

Not a Baby Anymore

by [Daddycums](#)

mf, inc, 1st, minor nc

The best thing that ever happened to Scott was when his parents died in a car accident. It wasn't that he didn't love them, or that they had mistreated him. On the contrary, they had been a loving and caring family. Looking back on it years later, though, he realized that the accident set in motion events that made his life far better than he could possibly imagine.

He was seven at the time, too young to be familiar with death, some would say too young to be allowed to experience it. But he did experience it, and he found himself alone for the first time in his life, sad and scared and naked to all the bad emotions of the world.

Fortunately, he had an aunt and uncle who took pity on him and took him in. Wayne and Colleen were a kind and gentle couple, much like his parents, and it helped to ease the pain. The day they brought him home was the day he met his cousin Anna.

He had seen her before, at family reunions and other events, but being three years older than him, she didn't really have much in common with Scott, so they mostly ignored one another. Now that they would be living together, they would have plenty of time to get to know each other.

Even though he was only seven and she was only ten, he could already see that she was a pretty girl. She had the loveliest straight brown hair, almost silky smooth. She had a kind face and a cheerful smile, the kind that made it hard to remain gloomy even in the midst of this tragedy. That smile even touched her hazel eyes, giving them a kind of sparkle as she gazed at him.

She smiled because she had never had a brother before, being an only child like Scott. Though she was a little older and able to understand what had happened, to her the most important consequence of the accident was that she would now have a younger sibling that she could play with. That thought was happy enough to swallow up all the sadness and grief at losing her aunt and uncle.

As soon as her mother, his Aunt Colleen, introduced them, Anna took his hand and led him back to the bedroom where he would be sleeping. They had moved a chest full of toys into that room to give him something to occupy his attention and make him feel at home, and Anna immediately took great delight in showing him all the fun things to play with. She brought out a couple of coloring books and a box of crayons, and set to work coloring the pictures.

Scott didn't feel much like talking, but that didn't stop Anna. She talked enough for both of them, chattering away and telling him all about her school, her friends, the house, the toys, the weather, what she had eaten for

lunch, what she wanted to be when she grew up (a forest ranger), her favorite foods, her favorite clothes, her favorite activities, their pet goldfish, their neighbors' tree house, and the finer points of taking care of stuffed animals. Scott listened quietly, not really hearing anything she said but enjoying the sound of her voice. As long as she was talking, it kept out the loneliness and grief of his own thoughts.

They played together all afternoon, Anna taking the lead and Scott just happy to follow along with whatever she wanted to do. Over the next few hours, his confidence grew a little more, and he actually started talking to her. Of course, he could barely get a word in edgewise, but that didn't bother him. Despite his earlier uneasiness and even fear, he gradually grew to like his cousin. She seemed genuinely interested in being his friend, which was what he needed more than anything right now.

Her parents were overjoyed to see the two of them getting along. Although they loved their nephew, they had not been prepared to take care of him, and they knew it would be a challenge for everyone in the family. They had taken Anna aside that morning and asked her to be especially nice to Scott, and it looked like she had taken the responsibility to heart. It certainly helped to ease what could have been an uneasy tension due to his presence. Anna could have felt bitter or jealous of any attention her parents paid to him, but instead she took to him immediately.

Unfortunately, bedtime eventually arrived, and that meant no more playing with toys, no more talking and laughing with Anna, no more doing anything to distract him. Ten minutes after his aunt tucked him in and gave him a kiss on the forehead, he broke down crying. During the day there were too many other things to occupy his attention, but now lying here alone with his thoughts, the full weight of the tragedy bore down upon him and he couldn't stand it. Usually when he felt sad or lonely or had a nightmare he crept into his parents' bed, where his mother would snuggle with him and he would feel safe and warm and protected. But even that small comfort had been robbed from him.

He had been sobbing like that for twenty minutes when he heard a knock at the bedroom door. It opened a crack, and Anna poked her head in. "What's wrong?" she asked, probably not the smartest question at the time, but being ten years old, she could be forgiven.

"I want Mommy," sobbed Scott.

Anna strode over to the bed and stood beside it, reaching out to stroke his cheek for a moment. "I know you miss her," she told him. "I wish I could bring her back."

Scott continued to weep, and Anna ran her hand gently over his back, trying to think of some way to comfort him. Suddenly, she had an idea.

"Come on," she said, grabbing his hand.

He stared up at her with surprise.

"Do you want to sleep with me in my bed tonight?" she asked.

He continued to stare for a few seconds, then nodded shyly. He sat up, and Anna rose to her feet. Holding his hand, she led him out the door and down the hall to her own bedroom. Once there, she climbed into bed and lay down. Scott followed her, and she drew up the covers over both of them. Scott scooted up next to her, threw his arm around her and sobbed into her chest. Anna continued to stroke his back tenderly until he felt the warmth and closeness of his cousin overcome the tears. Although he barely knew this girl, lying here with her felt so soothing and comfortable that for the moment, it made everything all right.

He fell asleep in that position, with his head against her chest and listening to the tranquil beating of her heart.

When Aunt Colleen came to wake them in the morning and found them lying there together, she stood in Anna's doorway smiling for a few minutes, watching them sleep. It really touched her to see them so affectionate with each other. The death of her brother and sister-in-law had hit her hard, but she knew her own pain was nothing compared to what Scott must be going through. Now it looked like he had found someone to help him through that pain, and it made her happy. Anna had always been a caring and sweet girl, just the type of friend that Scott needed.

That day they made preparations for Scott to start in a new school. Anna was happy to ride with him on the bus and introduce him to all of her friends. They were all just as cheerful and bubbly as Anna, but Scott was still a little timid and shy, so he didn't really talk much with them.

