



CHAPTER 1

GRANDMA RUTH DOESN'T GO TO funerals.

It's not that she gets squeamish or weak-kneed at the sight of a friend or relative laid out. She takes an avid interest in every detail of the deceased, from the tie they put on third cousin twice removed Billy Ray to how Harriet Tilson's hair turned out. Nor is it that she lacks respect for those who have gone on to glory before her. Grandma Ruth is the kind of person to whom you do *not* criticize your mother. And it's not that she prefers to stay home and watch *Jeopardy!* instead. Grandma Ruth is bedridden—has been for the past three years. Much as she would like to, Grandma Ruth isn't going anywhere.

I am Sarah Elizabeth, Grandma Ruth's favorite granddaughter. Being her favorite is a dubious honor. It means I'm her favorite to go to the store to buy birthday cards, visit her shut-in friends, and, you guessed it, attend funerals in her place.

Looking back, I realize I've been in training for funeral duty for quite a while. When I was ten, she taught me how to make macaroni and cheese from scratch to take by the home of the bereaved for the reception. By the time I was eleven, I had learned to write a tasteful and heartfelt condolence note. I attended my first funeral at twelve. (Grandma Ruth wanted to take me sooner, but Mama put her foot down and prevailed for once.) Now that I'm twenty-four, Grandma Ruth considers me not only fully qualified but socially obligated to take her place since she can't get out anymore. I don't think I've missed a single funeral in Raeburne's Ferry, Georgia, since she took to her bed.

That's why I was at Preston B. Harrington II's funeral on that unsettling January morning. I would not have gone if Grandma Ruth hadn't insisted. In fact, I tried to get out of it.

"Grandma, P. B. Harrington was a mean old buzzard. Why, one time when I was visiting, he threw a plate at his wife because his toast was the teensiest bit burnt around the edges. Mrs. Harrington just went back to the kitchen and made him another piece of toast. Now, *her* funeral you won't have to ask me twice about, but I don't want to take off work to pay my respects to the likes of P. B. Harrington."

I said this while examining the tips of my new black peep-toe high-heeled pumps. When I dragged my eyes away from my shoes to look at my grandmother, I wished I hadn't said anything at all.

Her voice was quiet, but her blue eyes snapped, crackled, and popped.

"Sarah Elizabeth McCready, this funeral *is* for Mrs. Harrington. She loved him, you know, and he wasn't always a plate thrower. Don't go telling that story around either," she said. "You know what they say about gossip."

"I know, I know, 'He who spits in the air . . .'" I sighed and just barely suppressed an eye roll.

" . . . gets it soonest in the face," she said.

"Yes, ma'am." Further protest was futile.

"And you'd better not wear those shoes to the funeral if you're trying to discourage Jeff Morris."



Even though I'd given in to Grandma Ruth about P. B. Harrington's funeral, I wasn't looking forward to asking for the time off from work. It was early January, and the pace at Crawford and Associates, Certified Public Accountants was picking up as we headed into tax season. Mr. Crawford, however, was delighted. Well, as delighted as anyone can appropriately be about a funeral.

"P. B. Harrington was a prominent citizen of Raeburne's Ferry in his day and a long-standing client of this firm. It is such a shame how

he went downhill those last few years.” Mr. Crawford shook his head sadly. “I know you’ll represent the firm well at the observances. Take the whole day, Miss McCready. We can hold down the fort here. Oh, and would you take care of ordering the floral tribute? Something tasteful and restrained. Just have it charged to the firm’s account. Have the card say . . .” He paused, his eyebrows drawn together as if he was puzzling over a particularly tangled account. “Well, I daresay you know what to put on it. Mary Ruth has given you enough practice over the years.”

“Yes, sir.” I headed back to my office before he could add anything else to my Harrington funeral to-do list. So far this included attending the viewing at the funeral home, making Grandma Ruth’s signature macaroni and cheese casserole, dropping it off at the Harrington homeplace before the service, attending the funeral, interment, and reception, and now ordering flowers on behalf of the firm. Oh, and I’d have to remember to sign the guest book on behalf of Crawford and Associates as well as the McCready family.

I walked across the street to the Daisy Chain during my lunch hour to get a head start on the funeral list.

