

# The First Love is the Deepest

*by scaranda*

Written in response to Pittwitch's 'Seven Deadly Sins' challenge. This one is Envy v Kindness. For Molly and Arthur school romance was all about what happened next; for Lucius and Narcissa it was more about what might have been.

## Chapter One

*Chapter 1 of 5*

Written in response to Pittwitch's 'Seven Deadly Sins' challenge. This one is Envy v Kindness. For Molly and Arthur school romance was all about what happened next; for Lucius and Narcissa it was more about what might have been.

It was the Slytherin-Gryffindor thing; it had to be, it couldn't possibly be anything else, Lucius mused to himself as he looked in the mirror with satisfaction, and the light from the single sconce caught the shimmering blond of his hair.

'You'll wear that thing out,' Snape observed dryly, as was his habit when he and Malfoy were alone.

'I put camomile in my shampoo,' Lucius remarked, ignoring Snape's little witticism, as was his habit. 'I think it brought out the colour of my hair quite nicely, don't you?'

'I put camomile in my tea,' Snape returned, dropping his head to the book he had been reading before Malfoy's preening had interrupted him. 'It think it brought me out in spots. Anyway, your hair doesn't have any colour.'

'I don't know why I talk to you,' Lucius snapped. 'What would you know about shampoo anyway?' he asked archly, glancing at Snape's undeniably lank locks.

'I don't know why you talk to me either... In fact, for a few moments I had rather hoped you were displaying the usual signs of centuries of enthusiastic inbreeding, and were talking to yourself.' He didn't bother to add that no one else was really disposed to listen to Malfoy's lunatic ravings, not for any longer than was necessary to ingratiate themselves to what they saw as his power. Power indeed, Severus snorted to himself, wondering why he was the only person able to see under the carefully lacquered façade to the insecure, somewhat lost boy underneath.

Lucius sighed in reluctant realisation that this wasn't going to be the first time in his life that he won a sparring match, however innocuous, with the younger Slytherin. 'I hope she'll say yes,' he said, changing the subject slightly, heaving another sigh; it was one that spoke of unrequited love.

'I suppose it depends on how much money you've offered her,' Severus replied. 'You are going to pay her, Lucius, aren't you? Only I'm not sure that it's altogether wise to rely on your good looks and personal charm.'

Malfoy flared his nostrils. 'And who are you taking?' he asked, smiling disarmingly, as though quite sure that Snape couldn't possibly have talked anyone into walking into the Yule Ball on his arm; there wasn't enough gold in Gringotts, let alone Snape's pockets.

'Alice Proudfoot.'

Lucius blinked several times. 'Alice-brains-for-breakfast-Proudfoot?'

'Yes,' Severus replied, feigning disinterest, pretending he hadn't been waiting for almost a week to deliver that little morsel of information, suppressing the almost

overwhelming urge to inform Lucius that he had renamed Alice, rather hopefully on his part, to Alice-balls-for-breakfast-Proudfoot.

'She's a tatty little Ravenclaw,' Lucius said, as though being a Ravenclaw were some type of socially unacceptable disease.

'And your little... or should I say large... goddess, is a Gryffindor, but I'm sure neither condition is infectious. Anyway, if you find she knocks you back and you're stuck for a date, I suspect Bella wouldn't mind a quick grope in the broom cupboard... She's got her eye on you.'

Lucius shied back, almost the way he did when the dreaded Bellatrix Black or her waspish sister went anywhere near him. 'Keep them away from me, Severus,' he snapped. 'Both of them.'

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Arthur counted the paltry few silver Sickles once again, just to make sure; then he rubbed the two Galleons on his robe to make them shine. He was very excited; he had never bought enchanted roses for a woman before, and the prospect of spending the rest of the term's cigarette money on them appealed to him as a fitting sacrifice. The woman he wanted was used to the better things in life, he thought importantly, and Arthur Weasley would have been quite content to starve for the rest of the term to make sure she had the very best.

'Do you think she'll say yes?' he asked the sixth-year boy who sat across the Library table from him, pretending to study a book on Lycanthropy.

'What? Who?' Remus Lupin asked vaguely.

Arthur was a bit sorry he had disturbed him; he looked awfully tired, almost grey and worn out, as he so often did. Perhaps he had been studying after all, he mused to himself in a puzzled sort of way. He couldn't remember studying Lycanthropy last year, but then again, Arthur could only think of his wonderful goddess, and of her saying, 'Yes, Arthur, I shall go to the ball with you.' 'Sorry,' he said. 'I was just wondering out loud if she would say yes.'