He managed to get through his first day of school all right; his teacher was nice and understanding, especially when Anna brought him to his class and had a talk with the teacher about what had happened. Mrs. Harner made a special effort to be nice and gentle with him in her class.

That night after putting his pajamas on, instead of lying down in his own bed he followed Anna to her bedroom. Aunt Colleen was a little hesitant about letting him sleep with his cousin a second night in a row; the girl might find it uncomfortable after all. But Anna smiled and patted the bed next to her, and he hopped in and snuggled up to her. Aunt Colleen just smiled and sighed, then tucked them in and gave them both a goodnight kiss.

From that point forward, things grew better daily for Scott. He was beginning to make new friends in school, and after school Anna always played with him. The scary new life turned out not to be scary after all. With his pretty older cousin looking after him, he didn't have to worry so much.

He continued to sleep in her bed with her. She was so soft and warm, and he felt so safe in her arms. This ten-year-old girl had become something of a surrogate mother to him, much better for him than any grown woman because, as a child herself, she could understand and relate to him. Besides, she wasn't anywhere near as scary as grownups. So he latched onto her, and from that point forward his world revolved around his beautiful cousin Anna.

A week later, he worked up the courage to tell her how he felt. As he lay in bed with her one night, with his

head in its usual position on her chest, he glanced up at her beautiful, kind face. He couldn't stand it any longer. He had to let her know.

"Anna," he said.

"What is it, Scott?" she asked.

"I... I love you."

Her face lit up with a smile, and he felt wonderful. He would have been satisfied with a neutral reaction, with a simple "that's nice," but she was actually *glad* that he had told her that.

"I love you too, Scott," she replied, then kissed him on the forehead.

Now his happiness was complete. Not only did his beautiful cousin love him, she had actually kissed him! All the hurt and sorrow that his parents' deaths had caused him immediately melted away. As long as Anna loved him, he could withstand anything the world could do to him.

The weeks of bliss stretched out into months, and then into years. The bedroom that was supposed to be his sat unoccupied as he continued to sleep with Anna. Those were happy times for him, full of peace and joy as he played with Anna during the day and slept with her during the night. The two became best friends, closer even than most brothers and sisters. They were inseparable, mainly because anywhere Anna went, Scott wanted to go too. Maybe she didn't feel quite so strongly about being with him all the time, but at the very least she didn't mind him tagging along.

The summers were the best, because it meant no school to get in the way of them spending time together. Sometimes he would go whole weeks without being out of her presence for more than a few minutes at a time. Aunt Colleen watched them with amusement, glad that they got along so well together. After the novelty of having him around wore off, he fit right in with the family. She had long since stopped thinking of him as her nephew, and now thought of him as her son. It looked like Anna thought of him as a brother too.

For Scott, the world was just perfect, and it looked like it would remain so forever. As long as he had Anna, nothing could ruin things for him.

Not long after his ninth birthday, his world came crashing down around him for the second time in his life.

Anna was twelve then, and Scott couldn't help but notice certain changes in her. He had always had a vague idea that little girls eventually turned into grown women and little boys eventually turned into grown men, but until then, that had always been in the "future," which to him simply meant a completely different world. For two years Anna and Scott had been best friends, just little children that would never grow up.

But one day the future arrived, and his childhood ended in tears.

The previous night, he had curled up in bed with her, laying his head down on her chest like he usually did and fell asleep to the sound of her heartbeat. Lately she had started growing softer in that region, but he didn't really think much of it. It just meant she made a more comfortable pillow. She had also been growing prettier, but he didn't think much of that either because to Scott, she had grown more beautiful every day since he met her anyway.

But that night, there was another difference, and not a happy one. Usually she put her arms around him and held him to her, but tonight, she just lay there with her arms at her side. He didn't let it bother him; as long as he could still lie there with her he was content. He decided to ask her about it though.

"Anna?" he whispered.

"What is it, Scott?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I'm just sleepy."

"Okay. I love you."

"I love you too. Now go to sleep."

He smiled. As long as she still loved him, everything would be all right.

The next morning at the breakfast table, he received a terrible shock. They sat together with his aunt, who was just as kind and friendly as the day he had met her.

"Mom?" said Anna.

"Yes dear?"

"I was just thinking... I think... well, Scott's really starting to grow up now."

"Yes, I know," his aunt smiled. "It won't be long now before he turns into a fine young man."

"Well... you know how he's slept in my room since... since we took him in?"

"Yes."

"I don't think that's such a good idea anymore."

Scott was stunned. He stared at his cousin, unable to believe what he had heard. Was she really suggesting that they separate like that?

"You know how much he adores you," his aunt replied.

"Yes, but it's been almost two years. Surely he's gotten over it by now, and he's old enough to sleep in his own room. Besides, I need my privacy."

His aunt sighed. "Yes, I suppose you do. Scott's not the only one growing up." Then she turned to him. "How about it, Scott?" she asked. "Doesn't having your own room sound fun?"

"Anna," he said. "Don't you want to sleep with me?"

"You don't need to sleep with anyone, Scott," she replied. "You're not a baby anymore."

Her words shocked him. In one instant, she had shattered his childhood and changed his whole universe. She had done nothing less than announce that the future had arrived. He stood on the edge of it looking across the vast landscape, and what he saw was not pleasant. In this new world, Scott had to sleep in his own bed, Anna found his company more annoying than enjoyable, and they were likely to continue to drift apart the further they traveled into that world.

"Scott?" asked his aunt. "What do you think about sleeping in your own room from now on?"

He glanced at Anna, who seemed unconcerned with whatever he decided. Just last night she had told him she loved him, and now she was just brushing him off. What did that mean?

It meant her feelings for him had changed, he decided. She was no longer the Anna that he remembered, but a selfish meanie who didn't care about his feelings at all. Well, if she was going to be like that, he would too.