“I need to order flowers for the Harrington funeral,” I told Abby Claire Harper, who looked something like a flower herself. Her spiky blond hair and warm brown eyes always made me think of sunflowers. The ink was barely dry on her horticulture degree from nearby Horton-Holgate University, but Abby Claire was already making her mark. When she started at the Daisy Chain, there was talk that she was wasting her degree. There was talk about her hair, too, as nobody ever walked into the Blue Moon Beauty Emporium and asked for hair that stuck up like that. But the talk died down quickly since her arrangements were breathtaking additions to happy occasions and always struck just the right note at funerals. It was clear that Abby Claire Harper had found her calling.

Abby Claire gave me a quizzical look. “Your grandmother doesn’t usually send flowers.”

“Yeah, she just sends me,” I said. “This order is from Crawford and

Associates. Mr. Crawford says to put it on the firm's account. He said he wants 'something tasteful and restrained.' I imagine the restrained part refers to the cost."

"That means no roses," Abby Claire said. "The service is over at St. Alban's, isn't it?"

I nodded. "It's on Thursday morning at eleven."

"I love doing flowers for that church. The rich colors in those stained-glass windows give a lot of scope for the imagination. You'll want a card to go with that," she said. "This one will go with what I have in mind." Instead of one of the umpteen variations of white lilies that characterize the cards that usually accompany funeral flowers, this one had a classy black art deco border.

"Tasteful," I said as I carefully wrote *With Deepest Sympathy, Crawford and Associates* on the card and handed it back to Abby Claire.

She clipped it to the order sheet. "He'll be missed. The boss tells me he had standing orders for Valentine's Day, his wife's birthday, and their anniversary. I was going to get to do the Valentine's one this year. They were married over sixty years, so I planned on making it really romantic. And now Mrs. Harrington won't be getting flowers from him anymore," Abby Claire said with a sigh.

I was tempted to tell Abby Claire how that "romantic" man threw plates at his wife when she burned his toast, but I resisted. Considering how many people would be ordering funeral flowers over the next few days, it would be sure to get back to Grandma Ruth. I'm never in the mood for the gossip lecture.



I worked late the night before the funeral so as not to get too far behind from taking a day off. About an hour after the office emptied, I heard the cleaning crew arrive. I worked steadily to the sound of vacuum cleaners and the emptying of wastebaskets. Along about seven, Malcolm Hartwell, owner of Hartwell Office Cleaning, stuck his head around my door. He's been in business for years and years, but he still

works alongside his crew at a different office each night to make sure his people are maintaining the company's standards. He has standards for his clients, too. He's been known to threaten to drop clients who make extra work for his people. Mr. Crawford has fielded only one such complaint. It was about the men's restroom here at the firm. The male CPAs took to practicing basketball shots with wadded-up paper towels in there—and couldn't be bothered to pick up the missed shots around the base of the trash can. Apparently, there had been quite a few missed shots. Mr. Crawford tried to take a "boys will be boys" attitude, but Mr. Hartwell was not amused. Mr. Crawford had to threaten to make the guys clean their own restroom, which brought basketball practice to an abrupt end.

"Still here, Sarah?" Mr. Hartwell shook his head as he came in to empty my wastebasket. "It's late. You should be getting on home."

I shook my head back at him. "I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep." I want to finish this account, and then I have to stop by Morris's. I promised Grandma Ruth I'd go to P. B. Harrington's viewing."

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.' Robert Frost sure knew what my evenings are like. Minus the snow, of course," he said with a grin. "I remember Mr. Harrington in his heyday. He convinced the partners to hire me way back when I first started the company, when I cleaned all the offices myself. He was a hard worker, just like you. Plenty of times I told him to go home to that lovely wife of his, but he would still be hard at it when I was finished. Not many at that firm worked as hard as he did. Shame how he went downhill toward the end."

I was tempted to say, "You don't know the half of it," but held my tongue to keep my promise to Grandma Ruth. Instead, I lifted my feet so Mr. Hartwell could vacuum under my desk.

At seven thirty I shut down my computer and headed over to the viewing at the Morris Funeral Home. As I waited for my turn to view the deceased, I took note of the floral arrangements, especially the one from Crawford and Associates. It was, indeed, tasteful and restrained,

but only in appearance. The arrangement of white gardenias and blue forget-me-nots may have looked demure, but the heady fragrance of the gardenias filled the area around the casket. My grandmother would also want to know who had sent what.