'You'll knock her flat,' Remus replied, a slow smile crossing his almost baby-like features as he moved along the bench to let Kingsley Shacklebolt sit down. 'That aftershave would knock a Hippogriff flat.'

'Too strong?' Arthur asked, flushing so furiously that his forehead seemed to blend in with his hair.

'No... I'm only teasing you,' Remus replied. 'Of course she'll say yes.'

'You don't think the Gryffindor-Slytherin thing will come into play, do you?' Arthur asked a bit more anxiously than he would have liked.

'With your perfect bloodlines?' Kingsley replied.

'Who are you taking anyway?' Arthur asked Remus, and immediately regretted it as Kingsley looked away, and Lupin shrugged non-committally, as though he had no one in particular in mind. Arthur took that to mean that the rumours he had heard whispered about Remus and Kingsley were true; ah well, he thought to himself, live and let live. He hoped he hadn't embarrassed anyone, but it didn't seem so.

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'What are you staring at, fat arse?' Narcissa Black asked from a few steps below her archrival, on the way from Potions class to the Great Hall for lunch. The positioning didn't please Narcissa; she would have preferred to look down on the redheaded cow more than metaphorically.

'Nothing,' Molly Prewett replied over her shoulder as she reached the top step. 'Absolutely nothing worth talking about.'

'You watch that mouth of yours, Prewett,' Bellatrix hissed as she came across the Entrance Hall to join her sister for lunch. 'One day it might get you what you deserve.'

Molly smiled back with all the sweetness of rapidly souring milk. 'It might just,' she said, licking her lips suggestively as she moved away. Severus Snape had passed her on the stairs, and she spotted him join Lucius Malfoy, and the two began to make their way towards the Great Hall; they were just in front of Kingsley Shacklebolt and Remus Lupin... and Arthur Weasley.

'Arthur,' Molly called, disappointed to notice that he had glanced across the Entrance Hall to where Narcissa and Bellatrix Black stood. Molly smirked to herself; if all she had heard whispered about the skinny little blonde Ice Queen were true, she wouldn't keep anyone warm on a cold day, not even someone as naturally warm and cuddly as Arthur Weasley definitely was. She glanced at Narcissa, noticing that she was watching Lucius Malfoy with what appeared to be longing. Molly snorted to herself in derision; the big silver-haired Slytherin would split her like a chicken and spit out the bones, there wasn't enough of the flat-chested Narcissa to satisfy any red-blooded male. Molly turned again to watch Arthur; he was now almost salivating over the tiny blonde. She sighed resignedly; it had the effect of thrusting her already handsomely ample bosom to even more generous proportions than any seventeen-year-old girl had a right to expect. Like all men, Arthur would just have to be told a few home truths, she supposed. Once he understood them, Molly was quite sure there would be nothing to block her way... not once he understood.

'Lucius,' Narcissa called, but Lucius had already turned away, and was muttering to Snape, who didn't appear to be listening to a word he said. She couldn't understand Lucius's aloofness, how he could possibly have his attention drawn to the lanky scowling sixth-year Snape he always seemed to hang about with. Things didn't add up to the way Narcissa had been brought up to expect nothing but the best to be bestowed upon her, with little in the way of effort from herself. Lucius Malfoy was turning out to be very hard work indeed, not something Narcissa Black was used to. For a moment Lucius turned his head, and Narcissa's heart fluttered inside her tiny chest, like a little bird trying to escape from an over-gilded cage, but her spirits dropped as quickly as they had arisen when she found she was not the object of the silver-haired Head Boy's admittedly limited attention span. He was looking... no, he was gazing at the hideously voluptuous Molly Prewett. Narcissa ground her perfect white teeth together in thwarted fury. She had everything he could possibly want, she told herself. She had slender ethereal beauty, so her mother had told her last school holiday when Narcissa had demanded that she cast a spell on her breasts, which despite having turned seventeen had refused to bloom from the little buds they still were; she had money for beautiful gowns and pretty jewellery, lavished on her by indulgent parents; and although she didn't know it, she had all of the charm of the stupid filthy rich. She didn't have the one thing fat Molly Prewett had though; she didn't have Lucius Malfoy, Slytherin demi-god's admiration.