"She's right," he said coldly. "I'm not a baby anymore."

From that point forward, that became his catchphrase. After school that day when Anna asked him if he wanted to walk down to the park with her and buy some ice cream from the ice cream stand, he replied, "Ice cream is for babies, and I'm not a baby anymore." He then went into his room and locked the door behind him, leaving her standing in the hallway with a look of shock on her face.

He came out that evening for dinner, but he didn't feel like talking. When Anna offered to pass him the mashed potatoes, he said, "I can do it myself. I'm not a baby anymore." She gave a frustrated sigh, but let him reach across the table to retrieve the potatoes.

For all his show of apathy, it still hurt inside. For the second time since he could remember, he cried himself to sleep that night. It felt a lot like losing his parents, but in one way it was even worse. What had happened to them was not their fault; despite going away and leaving him alone, they had not deliberately abandoned him. They had loved him right up to the end. With Anna it was different. She had cast him aside, discarding him because she didn't love him anymore. Worse still, there was no one to come rescue him from his grief this time. The door to his new bedroom remained closed all night, and he was forced to sleep all by himself.

In the morning he felt a little better, and seeing Anna at the breakfast table merely strengthened his resolve. She was right; it was time for him to grow up. He couldn't just hang around his cousin all the time. He

needed to be independent, to do things for himself. He didn't need her anyway; from now on, Scott would be his own best friend. He would show her. He would prove to her that he was completely over her.

His resolve lasted a week and a half. During that time he mostly ignored her, playing with his own toys and declining whenever she asked if he wanted to play with her. When she asked him if he was angry at her for some reason, he merely replied, "Why should I be angry? I'm not a baby anymore." It was a somewhat cryptic answer, but she didn't press the issue.

Then one night when he was sitting in bed taking solace from one of his favorite books, a collection of short fantasy stories with lots of pictures, he had an epiphany. Several of the stories told of brave princes or knights who rescued beautiful princesses from dragons or ogres or evil wizards. In the end of each one, the princess fell in love with her hero and they got married and lived happily ever after.

Could that be it? he wondered. Maybe he had found the reason why she no longer loved him. When she said he wasn't a baby anymore, it hadn't been meant to hurt his feelings, but to hint at what she needed him to be. She needed a man, not a baby, someone strong and brave who could come to her rescue. How could she love someone small and weak, who couldn't even go to sleep at night without cuddling with someone?

So that was it. He would simply have to rescue her from something, to prove his strength and courage. Scott could be like a knight in one of those stories. How hard could it be, really?

He set the book aside, turned out the light, and lay back down on the bed. For the first time since moving into this room, he went to sleep with a smile on his face.

Unfortunately, the modern world had a severe shortage of dragons and ogres and evil wizards. Anna was really in no danger at all, and it appeared that his plan was doomed to failure. When the next day passed and the opportunity never arose, it didn't bother him; he didn't really expect it to happen in a day anyway. When a week passed, he started to feel a little uneasy. When a month passed, he realized it wouldn't be as simple as he thought. Still, he wouldn't give up without a fight. The knights in the stories would never surrender no matter how long it took.

For four years he looked for an opportunity to prove his love. It had to be something big, something grand, something heroic even. It couldn't be something small, like giving her flowers or silly things like that. He needed to do something so completely overwhelming that she would have no choice but to throw herself at his feet in gratitude.

During those years, she grew into a beautiful and popular girl at school. He felt a stab of jealousy every time he saw her talking with a boy, but fortunately she never developed more than a casual relationship with any of them. He dreaded the thought of her coming home one day and announcing excitedly that she had a boyfriend. If that happened, he didn't know how he would be able to go on.

Toward the end of those four years, he started noticing other girls as well. Some of the girls in his class at

school, toward which he had previously felt indifferent at best, now became much more interesting. He had his fantasies about a few of them, but they were nothing like what he felt for his cousin. Anna had rescued him from grief and despair. She had been his playmate and his friend, someone he could trust and care for and look up to.

His tenth, eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth birthdays all passed without an opportunity presenting itself. Anna was sixteen now, and if he didn't do something soon, she was likely to start dating. Once that happened, he might never get his chance. She would find some handsome boy to sweep her off her feet, and then she would forget all about her cousin.

The day she brought home a boy she knew from school, Scott nearly flew into a rage. She introduced the boy as her friend Mike, who smiled and shook Scott's hand. Scott managed a friendly "nice to meet you," then headed back to his room to assault his pillow. How could she do such a thing? How could she bring home a boy, an ugly and skinny wimp who would probably run away screaming at the first sight of a dragon? *Scott* was her cousin, not this stupid creep. How could she just fall for some kid she just met, when Scott had remained loyal and faithful to Anna for six years?

Fortunately, nothing developed between Mike and Anna. He had come over to study with her because they were in the same math class and had a big test coming up, but that was it. The crisis had been averted, but it had been too close. Next time, Scott might not be so lucky. He had to find some way to prove his love soon, or she would fall for some guy who wouldn't be half as good for her as Scott was.

Then one Friday after school, the opportunity arrived. Aunt Colleen and Uncle Wayne had left for a weekend getaway earlier that day, which meant he would get to spend two whole days alone with his cousin. It was the first time they left her in charge without hiring a babysitter, so he hadn't had a chance to be alone with her in a long time. He was really looking forward to the weekend.

When the last bell rang, Scott hurried out the door. Since the junior high and high school were only a couple of blocks apart and their house was less than ten blocks away from either, sometimes Scott and Anna walked home together. Although they never planned it that way, there was a certain intersection midway between the two schools where they often happened to meet if neither of them was running late. Then they would finish the last five blocks of the trip together.