When I turned my attention to Mr. Harrington, I had to admit he looked pretty good. The face that had been furrowed with deep lines of grumpiness was smooth and peaceful. Even his sharp, straight nose seemed softened somehow. You may think it morbid that I studied a dead man's face so closely, but from long experience, I knew that my grandmother would not be satisfied with, "He looked pretty good, Grandma." She would want the color of his suit, a description of his tie, and whether or not he was being buried with his wedding ring on. (He was.)

After taking inventory of Mr. Harrington, I went in search of his widow. Instead, I found Jeff Morris hovering nearby.

"Anything I can do for you, Sarah?" he asked in a low, somber, yet eager voice. "Anything at all?"

"I'm looking for Mrs. Harrington," I told him.

"She has gone home. She is taking this very hard," he said in the tone of a professional undertaker. His puppy-brown eyes drooped sadly. All the Morris men have those droopy eyes. I wondered whether that trait had lent itself to their success as funeral directors or had developed over three generations of sympathizing with the bereaved. Either way, it was depressing.

"Thank you, Mr. Morris. I will ask a family member to convey my grandmother's condolences."

"You can call me Jeff," I heard him murmur wistfully as I headed across the room.



I went straight to Grandma Ruth's room when I got home. It's everyone's first stop when they come to the house, to say hey and tell her all the news. Before she was bedridden, we'd go to the kitchen to fill her

in while she plied us with cookies. She makes sure my mother keeps her well supplied with them so she can continue to elicit that same Pavlovian response.

"So?" Grandma Ruth prompted as I settled myself into the wing chair by her bed. I reached for one of the oatmeal raisin cookies piled on a plate on the bedside table. It had been a long time since lunch.

"He looked pretty good, Grandma," I said, just to tease.

She snatched the cookie out of my hand.

"All right, all right," I said, as she held it out of my reach. "He did look good, though. He had on a navy blue suit, a pale blue shirt, and a blue-and-burgundy paisley tie. He didn't look mean or grumpy at all. He looked peaceful and . . . and, well, satisfied." The thought had not occurred to me until that moment, but it was true. Was it simply the skill of the mortician, or had that crotchety old man finished his life completely content with what he had accomplished? "And yes, he was wearing his wedding ring."

"I should say so." Grandma Ruth harrumphed as she gave me back my cookie. "There never was a man more married than P. B. Harrington. Now about Charlotte—Mrs. Harrington to you, young lady—how is she holding up?"

"I didn't see her. One of the undertakers said she's having a real hard time and went home early. I spoke to Mr. Bent instead." In Raeburne's Ferry we have our own way of telling the four generations of Preston Bentley Harringtons apart. It all started with William Bentley, Esquire, the founder of Bentley, Harrington, Harrington, and Nidden. His daughter, Cordelia, married prominent local businessman, Preston Harrington. They named their firstborn son Preston, of course, after his father. Tradition is strong in Raeburne's Ferry, so his middle name had to be his mother's maiden name. The first Preston Bentley Harrington (Preston Senior, now deceased) grew up to be a lawyer and joined the firm. His son, Preston Bentley Harrington II, has always been "P. B." Then there's the third—but Preston Bentley Harrington III is quite a mouthful, so he goes by "Bent." (Of course, that's Mr. Bent to a young person like me.) The fourth and final Preston Bentley Harrington is simply "Preston."

My grandmother nodded. “I imagine she’s exhausted. He *was* a bit trying toward the end.”

A bit trying? I considered reminding her of the plate-throwing incident but decided against it. As I said before, I’m not fond of the gossip lecture, especially since Grandma Ruth is so fond of it—gossip, I mean, *and* the lecture.

Mama appeared in the doorway. “Your supper’s on the table, Sarah. I hope you still have an appetite after those cookies.”

Back in the kitchen, I tucked into pot roast that nearly melted in my mouth.

“Plan on sleeping in tomorrow morning,” my mother said. “You look worn out.”

“I can’t,” I said around a mouthful of roasted carrot. “I still have to make the macaroni and cheese casserole.”