'Narcissa,' Arthur called, but her attention seemed to be on Lucius Malfoy's rather broad back, and she didn't appear to have heard him. Well, he didn't have the roses yet, Arthur mused; he was sure they would make a difference. After all, he could hardly expect someone as precious as Narcissa Black just to look at him because he was Arthur Weasley; she deserved a bit more than that. That apart, Lucius didn't seem to be interested in noticing her anyway, which rather relieved Arthur; he was sure Lucius Malfoy could buy armloads of enchanted roses with his pocket money. He watched the Head Boy turn for a moment, then breathed a sigh of relief as Malfoy's glance swept past the divine little Narcissa Black to where Molly Prewett stood with Alice-brains-for-breakfast-Proudfoot. Alice was watching Severus Snape, with a mysterious little smile on her lips; then Arthur realised that Molly was watching him. He hated the flush he felt creep into his cheeks; it was the one that he knew clashed horribly with his hair, the one he knew, just by thinking about it, would even turn his ears red. Molly was quite scary. Arthur wondered if she wanted him to help her with her Muggle Studies homework again, and hoped not; he had felt very odd in her close company the last time she had cornered him in the library. He thought of the word "prick-tease", and dismissed it quickly when he felt the colour on his face deepen even further; best not to think of Molly Prewett's charms, they were for braver men than Arthur Weasley to try to play with. Arthur smiled to himself as he watched Lucius Malfoy's openly longing gaze; it seemed that the Slytherin bully-boy had no such reservations; then he turned his gaze back to the object of his own longing.

'Molly,' Lucius called, turning away from Severus, who wasn't listening to him anyway. He was watching Alice-brains-for-breakfast-Proudfoot, or Slack Alice as Lucius had renamed her in his mind. He hadn't had the guts to tell Severus that most of the rest of the sixth and seventh year had already been round the block with her; he would pick his moment carefully, once he had Molly Prewett safely wooed and won, and had gained some sort of equality with the young dour Snape. But Molly was watching that fat bumpkin Arthur Weasley for some reason that was quite unfathomable to Lucius; then again, most things were quite unfathomable to Lucius, and it was only his power and wealth that made others refrain from pointing that out to him... except for Severus Snape, of course, but then, Severus Snape marched to a beat all of his own. Lucius sighed, and tossed his head the way he knew would make his silver-blond hair shimmer below the scone he had posed under; surely Molly couldn't fail to notice him now.

He hoped Snape was up to fending off the Black sisters; they seemed to be converging upon him, looking ominously as though they were women with a mission in life.

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## Chapter Two

### *Chapter 2 of 5*

Lucius and Arthur both write a love letter, and Molly and Narcissa receive a love letter each.

'That ought to do,' Lucius said grandly, rolling up the missive he had finally completed after seven tortuous attempts. He wound a silver and green ribbon around the scroll and pointed his wand at it to tie it in a bow, blinking rapidly in disappointment as his efforts reduced the whole sorry mess to a pile of smouldering ash instead.

'Can't you do anything properly?' Severus demanded, swiping uselessly at the air in front of him, which had begun to fill with the fumes from the burnt ribbon. 'I'm meeting Alice, and now I'll stink of burnt...' He trailed off, watching Malfoy's crestfallen look. 'Give it to me,' he snarled at the hapless Lucius. 'Give me over that ink and parchment, and I'll do the ruddy thing for you.'

'I haven't got any more ribbon,' Lucius pointed out disconsolately.

'Here, use this,' Snape hissed, tugging a piece of red cord from his pocket. It was the one Alice had bound his wrists with during a little experiment the other night, and Severus hadn't really wanted to part with it, but he was becoming a little concerned about Lucius's lack of success in the wooing of Molly Prewett. It would usually be about now that Lucius would begin whining if he didn't get what he wanted; that was the step that normally preceded vindictive, the last step before vicious. Severus wasn't at all sure how the order would run in affairs of the heart though; he hadn't known Lucius had been in possession of a heart until Molly Prewett had broken it.

'It's red,' Lucius said, eyeing the cord suspiciously. 'What is it anyway?'

'Of course it's red; your ladylove is a Gryffindor,' Snape replied, ignoring the trickier question, not that Lucius would even remember he had asked it. 'Now what d'you want this to say?' he asked, his quill poised over the parchment.

'My dearest one,' Lucius began as Severus rolled his eyes heavenward. 'Do me the honour of meeting me tomorrow night at eight o'clock... You may lower your eyebrows, Severus,' he snapped, breaking off for a moment. 'I know how to charm a lady.'

'I'm not the one without a date for the Yule Ball,' Snape countered, the quill hovering again above the parchment, glad at least that Lucius hadn't opted for "nymph divine" or some such drivel. 'On you go though; I'm quite happy if you want to sound like Arthur Weasley leafing through a book of love poems.'

'We'll see who has the last laugh, Severus. Merlin, and in fact all the Death Eaters, won't stop Molly Prewett beating a path to my dorm once she understands my feelings for her.'

'I'm not sure that Merlin was Death Eater,' Snape replied dryly.

'Of course he was,' Lucius said with a hard look. 'Don't treat me like an idiot, Severus.'