Scott looked forward to seeing Anna again; with the whole weekend alone together, maybe something would happen between them. He really didn't know what that might be-- it could be something as simple as a conversation, or perhaps they would walk down to the park and throw around a football, or maybe they would go out and see a movie together. Now that Anna had her driver's license, it opened up all kinds of opportunities that hadn't been there before. Whatever happened, Scott just knew that spending this time alone with his cousin would have some beneficial effect on their relationship.

He was so happy that he nearly whistled as he walked to the familiar intersection. He just couldn't wait to meet with Anna so that they could begin their weekend together.

When he turned the corner, he froze. Anna was there, but not alone. Five tough and scary-looking boys stood around her. They were older, probably college aged. Anna wore a frightened look on her face, and for good reason. One of them stood behind her, pinning her arms behind her back. One of the others had his hand on her chest, fondling her through her blouse.

Scott gritted his teeth, feeling rage building inside of him. How dare they touch Anna like that! Before he knew what was happening, he found himself charging toward them, prepared to do whatever it took to protect her.

He launched himself at the one who had groped her, throwing himself into his midsection in a flying tackle. Caught off his guard, the boy flew to the ground with Scott on top of him. Scott's fists pounded into the boy's face over and over again, until blood began pouring out of his nose.

Suddenly, two pairs of hands grabbed Scott and pulled him off of the boy. They hauled him to his feet, and he realized he had just made enemies of five much older and much stronger boys.

The one he had tackled rose up. "You broke my nose, you fucker!" he shouted, then clenched his fist and rammed it into Scott's stomach. He doubled over in pain, but the two who held him lifted him up again just in time for another strike. Three, four, five times the boy struck, until Scott slipped from the grasp of his enemies and fell to the ground, writhing in agony.

But the ordeal wasn't over yet. A moment later he felt the tips of what felt like dozens of shoes kicking him all over. His head, his stomach, and his back all received blows from the boys. He tried to ward off the attacks with his hands, but there were too many of them. With the wind knocked out of him, he had no time to catch his breath between blows to his stomach, and he felt himself slipping into unconsciousness from lack of air. His strength gave out and he collapsed helplessly into a motionless heap.

After a few more minutes of assault, the attacks stopped. Then he heard mumbled words through the haze of his pain.

"...not breathing..."

"...we killed him!"

"...get out of here!"

Then the sound of running feet gradually vanishing into the distance, followed by the feel of gentle hands lifting him up off of the hard pavement. He felt his body pressed against something soft and warm.

The unconsciousness fled from him, but it was replaced by the painful aftermath of the beating. He couldn't help himself, but broke down into tears. To his horror, when he opened his eyes he found himself cradled in the arms of his cousin Anna and staring up at her face, who seemed close to tears herself. For years now he had wanted to prove himself to her, to show her that he was no longer a baby, and now here he was, crying in her arms. He had been unable to defend her, unable to fight off the boys who were molesting her. All he had

accomplished was getting himself beaten up, and now she would never think of him as anything but a crybaby.

She hugged him to her chest for the longest time, but he was too mortified to allow himself to enjoy it. Any other time he would have loved to have her embrace him, but not like this. Not with her as a maternal figure comforting a crying child who had fallen and skinned his knee.

Eventually though, the pain subsided to a dull ache. He managed to sit up, and Anna slipped an arm around his waist.

"Scott," she said. "Can you walk? I'm scared that the boys might come back."

He nodded, and tried to rise to his feet. Unfortunately, the slightest movement brought the pain back with full force, so he couldn't stand. He tried three times in vain before Anna had him put his arm over her shoulder, then helped him to her feet. That was the most humiliating of all. He had to rely on *her* strength to do something as simple as standing.

Eventually he was able to rise to his feet, and although every movement shot pain through his body, he managed to put one foot in front of the other and make his way, with his cousin's help, toward their house. Five blocks was normally a negligible journey, but today it might as well have been a continent away when every step in itself was a tremendous accomplishment, made worse by the thought of what Anna must think of him. He was supposed to be the strong one; she was supposed to come to him for strength. But without her help, he wouldn't be able to stand, much less walk. He had been reduced to the child he had been when they first met, the child crying for his mommy.

When they finally made it home, he plopped down on the couch, wincing from the pain in his stomach but relieved that he could now rest. Anna sat down beside him, leaving her arm around his shoulders.

"How do you feel?" asked Anna.

"I'm fine," he grumbled. It was a lie, of course. The truth was that he was sore, tired, angry, and humiliated. He had actually cried in front of Anna. His cousin, for whom he would do anything in the world, had seen him bawl like a baby. Now she would never think of him as anything else ever again.

"You're not fine," she insisted. "No one would be after taking a beating like that."

"Yeah, I really took a beating," he said. "Little Scott got himself beat up. Couldn't even defend himself in a fight."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm not a baby anymore!" he snapped, and she stared at him in shock. Immediately he wished he hadn't been so sharp with her. It wasn't her fault. He was the one who had proven himself unable to protect even himself, let alone her.

"Scott," she said meekly. "Please tell me what's wrong."

He sighed. "It's just that... when I saw those guys bothering you, it made me so mad. I wanted so much to be able to come to your rescue. To beat them up or at the very least make them run away so they would stop bothering you. But instead I just made a fool out of myself."

"How did you make a fool out of yourself?" she asked. "By losing a fight? You think that makes you weak or something?"

"Doesn't it?"

"There's no shame in being outnumbered. And there's no shame in being outclassed. No matter who you are, there's always someone who can beat you in a fight. You were just unlucky enough to run into five of them."

"You don't have to apologize for me. I know I screwed up."

"You did not screw up, Scott!" Anna insisted.

"Yes I did. I tried to rescue you--"

"Which you did."

He glanced at her in surprise. "What?" he asked.

