers, studying it tentatively.

"I thought it was me," she whispered.

"You?"

Bella nodded, swallowing visibly, one shoulder sliding up in a half-shrug. "I thought you were having second thoughts about our relationship. That I really was just a rebound."

I shook my head and sighed. "You were *never* my rebound, Bella." Reaching up, I cradled her cheek against my palm. "You were my savior."

The sweetest laugh escaped her lips and I lowered my hand, reaching around to retrieve the paper from my pocket. I studied it, folded up in my hand.

"There's so many reasons why, Bella. So many reasons why you mean the world to me."

I handed over the paper and she took it from me gingerly, flattening it and murmuring the title. "'Fifty Reasons Why!...' Her eyes snapped up to mine. "You *love* me?"

I nodded sheepishly. Bella looked rapidly from me to the paper and then back again, her mouth slightly agape. "Go on," I encouraged. "Read it."

Her eyes trained on the paper, I sat back and simply took her in. The summer sun had brought a fresh sprinkling of freckles to her nose, her skin glowing. Her soft, pink lips moved as she read, the corners every once in a while turning up into a smile, her tell-tale blush spreading across her cheeks.

And when she looked back up at me again, her eyes were shining. Bella shifted onto her knees, leaning in toward me and pressing her forehead to mine.

"I thought...I didn't know if..." She shook her head, discounting her words. "I love you, Edward."

Reaching up, I cupped her face in my palms. "I love *you*." I brought my lips to hers, just the slightest breath of a kiss, and a few steps away, I could hear children giggling and clapping.

"Go, Mr. C!" One of them cheered, making Bella's face flush even deeper, and we both laughed.

"I can't believe you wrote this!" She gripped the list tightly in her hand. "You don't know what this means to me."

But Bella didn't know what she meant to me just by being who she was: honest, sweet, clumsy, sexy, real.

Her.

"Edward Cullen's very own countdown," she mused, grinning deviously at me.

"I like to think of it as a count-up," I argued. "I'm only going to be adding to it."

She bit her lip again. "You know, Jessica and Mike made a bet at the end of the school year." I raised an eyebrow at her, encouraging her to continue. "They think we won't last the first hundred days of school."

I looked up and around us, at the people of the small town of Forks, the children I taught, the lives I was a part of. It was the small town life I'd wanted to live. It had slipped out of my grasp, and I'd hidden in the shadows, ashamed.

Finally, I was ready to walk in the sunlight again, with the hand of the woman I loved warm inside mine.

"Well, let's show 'em." Standing, I pulled Bella to her feet. Wrapping my arms around her waist, I picked her up, spinning her around in a circle, listening to her laugh. "Let's show all of them."

I would want her to move in with me. I would want to ask for her hand, binding my life to hers, to set down roots with her and watch them grow. But there would be plenty of time for that.

And in the meantime, I would go through every letter and number in the world to show her all the reasons why I loved her.

And ABCward and Teacherella lived Happily Ever After.