Severus found himself without a reply for once.

Lucius was just stuffing the scroll into his doublet when the door to the Slytherin Common Room opened, and the Black sisters came in, almost causing him to topple the table and spill the ink in his panic to be away from them.

'I wondered if I could speak to you later, Lucius,' Narcissa asked, smiling winsomely from below her thick eyelashes, the way her mother had taught her to look beguilingly at a man of her fancy. 'I'm a bit stuck with my Potions work, and Bella's got a date with Rodolphus tomorrow night, so I was wondering if you could...'

'Get Severus to do it,' Lucius replied, backing towards the door. 'I've got something on.'

'So have I, if you recall, Lucius,' Snape retorted, not bothering to point out that there possibly wasn't anyone alive who knew less about Potions than Lucius. 'In fact, I've made myself late by helping you already.'

'Helping him do what?' Narcissa asked, not bothering to point out to Snape that she was talking about the next night; the last thing she had on her mind was a Potions lesson. 'I hope you're not brewing love potions, Lucius,' she teased.

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'Are you going to put a couple of kisses at the bottom of that?' Kingsley asked as Arthur blew on the green ink to dry it.

'Don't you think it smoulders enough?' Arthur asked a little doubtfully, kissing the parchment anyway in misunderstanding of what Kingsley meant.

'I don't think you could say "My dearest one" is smouldering,' Lupin offered. 'The "Do me the honour" bit sounds as though Lucius composed it though, although he'd probably have opted for "nymph divine" or some rubbish.'

'It'll appeal to her Slytherin side,' Kingsley reasoned. 'Here, Arthur... look what I filched from Bella's pocket in Potions class.'

Arthur beamed his thanks as Kingsley handed him a piece of green velvet ribbon. 'Perfect,' he said, rolling the scroll up and tying the ribbon in a neat bow, just as the Common Room door opened and Molly Prewett came in with her Ravenclaw friend, Alice Proudfoot.

'Who's writing love letters,' Molly joked, nodding to the scroll Arthur was trying to stuff under his robe without squashing it.

'Love letters?' Remus scoffed. 'He's eighteen, what would he want to write love letters for?'

'Only teasing, Remus,' Molly replied, before turning her gaze on the object of her fancy. 'Alice is probably meeting Severus tomorrow night again, Arthur... quite the little item they are... and as I'm at a loose end, I was wondering if you could help me with my Muggle Studies again.' She gave him the benefit of her sultriest smile, which seemed only to have the effect of reducing him to a quivering wreck. 'It's just that I keep getting fellytones mixed up with eckeltricity.'

'Ah, sorry,' Arthur gasped out, 'I've got something on.'

'Not a date, I hope, you naughty boy,' Molly teased.

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'Who's it from,' Alice asked as she dragged a brush through her long chestnut hair.

'I don't know,' Molly said, pretending to herself that she didn't already know it was the scroll Arthur Weasley had been trying to hide under his robe. She thought that one had been tied with a green ribbon though, not the red cord she was toying with.

'Open it, Molly,' Alice urged. 'Hurry up... I need to hurry and meet Severus; you know what a grumpy snake he is if he's kept waiting.'

'Oh... oh... *"My dearest one, Do me the honour of meeting me tomorrow night at eight o'clock at the edge of the Dark Lake, beside the twin willows. You would make me so happy if you were to join me for a walk under the stars. Yours in hope, a love struck admirer."* Oh... oh, Arthur, how eloquent,' Molly said, clutching the scroll to her breast, her eyes shining with happiness.

Alice hugged her, and kissed her cheek affectionately. 'Go get him, Molly,' she said. 'Well done, girl.'

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'Who's it from?' Bellatrix asked, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. 'That looks like the ribbon I lost.'

'I'm sure Lucius doesn't need to pick your tatty old ribbons off the floor, Bella,' Narcissa snapped. 'I'm quite sure he can buy his own.'

'Well, aren't you going to open it?' Bellatrix asked, her eyes flashing in a mixture of malice and curiosity. 'How do you know it's from Lucius anyway?'

'I just do.' Narcissa hugged the scroll protectively to her chest. 'Go away, Bella. I can read it for myself, thank you.'

'Don't be stupid. I'm your sister; we're supposed to share things,' Bella replied.

'I don't remember you sharing Rodolphus's letters with me, so I've no intentions of sharing Lucius's with you.'

'He's thick, Narcissa,' Bella reasoned. 'I bet Severus had to write it for him anyway.'