"You did rescue me," she repeated. "If you had just left everything alone, who knows what those guys would have done to me? Maybe they would have just felt me up a little and then left, but maybe not. It terrifies me to think just how much worse it might have been. But even though you had no hope of winning the fight, you attacked those guys anyway. And now you're the one who's hurt, not me."

"I..." he said. It was true. He had ended up injured, but she had come out of it unscathed. The boys had been so focused on attacking him that they had forgotten all about her. The way she put it, it sounded like he had done just what he had tried to do. He had rescued her.

"It took real courage to do that," she continued, smiling at him. "And I love you for it. You might not think so, but today, you're my hero."

"Really?" he asked, fighting back the tears. *Don't start crying. Don't start crying*, he told himself. Somehow it worked.

"Really," she replied. Then she threw both of her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. The motion made the pain in his torso flare back up, but despite that, he hadn't felt that good in years.

They held each other for almost two minutes, but when she drew back, he thought it had been far too short. She gave him a smile as she gazed into his eyes, and for just a moment they were children again, happy and innocent and best friends.

"So what happened?" asked Scott. "I mean, what were those boys doing?"

"Well, they were standing there when I tried to pass them," Anna explained. "One of them flipped up my skirt as I was walking past. I turned around and slapped his face, and that was when the other one grabbed me. You know the rest. I think they were just having a little fun and probably would have let me go in a minute, but you never know."

He nodded. It was pretty much the way he imagined it. A bunch of lowlifes with too much time on their hands hanging out on the street corner, who couldn't resist the opportunity when a pretty girl walked by.

"Come on," said Anna. "Let's see how bad you're injured." She reached for the bottom of his tee shirt.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Just checking out the damage. Lift up your arms."

"Oh, you want to play doctor?" he grinned, and she laughed. Scott raised his arms, wincing a little as he did so, but Anna did all the hard work of removing his shirt. Once it was off, they both glanced down at his chest and stomach. There were a couple of bruises, one just above the base of his rib cage on the left, and another off-center to the left above his navel. Neither of them looked too serious.

"Good," she sighed in relief. "It's not as bad as I thought. I was worried I might have call for an ambulance."

"How about my face?" he asked, reaching up and touching his swollen lip.

"Not any worse than it was before," she teased.

"Hey!" he exclaimed, but she gave a friendly laugh and hugged him again.

"Just kidding," she told him. "To tell you the truth, I've always thought you had a handsome face."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Thanks."

She stared at him for a moment, a smile lingering on her lips.

"Now this is the part where you return the compliment," she said.

"Why would I want to do that?" he asked.

"Scott!" she whined playfully.

"What I meant to say was, it's so obvious that you have a beautiful face that I didn't think it needed to be said."

"Good save. I was about to beat you up worse than those boys did," she told him with a smile. "Anyway, if you're worried about your pretty face being all mussed up, here." She grabbed her purse from the floor near the couch, reached into it, and withdrew her compact. She opened it to display the mirror, which she turned so Scott could see himself. Like his body, his face wasn't as bad as it could have been. He had a split lip of course, and a bruise just below his left eye, but other than that he was all right.

She eventually put the compact away, and the two cousins reclined on the couch next to each other. Anna even put an arm around Scott's shoulder, which felt really nice. For a while, neither of them said anything. They just rested there together, still a little frightened from their ordeal but feeling much better now that they were home and safe and together.

"Scott, can I ask you a favor?" said Anna.

"What kind of favor?"

"I know it's a little out of your way, but would you mind meeting me at the high school from now on after school? I don't want to walk home alone."

He smiled, feeling really good inside. Anna, his beautiful cousin, was asking him to be her knight in shining armor, her protector from all the evils of the world.

"Of course I will," he told her gallantly.

"Thanks," she said with a relieved sigh, and hugged him again.

Since it was getting close to dinner time, Anna excused herself and headed into the kitchen. Their parents had left them a frozen pizza in the freezer, which she stuck in the oven. Then she came back out to the living room. Normally she would have insisted that they eat at the dining room table, but because every movement was painful for Scott, she didn't want him to have to get up off the couch, so she went to the closet and brought out a card table that was stored there, which she set up in front of the couch. When the timer on the oven dinged, she got up, sliced the pizza, and brought out two plates for them.

During dinner they talked and joked like they hadn't in years. As if trying to make up for lost time, they talked incessantly about everything that came to mind. Anna, as usual, dominated the conversation, but Scott didn't mind. Ever since that first day, six years ago, when he had come to live with her, he loved the sound of her voice. Sometimes he couldn't get a word in edgewise, but that suited him just fine.

Anna cleared away the dishes after supper, then asked Scott if he wanted to play a game.

"As long as it's not a kid's game," he said. "I'm not a baby anymore." But he said it jokingly this time. Anna grabbed a deck of card from her room, and they played several hands of poker, blackjack, and gin rummy.

Then they started making up their own games, inventing new rules sometimes right in the middle of a hand, the sillier the rules the better. It brought back fond memories of when they were younger and used to come up with all kind of creative ideas for games to play.

They played the games just for fun, not even caring who won. Half the time one of them would throw the game, and the other half they would cheat in the most blatantly obvious way, with the other person pretending to turn a blind eye but then cheating in an even more obvious way on their next turn. They joked and laughed to the point of tears, although in Scott's case it might have been out of pain; every laugh shot stabs of pain through him. But right now, he didn't care. He was having more fun with Anna than he had in four years.

They were having so much fun together that they didn't realize they had stayed up way past their bedtime. They would have kept going right until morning, except that Anna happened to glance at the clock and notice that it was already past midnight. Scott didn't feel the least bit tired, but Anna insisted that he get a good night's sleep to help him heal. He grudgingly conceded the point, so they got up and headed down the hall to their respective bedrooms. They gave each other a good night hug, holding each other a little longer than usual, then they entered their rooms and closed their doors.