“I thought you could use a break from putting together that everlasting casserole,” she said as she opened the refrigerator. The shallow casserole dish that our family always uses for that ultimate Southern comfort food rested on the middle shelf, covered in foil. “All you have to do is bake it in the morning before you go.”

“Thank you, Mama.”

My mother is a genuinely kind and compassionate person. She had to be, to survive teaching eighth grade math for over twenty years. She often stayed late to tutor, since a lot of kids went into a tizzy when the x ’s and y ’s of algebra showed up right after they’d finally figured out numbers. About the time Mama couldn’t stand it anymore, Grandma Ruth fell and broke her hip. I was home from college for the summer, and the two of us took care of her. By the beginning of August, it became clear that my grandmother would not be able to get around on her own anytime in the near future or maybe even anytime at all.

Mama retired from teaching, and she and Daddy moved from the bungalow where I had grown up to the McCready homeplace so they could take care of Grandma Ruth. The house was built by one of my daddy’s ancestors back in the early 1800s and has been occupied by McCreadys ever since. When I came home for Christmas break, I

found my room exactly as I'd left it, except it was in a different house. It wasn't that much of an adjustment when all was said and done. I'd spent a lot of my childhood at the homeplace, heading there after school while Mama talked eighth graders down from the ledge over algebra.

The thing that *did* take some getting used to was Grandma Ruth confined to bed. Before her fall, my grandmother was an elderly version of the Energizer Bunny. If she wasn't on her way to choir practice, getting her hair done, or attending a funeral, she was playing bingo, making quilts, or getting in nine holes at the country club with her friends. And the kitchen always smelled of fresh-baked cookies because she needed a steady supply to keep us all talking.

After her fateful fall, she was ensconced in a hospital bed in the front parlor with a window to look out of and a phone on the table by her bed. Before you start to feel sorry for her, though, may I remind you of the conversation in which I was railroaded into attending P. B. Harrington's funeral? Being bedridden simply meant she channeled her considerable energy into staying connected to the life of Raeburne's Ferry by any means necessary. I was so used to saying "Yes, Grandma" from the time I could talk that when I came home from college to work at Crawford and Associates, she managed to take over my life before I even realized what was happening.

I hear what you're saying to yourself. "She's a grown woman, a college graduate. Why doesn't she just say no?" Well, I dare you to come by the house when Mary Ruth McCready really wants something done and see how *you* do. Right. I'll save you a seat at the funeral she makes you attend.



CHAPTER 2

THE DAY OF PRESTON B. Harrington II's funeral dawned cold and bright. I dressed carefully in my winter funeral outfit, a charcoal-gray sweater dress with a scoop neck that shows off the pearls my daddy gave me when I graduated from high school. I went down the back stairs so as to avoid a critique of my attire. My grandmother doesn't approve of the way that sweater dress clings "in all the wrong places," as she puts it. I think it looks great on me. I don't see why I should have to look frumpy to show respect to the dead. I think it makes it all the more depressing for the bereaved to have that sea of black dowdiness stretching out behind them in the church.

I baked the macaroni and cheese, tucked it into Mama's thermal casserole keeper, and headed over to the Harringtons'. Patti Sue Seiden, another funeral aficionado, met me at the kitchen door and relieved me of my burden.

"So thoughtful," Patti Sue murmured as she patted the casserole keeper dolefully. "There's no more room in the ovens." Over her shoulder, I could see that the counters were filling up fast with food for the reception.

"How's Mrs. Harrington doing?" I asked.

Patti Sue's voice dropped to a mournful whisper. "It's pitiful, Sarah Elizabeth, just pitiful. She wouldn't eat a bite this morning, no matter how we coaxed her."

"Well, I'm sure it's a comfort to her to have you taking care of the food." The wind was whipping up as I stood at the door. I hunched my shoulders against the cold. "I'd better be going. You'd better head out soon, too, if you want a good seat."

"I'll be along directly," Patti Sue said. "The Eifflebachers are saving me a seat toward the front."



The church was filling up by the time I got there, fifteen minutes early. I never have to worry about getting a good seat. My grandmother always sat in the seventh pew from the front on the left-hand side of the church—on the aisle, of course. The Episcopalians of St. Alban's are an orderly people. They like to have a place for everything and everything in its place. This extends to people as well. Once you sit down in a service at St. Alban's, they expect you to sit in that spot every time you come to church. It didn't matter that Grandma Ruth couldn't attend church anymore. Since I was her proxy, her seat was reserved for me, defended by Mrs. Vivian Morgan's fur coat draped across the back of the pew in case some non-Episcopalian (bless his heart) took it into his head to sit there.