Narcissa untied the ribbon, unable to wait any longer, and knowing Bellatrix wasn't about to give her the privacy she wanted. She unrolled the scroll, sighing in happy relief that it was indeed a love letter. 'Oh... oh... *"My dearest one, Do me the honour of meeting me tomorrow night at eight o'clock at the edge of the Forrest, at the stony path on the far side of Kettleburn's cottage. You would make me so happy if you were to join me for a walk under the stars. Yours in hope, a love struck admirer."* Oh... oh, Lucius, how eloquent,' Narcissa said, clutching the scroll to her chest, her eyes shining with happiness.

'Oh, well,' Bellatrix said in resignation, giving Narcissa a grudgingly congratulatory peck on her cheek, 'I suppose you deserve him. Well done, little sister.'

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## Chapter Three

### Chapter 3 of 5

Molly and Narcissa set out to meet their paramours.

The next night was four days after the full moon, and Molly Prewett stepped out of the main door and pulled her cloak about her in the frosty night air as her breath plumed about her. She was only five minutes late, enough to make her beau anxious, but not quite enough to make him believe that she wasn't coming, a perfect balance. She looked to both sides to see if she could see her Arthur skulking nearby, watching for her leaving, but the only person she saw was Narcissa Black, and wondered only briefly why the little Slytherin minx was heading towards the Forbidden Forest. She cast the thought aside as unworthy of her; after all, why shouldn't everybody have a little liaison and be as happy as she felt tonight, even Narcissa Black.

She picked her way carefully between the trees to where Arthur had said he would be waiting for her, to where Molly fancied her whole future might even be beckoning... if she played her cards right. Molly Weasley, she turned the name over in her head, Molly and Arthur, Mr and Mrs Arthur... *'Malfoy?'* she gasped. 'Where's Arthur? You had better not have hexed him or you'll have me to answer to.'

'Molly... what are you talking about?' Lucius asked, thrusting an enormous bunch of roses at her. 'Didn't you get my message? The scroll I sent you yesterday?' he asked, clearly confused, maybe even chagrined. 'Why are you talking about Arthur?'

'You... you sent me that scroll?' she accused, pointing at Malfoy. 'Was this some kind of pathetic practical joke?' Then she took a good look at Lucius, possibly for the first time ever, and wondered why she had never seen him properly before. 'Roses?' she said with a little catch in her throat, as the heady scent from the enchanted blooms invaded her senses. 'No one has ever bought me flowers before... I... I... thank you, they're beautiful.'

'They're not enough, are they?' Lucius asked, and something in his flat tone made Molly understand.

'They're beautiful, Lucius... I had just expected someone else... That's all.'

'Arthur Weasley?' Lucius asked in the same cold voice that Molly now recognised as strangled with emotion.

She didn't know how to handle this; she had been completely unprepared for anything but falling into Arthur's arms, and him falling into hers, and now she had a hurt angry young man to deal with, and Molly didn't know how to do that.

'He can give you nothing, Molly. In this life every man is what he has, and if he has nothing, he is nobody very much at all,' Malfoy reasoned with the only tool he understood. 'I, on the other hand, can give you the whole world... if you give me a chance.'

'I don't want the whole world, Lucius,' she said lamely, quite at a loss as to how to find words that would neither hurt nor give false hope. She held out her hand to him, watching as he seemed to try to come to some sort of decision, perhaps to save face, perhaps not. 'Let's walk awhile, Lucius, and at least talk... and as to the roses, well, were I not the fool I probably am for wanting a boy who has no interest in me... yes, they would have been enough,' she said, smiling as kindly as she could at him, as he took her hand at last in his cool grasp, 'but only because they came from you.'

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Narcissa hugged her cloak tightly, wishing she had worn something less flimsy below it; it was the beginning of December, after all. She looked around for any sign that Lucius might be hanging about the entrance in the hope of catching her there and saving himself the walk to the Forrest, but she saw no one but Molly Prewett heading towards the Lake. She wondered briefly who the fat cow was meeting there, and then stopped herself, telling herself it was ungracious not to be happy for someone else, when she was so happy, even if that someone else was Molly Prewett.

It wasn't long before her footsteps crunched on the stony path where she knew her Lucius was waiting. She wondered what the glorious scent was wafting from the trees, and she closed her eyes for a second and inhaled the heady perfume, thinking to herself, Narcissa Malfoy, Lord and Lady of Malfoy Manor, Mr and Mrs Lucius... '*Weasley?*' she screeched, sending a flock of birds fluttering out of the branches in panic. 'What are you doing here? Where's Lucius? What have you done with him?'

'Narcissa...' Arthur stumbled further out of the cover of darkness, thrusting his dozen enchanted roses at the tiny girl who had come to meet him. 'I sent you a message. Didn't you get my scroll? Why are you asking about Lucius?'