Normally Scott changed into a tee shirt and sweat pants for bed, but he was too sore to do much more than just unfasten his jeans and drop them to the floor, leaving him in his boxer shorts. Somehow he managed to remove his socks using only his feet; bending down at this point was out of the question.

He had just settled into bed when he heard a knock at the door. Anna opened it and peeked in. She had already changed into an oversize tee shirt that she wore as a nightshirt, her usual attire for sleeping in. He couldn't help but notice and admire her smooth, bare legs. She had always been fit and slender, with a beautiful figure.

"Scott," said Anna. "Do you want to sleep in my bed tonight?"

"Why would I want to sleep in your bed?" he asked. "I'm not a baby anymore." Actually, he would have loved to sleep with her. He missed those times, seemingly long ago, before they had grown up, when the innocence of youth meant they could do things like that and get away with it. He understood now that a certain propriety had to be maintained, and that acceptable activities for children could be unacceptable as teenagers. He didn't want to sound too eager, though.

Anna smiled at him. "Okay, let me rephrase that," she said. "Is it okay if you sleep in my bed tonight? I'm still kind of shaken up over what happened today, and I need you to be with me. Please?"

How could he refuse her when she asked him so nicely. She was making it so easy for him. Maybe this was her way of trying to make up for how much they had grown apart over the years.

"Okay," he said. He threw off the covers and slipped his legs over the side of the bed. When he tried to stand, he winced again.

Anna came over and helped him to his feet. He probably could have managed by himself, but he wasn't about to pass up an opportunity to put his arm over her shoulders and have her arm around his waist, especially since he wore no shirt. There was something delightfully appealing about being this close to her with only the thin fabric of her nightshirt between them.

They moved down the hall to her own bedroom, where she helped him into her bed. He lay down, scooting over to give her plenty of room. With a smile on her face, she climbed into bed and lay next to him, then reached over and turned out the lights.

Scott stared up at the ceiling, not wanting to go to sleep, because the sooner he went to sleep, the sooner he would wake up, and the sooner they would have to get out of bed. Right now he just wanted to lie here next to his cousin, feeling the heat radiating from her body and just knowing that she was there with him.

"Scott," she whispered a few minutes later. "I wanted to thank you again for coming to my rescue today."

"You're welcome," he mumbled.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"If you had known how it would turn out, would you still have done it?"

"Of course," he replied immediately.

"That's what I thought," she smiled. They closed their eyes again, and this time the comfort and tranquility of lying together overwhelmed them in peaceful sleepiness, and they soon dropped off to sleep.

Scott awoke in the morning to a wonderful, soft, and warm feeling. It was a pleasant sensation, unusual and yet somehow familiar, like a forgotten memory suddenly returning to mind. He lay there in a contented haze of drowsiness, half awake yet not moving for fear that the sensation came from a dream that would vanish at the slightest interruption. Then something else stirred around him, and he opened his eyes to discover that the feeling came from the real world after all.

He lay beside his cousin Anna, his head on her chest tucked neatly under her chin. One of her arms was wrapped around him, holding him tenderly to her. His hand grasped her shoulder, and he realized that the two of them lay in exactly the same position as the first time he slept in her bed. He remembered it so well; of all the memories of his entire life, perhaps that was the strongest.

The pain had mostly subsided; he still felt a tightness and dull ache that reminded him of his bruises, but it wasn't enough to bother him. Besides, the feeling of his beautiful cousin lying there in his arms more than made up for any pain that might still linger.

She yawned, and Scott lifted his head to see if she was awake. He found her gazing into his eyes with a sleepy yet happy look.

"Good morning," she said with a smile.

"Hi," he replied.

"How did you sleep?"

"Surprisingly good. Thanks for letting me sleep in your bed last night."

"Thanks for accepting," she grinned.

Scott rolled off of her, and lay there beside her for a moment. Anna turned toward him, propping her head up on her hand and just watching him. For a minute or two neither of them said anything, nor did they need to. It was enough just to be near each other like this.

Anna eventually broke the silence. "You know," she said, "I think this is the first time we slept together since we were kids. I miss those days."

"So why did you kick me out of your bed then?" he asked, fortunately keeping it from sounding bitter.

She sighed. "I guess I just felt kind of embarrassed about it. I mean, I was twelve years old. Not much younger than you are now. Wouldn't you feel a little strange if you had a kid sister or younger cousin who slept in your bed all the time? Even one you loved very much."

"I suppose you're right. I just... well, at the time I didn't understand it."

"I know. I tried to explain, but..."

"I didn't make it easy for you."

"No you didn't," she said, with a teasing smile.

"I'm really sorry about that, Anna. I was angry at you, so I said and did some things I'm not proud of. I hate how much we've grown apart these past few years, but it's not fair to blame you, because it wasn't your fault. It was mine."

"It's okay, Scott," said Anna. "I think we both overreacted a little. I'll tell you a secret. The first night you slept in your own room, I cried myself to sleep."

"Really?" he asked, astonished.

"Really."

"Well, I guess there's no harm in telling you that I did too."

She laughed. "Maybe we were always destined to end up in bed together again," she said.

Scott said nothing. He understood that the rules were different for them now, that there were complications with the two of them old enough to understand about sex, but he wished he could just sleep in the same bed with her from now on.

"That was a joke," she explained.

"I know. I just wish that things could be different."

"Me too," she sighed. "I miss those days when we spent all our time together, just playing with each other. Now there are so many complications, but how many of those did we fabricate ourselves? We've put up so many walls, but can't we start tearing them down? Do you think we can ever go back?"

"No," said Scott, and Anna stared at him. "We can never go back," he told her. "But we can go forward. Things will never be the same as they were before, but that doesn't mean they have to be worse. I think with a little effort, we can make them even better."