"Thank you," I whispered to Mrs. Morgan as I took my seat. Mrs. Morgan just nodded in that regal way of hers.

I settled back into the sun-warmed pew. My grandmother had known what she was doing when she chose her seat in church. I had a clear view of the pulpit, the altar, the casket, and the pew where the family of the deceased would sit. I breathed in the faint scent of incense that always lingered in the air of St. Alban's. When I was little, I thought it was what angels smelled like.

The church was packed by the time the family came up the center aisle to fill the front pew. Mrs. Harrington's grandson, Preston, escorted the widow to her seat. The top of her black pillbox hat barely reached his shoulder. The rest of her ensemble was equally stylish—trim black suit, gray silk blouse, pearls at her throat, and low-heeled pumps. As she passed my pew, I saw that her eyes were full and ready to spill her sadness down her face. She clutched a lace-trimmed handkerchief that was already limp with tears. I wondered how she would manage to make it through the service.

Not well, as it turned out. She sobbed and boohooed through the music, the Scripture readings, and especially the eulogy and remarks from friends and family. Every reference to what a fine, upstanding man of character and integrity P. B. Harrington had been brought fresh torrents of tears from the front pew. At long last, Father David and the deacons came around the altar rail and took their places at the casket for the Commendation.

"Into your hands," Father David intoned, "O merciful Savior, we commend your servant, Preston. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive him into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light. Amen."

P. B. Harrington would need that mercy and redemption, I reflected as Father David removed the pall and the pallbearers came forward. Surely God takes a dim view of heaving plates at wives over burnt toast. We all stood as the casket passed down the center aisle, followed by the immediate family. As Mrs. Harrington passed, almost sagging against her grandson, I heard her heave a shuddering sigh and say, "Oh, if only I knew! If only I knew!"

If only she knew what? If she'd see him again in heaven? I had no doubt Mrs. Harrington would be welcomed at the pearly gates, if for no other reason but the saintly way she made toast, but you had to wonder about the old grouch who threw it at her.



I didn't have far to go for the interment. St. Alban's has its own churchyard situated between the church and the rectory. The Harrington family plot is under a huge oak tree. We gathered, shivering, under its spreading limbs to which a few lifeless brown leaves still clung, fluttering above us in the breeze. I looked out over the churchyard. The sky had turned cloudy during the funeral service. The churchyard looked and felt dismal, with forlorn wreaths that

relatives had placed at Christmas still propped against some of the weathered headstones.

"Plastic floral tributes." Mrs. Morgan sniffed her disapproval to Mrs. Fogarty, who was standing next to her. "I keep telling Father he shouldn't allow it, but he lets people bring anything they want, no matter how tacky it looks."

She said it loud enough for Father David to hear. He looked up from his prayer book at her, his gray eyes steady and unperturbed. When she looked away, he began the committal service.

"In the midst of life, we are in death . . ."

As the familiar words rolled past me, I took note of the mourners. Grandma Ruth would want to know who had attended the burial and who had bugged out after the service in the church. Some folks never attend the burial, even if it's in the churchyard and doesn't involve a procession to the Magnolia Cemetery on the outskirts of town. If it were up to me, I'd skip it, too. I've never liked the sound of that handful of dirt hitting the coffin lid. It is not, however, up to me. Grandma Ruth had always been fully present for every part of the funeral rite, so I had to be, too.

I spent a good portion of the graveside service sidling away from Jeff Morris, the third-generation funeral director who had the mistaken idea that I was attracted to him. (I simply had to wear those peep-toe pumps. They were too new and too cute.) Grandma Ruth often spoke to me of what a nice young man he was, with a good, steady job.

"I can find my own boyfriend should I feel the need," I would tell her through clenched teeth.

"Believe me, you need one," she'd say. "Better yet, a husband. And do you think love will walk up and tap you on the shoulder while you bury yourself in that career of yours? No, it's going to pass you by because you're not paying attention . . ." and so on and so forth.