'You sent me that scroll? What kind of pathetic joke was that? What kind of fool were you trying to make of me?' Then she took a good look at the boy she had never deigned to notice before, standing holding out the bunch of flowers he had probably spent every Knut he had on, with his shoulders slumped in defeat. 'Roses?' she whispered in a tiny voice which was the only one she could push past the knot in her throat. 'No one has ever given me flowers before, Arthur... They're beautiful.'

'It's not very many, is it?' he asked, and something in his tone made Narcissa understand.

'They're beautiful, Arthur. I had just expected someone else... I'm truly sorry.'

'Lucius?' Arthur replied. 'Yes, I'm sure he can buy you barrow loads of roses.'

Narcissa didn't know what to say; nothing in her life had prepared her for being careful not to tread on someone else's feelings, but she knew she didn't want to tread on Arthur's. Arthur had bought her roses, and she wanted to let him understand how much she valued that, without giving him any false hope.

'I don't want barrow loads of roses, Arthur. I know I'm a fool, but I would gladly live in rags to be with the boy I love, the boy who doesn't even seem to know I exist,' she said. 'I want these roses though, but only because they came from you.' She held out her tiny hand. 'Now what about that walk under the stars you promised, and we can chat and be the very dearest of friends.' She sniffed, pretending to herself that she was smelling the blooms, and didn't quite catch the remark that fell from her lips. 'Because you bought me roses.'

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Severus and Alice reached the top of the steps. They had been talking about the debacle of the night before, each one wondering why they had not discussed the developing situation with the other before it had had reached its climax, realising that in so doing a lot of pride would have remained unwounded. Severus looked across the Hall and then nodded to Alice, as Remus Lupin and Kingsley Shacklebolt arrived at the bottom of the stairs leading from the Gryffindor heartland.

'Lupin... Shacklebolt,' Severus called. 'Have you two got a second?'

He watched as the two Gryffs shared a knowing look, and Lupin cocked his head towards the library.

'It was a fiasco,' Lupin said with a groan as he sat at one of the tables furthest from the door. 'Arthur was devastated.'

'So was Molly,' Alice said. 'She stayed in the Ravenclaw dorm, and cried half the night for Arthur and the other half because she felt sorry for Lucius.'

Severus didn't particularly want to think about Lucius, but he knew he had to; he would do that alone though, he didn't think anyone else needed to know just what retribution Lucius had planned for Arthur Weasley... if he didn't talk him out of it. 'Yes, well, hell apparently hath no fury like a Malfoy scorned,' he said, settling for a vague warning.

'Has anyone seen Narcissa?' Alice asked them all, including Snape. 'We shared with Slytherin for Charms, and she wasn't in class.'

Severus gave her pained look, as though to ask if she didn't realise he was a Slytherin, and in fact had been sitting at her side in the very class she was talking about. He was beginning to have reservations about the fabled Ravenclaw brains. 'No, and I have no intention of going head to head with Bellatrix, before anyone suggests it,' he said instead.

'I don't think we should do or say much at all. Just let the dust settle for a few days,' Kingsley suggested.

'Yes, that would be fine if the ruddy Yule Ball wasn't looming on the ruddy horizon like the Sword of ruddy Damocles,' Severus snapped.

'I'm sure it will all sort itself out,' Lupin offered in the infuriatingly deferential way he had of making Snape's teeth grind.

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## Chapter Four

*Chapter 4 of 5*

The Yule Ball

Molly hesitated for a moment inside the door of the Gryffindor Common Room, and then squared her shoulders before heading out to go down the eight flights of stairs to where the Slytherins lurked in the dungeons. She had to meet to with Narcissa Black; there was nothing else for it. Surely two sensible girls could set aside their differences for the sake of each getting what she wanted. And she was sure Narcissa did want Lucius Malfoy; it was just that that she hadn't seen much enthusiasm in Lucius when she had mentioned that. Lucius had seemed more interested in what Molly thought that Arthur could offer her that he couldn't; she knew it was nothing that Lucius would

ever understand. She was, of course, suitably flattered that one such as Lucius had had a fancy for her, one that had turned to an obsession, but she was slightly alarmed that he seemed to have mistaken it for love, and whatever rights over her he assumed that gave him. She was sure he would change though; it wasn't as though Narcissa weren't a perfect match for him: two white-blonds, a beautiful couple, epitomizing their families' social standing. She smiled fondly to herself at the thought of her and Arthur: two redheads, the epitome of their families' down-in-your-luck, living-on-borrowed-time-and-money standing. What could be simpler? Men just had to be led by the nose sometimes.