She let a grin spread onto her face. "I like the way your mind thinks," she said. "And this time, let's not let anything get in our way. We may not be able to sleep together on a permanent basis, but we can have as much fun as we want during the day."

She fell silent then, just watching him and smiling at him. Scott smiled back, just happy to be here, so close to her. Without thinking, he reached out and brushed away a strand of hair that had fallen across her face. He let his hand linger there, and suddenly he found himself cupping her cheek. Anna stiffened up for a moment in surprise at the gesture, then let herself relax. She even closed her eyes and smiled.

After a few seconds, he removed his hand, and she opened her eyes again, gazing into his own. She was so beautiful. Even more beautiful at sixteen than she had been at ten, and considering how much he had adored and worshipped and idolized her back then, that was saying a lot.

Then something happened that changed everything between them. Anna moved in toward him, lowering her head with pursed lips. Scott realized what she was about to do, and his heart jumped in his chest.

From the instant their lips touched, he knew that everything would be all right. Whatever their past, whatever rifts that had come between them, in one moment they had crossed that gulf and were joined together not just as they had been once upon a time, but even more than ever before. In their inexperience, the kiss was a bit awkward physically, but emotionally it was perfection itself. Anna and Scott had finally realized their destiny.

When she drew back, he stared at her in surprise. "Anna," he breathed, overwhelmed by what was happening.

"It's okay, isn't it?" she asked. "I mean, you do love me?"

She was opening up her heart to him, and he realized that he could do nothing less. Now was the time to be truthful, to let her know exactly how he felt. He realized that the past four years had been leading up to this one moment, the culmination of all his dreams and aspirations, and the time for silly games was over.

"Anna, I've been in love with you since we first met," he told her. "All I've ever wanted is to be near you, to spend time with you, to be your best friend. Tell me you love me the way I love you, and my happiness will be complete."

"I do love you," she insisted. "I don't know if it's the way you love me, but I do know that it's more than as a cousin. It's even more than as a sister. I think... I think I'm in love with you too."

"Then you've already given me everything I've ever hoped for," he smiled. "I'm embarrassed to admit this, but I've been so wrapped up in wanting you to fall in love with me that I never really thought beyond this moment. Now that I know how you feel, I don't know what the next step is. I love you, but I'm not sure if I want... um..."

"It's what *I* want," she said.

Scott nodded and smiled at her, and suddenly everything was clear once more.

"Then it's what I want too," said Scott.

She leaned in and kissed him again, and this time there was no hesitation by either of them. There was no more doubt as to their feelings for one another, no uncertainty or fear or secrets.

"Make love to me, Scott," Anna whispered as soon as she drew back from the kiss. Scott nodded. The two of them sat up, and he noticed that he felt only the mildest ache from the motion; apparently the good night's sleep had done wonders for the healing of his body. It didn't matter; even excruciating pain could not possibly diminish his happiness right now.

He reached for the bottom of Anna's nightshirt. She helped him by raising her arms, and a moment later he had it off her. He stared in delight at her beautiful body, covered now only in her bra and panties. It wasn't the first time he had seen her similarly undressed. Last summer she had worn a bikini on a trip to the beach, and he had even caught a couple of glimpses of her through her half-closed bedroom door as she was changing, not that he had been spying of course. He would never disrespect or objectify Anna like that. But now that he had the chance to take in a good long look at her body, he found the sight thrilling, especially with the anticipation of what lay ahead.

He reached out and drew her to him, hugging her tightly. Even during these past years when he had sought to prove his love to her, he had never dreamed that he would one day get to touch her like this. It was far beyond his aspirations even to imagine it. And yet here he was, holding her soft, warm body against his own.

"Anna, I love you," he whispered.

"I love you too," she replied.

It was enough to just hold her like that, but he wanted more. So as he hugged her, he began fumbling with the clasp of her bra behind her back. He made sure to let his fingers brush against her skin in the process, so that she would know exactly what he was doing and have the opportunity to stop him if she didn't like it. But she continued to embrace him as he unclasped the bra.

When he drew back, he took the straps with him, pulling it forward. Anna smiled at him as she lowered her arms and let it slip off of her chest.

"Oh my god," he breathed as he gazed upon her bare chest for the first time. His heart pounded in his chest in excitement at the sight of her perfect breasts. She still had room to grow, but she already had a magnificent figure. Her breasts were just the right size, in his opinion, large enough to be a handful but small enough to be perky. Capped by perfectly round and well-defined nipples, they were the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

"Can I... can I touch them?" he asked, and she nodded, still smiling. Scott reached out and slipped his hands onto her breasts, amazed at how soft and delightful they felt. He ran his hands all over them, massaging them gently. Anna closed her eyes and sighed in pleasure.

After a few minutes of toying with her, he removed his hands and leaned in to kiss her again on the lips. As he did so, he held her to him and gently lowered her to the bed. She willingly lay back, and as he pressed his chest to hers, he realized that her heart was pounding every bit as much as his.

"Are you nervous?" he asked.

"A little," she said, but kept that smile on her lips. "I think I should tell you that I'm still a virgin."

"So am I," he confessed.

"Good," she smiled. "I'm glad that this is the first time for both of us."

"So what about other boys?" he asked. "Haven't you ever wanted to be with one of them?"

"A little. But the truth is, every time I thought about giving myself to one of them, it kind of bothered me."

"Bothered you?"

"I'll be honest, Scott. From the time we were kids, I felt that you're the only boy I could ever sleep with. After you and I slept together for so long, I could never let anyone else into my bed."

"I feel exactly the same way about you," he told her, then gave her another kiss.