Jeff caught up with me at the benediction.

"Remember, dear friends," Father David intoned, "how short life is and how little time we have to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us. So be quick to love and make haste to be kind and may the

blessing of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be upon you now and forever.”

The “amen” was punctuated by a tap on my shoulder. It was Jeff. He shot his cuffs (French, with somber black onyx cuff links), cleared his throat, and offered me a ride to the reception.

“You can ride up front with me in the limousine,” he said eagerly. Did he think he was gladdening my heart?

“Uh, well, I’m going to the reception, but I don’t need a ride,” I stammered. Good grief, if I ever did go out with him, would he pick me up in a Morris Funeral Home limousine? It’d be better to meet him at the restaurant or movies or whatever. *Wait. What?* I mentally slapped myself. *Get a grip. You are not going out with Jeff Morris, no matter what Grandma Ruth says.*

His eyes drooped a tad more as he looked down and away. “Just thought I’d ask,” he mumbled, then hurried off to help the bereaved into the waiting limousine. I immediately felt guilty. “Make haste to be kind,” Father David had said. But was it really kind to encourage him when I wasn’t interested?

In high school, I was a sucker for boys who gave me that same pleading look, but I was never impressed with the ensuing relationships. I decided I was done going out with guys because I felt sorry for them. Then Jake Halloran—the one guy who wasn’t a pity date, the one I thought was the answer to my prayers, who swept me off my feet and seemed perfect in every way—turned out to be the biggest loser of them all. Hopes and dreams and trust had died, with the dirt of Jake’s betrayal heaped on top like the soil that would soon fill in P. B.’s grave. No, I wasn’t in any hurry to give the time of day to any man and certainly not hangdog Jeff Morris who wanted to squire me around in the next thing to a hearse.



There was quite a spread at the Harrington homeplace. Friends, neighbors, and church ladies had gone all out. The long table in the formal dining room was spread with a white damask cloth. The family

silverware, polished to perfection, was arrayed at one end in front of a stack of Haviland china luncheon plates. Everyone had brought their best funeral dishes for the occasion.

In addition to the McCready macaroni and cheese, there was a gracious plenty of chicken salad sandwiches, three plates of deviled eggs, one tomato aspic, a cheese and potato casserole that was disappearing fast, a generous platter of sliced ham, cheese straws, a basket of biscuits, and three potato salads, to name only a few of the dishes vying for space on the table.

The sideboard was laden with assorted desserts, including Patti Sue Seiden's Black Forest cake, four different kinds of pound cake, and a large bowl of banana pudding. I knew who had brought every single offering by their serving dishes. I don't know why any of us still bother to put a piece of masking tape with our names on the bottom of our platters, bowls, and casseroles.

A crowd had gathered at the far end of the dining room where a coffee urn and silver tea service were getting short shrift in favor of the wine also being served there. I filled my plate to a ladylike level and headed to the parlor to give Mrs. Harrington the condolences of the McCready family and Crawford and Associates.

She was seated on the couch, tears running down her face. Several of her friends were trying to comfort her.

"You were a good wife, Charlotte," said Mrs. Morgan. "You took good care of him right up to the end."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Fogarty, as tiny as Mrs. Morgan was tall. "You were patient and kind no matter what. No man could have asked for a better wife."

"I don't understand," Mrs. Harrington moaned. "I just don't understand."

"Goodness, Charlotte," Mrs. Morgan said, losing patience. "He was eighty-five years old and not in the best of health. Surely you weren't surprised."

"No." Mrs. Harrington sniffed into the tissue Mrs. Fogarty pressed into her hand. "I've known for weeks it was coming. I just wish I knew

what he meant. His last words to me, his very last words, were—" Her voice caught. I saw her fight to gain enough control to get the words out. At last, she sat up straighter, took a large swallow from the glass of chardonnay she held in her other hand, and said, "His last words were 'I loved you more than Millie.'" She gripped her glass so tightly I thought it might shatter. "Who's Millie? I never knew he loved anybody named Millie. I thought I was the only one he ever loved. How could he say something like that and then just up and die without explaining?"

How indeed, I thought. Sure, he'd said he loved her *more* than Millie, but to even mention another woman in his dying breath was just plain . . . well, I told you he was mean.