Lucius had left her after a while the previous night, but not before Molly had seen his bitterness twist his mouth, not before he had begun mentioning Arthur in more and more derogatory terms, until Molly became a little uncomfortable about it. She hoped there wasn't going to be trouble, yet she knew there could be. Molly knew something even Arthur didn't know; after all, her father did some business with the Malfoys. Molly knew that the promissory notes for the Weasley's string of little shops in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, and even on the Burrow, were held by Abraxas Malfoy; she hoped Arthur wasn't the only one who didn't know, she hoped Lucius didn't know either.

She was only on the second downward flight when she saw a blonde head bobbing far below her, on the way up.

'Narcissa?' she called over the banister, resisting the urge to call her "Black" as she normally did. 'Can I see you for a moment?'

'Molly,' Narcissa replied, returning the tentative compliment, her piping little voice echoing off the stone walls. 'I was just coming to see you actually... if you have a few minutes.'

Molly pushed down the flood of relief. She had hardly dared hope that she wouldn't be met with outright hostility when she called to see Narcissa; or even worse, she could have had to box a few rounds with Bellatrix first. But now it seemed Narcissa was as anxious to speak to her as Molly was to speak to Narcissa, and she was alone.

Narcissa leant against the wall; she had just got her breath back from racing up the first three flights of stairs before her courage gave way, and now her heart was hammering in some sort of relief that Molly wasn't about to slam any doors in her face. Perhaps something could be salvaged from this mess after all; perhaps it just needed two different girls to set aside those very differences and concentrate on their own goals. At least their aims didn't clash; that had to be something, and if she weren't mistaken, Narcissa thought that Arthur had puffed his chest out a little when she had mentioned that she thought Molly Prewett had her eye on him. Narcissa just hoped she hadn't been mistaken.

It was just that now, what with the roses... and how... damnit, how kind Arthur had been, telling her that she deserved the very best in life, and that Lucius Malfoy was probably the boy who could give that to her, and that he would gladly stand aside and not trouble her any more for the sake of her happiness... well, it was just that now Narcissa wasn't quite as sure as she had been. It wasn't that she fancied Arthur Weasley, she told herself, far from it, but there was something about Arthur that was more precious than anything Narcissa Black had ever come across in her privileged life, and she knew what it was. There was a difference in giving for procurement's sake, or for the admiration of others, or even as an act of charity for one's conscience; Arthur had given her roses, and Narcissa knew deep within her, as she suspected he did too, that he had given them with his heart, and had had no real hope of return.

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'A love potion?' Severus echoed, his mouth twisted in a disgusted sneer as he looked at the two girls who had dragged him into the library.

'Please, Severus,' Molly said, and Snape didn't think he imagined that she had drawn a breath, and thrust her alarming bosom out at him, as though in some kind of bizarre offer of payment.

'I'll pay you, Severus,' Narcissa said quickly, as though she too perhaps thought that Molly was about to offer her charms. She dipped into her robes, as if she were about to hand him a stack of Galleons right there and then instead.

'I... I'm not making a love potion,' he snapped. 'Who do you think I am, ruddy Cupid?'

'Please,' Molly wheedled.

'Yes... please,' Narcissa added. 'In fact two love potions... one for Lucius and one for Arthur.'

'I... I don't know how to,' he said, at last admitting grudgingly what he hadn't wanted to admit before. 'And even if I did, I wouldn't,' he added in a hurry, when he saw Narcissa draw a small leather book from her robe, just as Molly drew a small leather pouch from hers.

'We do,' Molly said.

'And you will,' Narcissa added. 'Or we'll tell Lucius that you've told everyone that he took roses to Molly, and she knocked him back.'

'And then we'll tell Bella you fancy her something rotten, but you're just too scared to ask her out,' Molly added for good measure.

'That's blackmail,' Snape expostulated, feeling rather like a rat in a trap.

'He's beginning to get the idea,' Molly said to Narcissa.

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As a damage limitation exercise went, it had been fairly successful, Severus supposed. He was quite proud of the potion; neither Lucius nor Arthur had died, or broken out in a green rash. Lucius asked Narcissa to the Yule Ball, and Arthur asked Molly. Severus had extracted, well, perhaps extorted, a promise from the two girls that they would tell no one of the potion, hinting that he had added an ingredient that he could activate to make both boys double their body weight in two weeks, if anyone came anywhere near him again looking for such a potion. He was quite sure neither girl believed him though.

As it turned out, only Severus was at a loose end, finally fed up with Alice, a condition brought about by finding her with Walden Macnair when he went to retrieve his broom from the broom cupboard he thought only he ever used, only it seemed Severus wasn't the only one who used it.