He let his hand wander down her body once more, but this time he let them stray to her hips, caressing her gently there. He gazed into her eyes for permission to continue, and she sensed his question and nodded. Scott sat up and took the waistband of her panties in his fingers, pulling them downward. He grinned in excitement and delight as the last hidden treasure came into view. She had a healthy growth of hair down there, above a beautiful set of lips that looked so inviting. He trembled in anticipation of plunging into their depths, feeling her warm body wrapped around him.

He finished removing her panties, tossing them on the floor. Then he lay down to allow her to do the same to him. There was no hiding the tent in his shorts, and she grinned as she stared at it. Then she reached out and gave him a squeeze, causing him to groan in pleasure. She giggled at his reaction, then reached for the waistband.

A moment later he found himself lying naked beside her, completely exposed to the eyes of his cousin. She stared at his member, hard as a rock and lying flat against his stomach.

"Can I... um...?" she asked, and Scott nodded. She reached out and placed her hand on it, and he sighed from the contact. Taking that as a sign to continue, she wrapped her hand around it, lifting it so that it pointed straight up.

"Wow," she breathed. "I can't believe I'm finally doing this." She gave it a couple of slow strokes, getting used to the feel of it in her hand.

"You don't mind if I do the same thing, do you?" he asked. In response, Anna lay down beside him and spread her legs. Scott reached out and let his fingers run over her gorgeous, pink slit.

"Oh god, that feels good!" she gasped, closing her eyes. "Keep doing that."

He continued to rub her, feeling dampness on his fingers. He already knew intellectually that that meant she was getting aroused, but he had never experienced this before, and the thought that he was doing it to her thrilled him beyond belief. He was actually sexually stimulating his cousin, and she liked it!

His confidence growing, he rolled over onto his side facing her. As he rubbed her between the legs, he leaned down and kissed her nearest breast.

"Oh!" she exclaimed in delight from the unexpected sensation. A tremor ran through her body, and he knew that she enjoyed this too. He continued to kiss her all over, and even stuck out his tongue to run it across her nipple. She gasped at the contact, so he did it again. Then he got bold and sucked it into his mouth, causing her to make a little mewling sound as the pleasure washed over her.

He had to admit, he was really enjoying himself. He had often wondered what it would be like the first time, but now that it was happening he found his body just reacting naturally, without any thought on his part. Perhaps he might have been a little more self-conscious with anyone else, but this was Anna, the girl he had played with as a child, the girl he had slept with countless times, his cousin who loved him every bit as much as he loved her. It was simply meant to be.

That didn't mean he wasn't a little nervous. He really did want to please her. He wanted this to be such a special moment between them that she would want to do it again and again. But he found that he didn't need to do anything beyond letting his instincts take over, instincts passed down through countless generations from the beginning of the world. He knew what to do; he just had to trust himself.

"Scott, I'm ready," she whispered, and he nodded. He rolled over on top of her, and she spread her legs even wider to accommodate her. He placed the tip of his cock at her entrance, feeling it pressing up against her barrier. Anna sucked in her breath, and another tremor ran through her body.

"Just do it," she told him with a smile. "Do it quickly."

Scott nodded. He gave one quick thrust, and burst through. Anna gasped and bit her bottom lip, and he could see tears in the corner of her eyes.

"Are you all right?" he asked, concerned.

"It's okay," she told him. "It hurts just a little. Do you mind waiting for a minute?"

"Of course not," he smiled, kissing her on the lips. This time it was less passionate and more tender, because he knew she was in pain and needed to be comforted. From the smile on her face as he kissed her, he could tell that it was just what she needed.

After a few minutes, he drew back again and stared down into her lovely eyes.

"God, you're beautiful!" he whispered.

"Thanks," she blushed. "I think I'm ready to continue now."

"Okay," he said. He lowered his hips, pressing even deeper into her. Anna took a deep breath, wincing just a little with the first thrust. He drew back, then pressed in again, and this time she moaned.

"Oh my god!" she exclaimed. "I can't believe how good that feels!"

Scott couldn't agree more. He continued to thrust into her, going deeper each time until he managed to fit the entire thing in. He loved the feeling of her hot, moist body wrapped around him. He let his instincts take over now, letting his body do as it willed. There was no room for conscious thought anymore, just primal urges tempered only by his love for his cousin.

He could feel her body reacting in a similar fashion beneath him. Her legs alternated between spreading wide for him and clamping tightly to his hips. Her own hips squirmed and wriggled in a rhythmic pulse, rising up to meet him as he thrust into her. He could hear moans echoing off the walls, but couldn't tell whether they came from Anna or himself. Probably both.

When he felt the pleasure mounting, he knew it wouldn't be long. In a moment he would enjoy the ultimate experience with his cousin, the culmination of everything they could give each other. He let it happen, crying

out with intense pleasure and joy as the feeling overcame him, lifting him to heights he had never dreamed were possible. Through the haze of his ecstasy, he could hear Anna crying out in similar orgasmic bliss, and in that moment he loved her far more deeply than ever before.

When the pleasure peaked and began to drop off, his love for her remained at that same high level, and he hugged her body to his own, knowing that she loved him just as much. He rested there for a minute, then rolled off of her, exhausted yet happier than he had ever been in his life.

"Wow, Anna!" he said, still panting from the exertion. "That was the most wonderful feeling I've ever felt. I'm so glad it was with you, because it would have felt wrong otherwise."

"I feel the same way, Scott. I love you so much, and I can honestly say that this was the best experience of my entire life."

"Good, because I really wanted to make it special for you. I was kind of nervous that I wouldn't do a good job."

"You did just fine, although if you ever feel you need to practice..." she said with a grin.

"I think I'll take you up on that offer."

"You know, you may be only thirteen, but I think you've proven one thing beyond a doubt."

"What's that?" he asked.

"You're definitely not a baby anymore."

THE END

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