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To think it could have turned out an awful lot worse, Molly thought happily, as she cuddled below the eiderdown, listening to her Arthur snoring lightly beside her. She found herself wondering how her Slytherin partner in crime had got on, her brow furrowing lightly as she remembered the only incident that had marred the most wonderful night of her life.

Late on in the evening she had been dancing with Arthur, her Arthur, Molly corrected herself, and found they were next to Lucius and Narcissa, and she had given the little blonde Slytherin a smile, a secrets-shared smile, only to be rewarded with a cold look as Narcissa turned away... Molly corrected herself again as she thought about it properly; it might have been a cold look, but she rather fancied it was a troubled one too.

Arthur snored again, and began mumbling, as Molly tried to make out what he was dreaming about, terrified she might not be the true object of his innermost desires, love potion or not. He harrumphed, and let out a snort that might have been a dream laugh, and began snoring lightly again. She would have to do something about this before he woke the whole Gryffindor girls' sixth-year dorm, not that most of them weren't either mysteriously absent or had a boy of their own in their beds, she thought, pinching his nostrils ever-so-slightly. Her heart seemed to swell in her breast as he muttered in his sleep, 'Molly.'

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It should have been different; Narcissa was sure it should have been different. She didn't think she should feel cold and empty and used... abused, she corrected herself.

Her mother had once told her not to expect much from sex, that it was a thing of men's pleasure, not women's, but that hadn't seemed to equate to what the other girls she shared confidences with had told her. Narcissa knew better now; a girl should always listen to her mother. He had taken her virginity, and her pride and her self-respect, with no thought or care for her pain or her humiliation, and had left her to make her miserable way to her own dorm from his Head Boy's room alone. Yes, her mother had been right.

Narcissa pulled her eiderdown around her, wondering why she was so cold that she was almost shivering, and let her thoughts drift to where it had all gone wrong.

It had begun well enough, she supposed. Lucius had complimented her dress and her jewellery, although he had made no mention of the hours and the charms she had spent decorating her white-blond tresses with green-tinted seed pearls that exactly matched her dress. Then Narcissa had made her first mistake, and had asked Lucius if he liked her hair. It wasn't as if he looked at it before he commented that the colour wasn't his favourite for hair; it was more that he avoided looking at it, and as Narcissa caught sight of Molly Prewett's red mass of unadorned tumbling curls, she knew what he meant. That was the trouble with love potions, she supposed, they might be able to make someone love you, but she doubted they could make them un-love someone else too.

As the night wore on some couples began to drift off, to other entertainments, she supposed, and she once again saw Molly and Arthur across the hall, laughing and cuddling openly as they danced, the way she had hoped to do.

'Shall we have a drink with Molly and Arthur?' she had asked Lucius, anxious to release the tension she had felt building up, thinking perhaps some company would do that.

Lucius had held her at arm's length, and she had been quite confused by his intensity, almost frightened. 'You have a choice in life, Narcissa, as we all do. Would you like to know what yours is?' She had hardly nodded before he went on, in a way that made her think that her opinion mattered little to him. 'You either stay away from those two, or you stay away from me. Now do tell me, Narcissa, because I do not intend to waste any more time with you than I have already done, if you intend to consort any further with Gryffindors.'

She weighed it up quickly, too quickly; she knew that now. But she had her station in life to think about, and the envious looks of the other Slytherin girls when she had arrived in the hall on Lucius's arm to weigh up, and the expectations of her parents, and the way Bellatrix's nose seemed to have been rather pleasingly put out-of-joint to consider; she had weighed it up so quickly that she quite forgot about Narcissa Black.

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## Chapter Five

*Chapter 5 of 5*

Even the rich don't always get what they want.

It was only when he noticed that Arthur had not returned after the New Year break, and some sort of coldness seemed to have once again developed between Narcissa and Molly, that Severus remembered how concerned he had been about Lucius's threats to bring Arthur Weasley down. Lucius said nothing though, and Severus didn't ask. Malfoy had become remote and cold, in a way that Severus knew was nothing to do with him, and despite the fact that he had not seen fit to correct anyone who assumed that he was in a relationship with Narcissa Black, Lucius never mentioned her. Severus never then saw them share anything but formality, and he began to notice that, apart from stopping at Narcissa at the breakfast table to give her the type of cool kiss on the cheek a long married couple would give one another, he didn't display any affection towards her at all. It was as though he had marked her as his property, and felt he had no need to further validate that claim.

Severus realised that he seemed to be the only person Lucius even spoke to, and as Lucius's final year drew to a close, with him failing his N.E.W.T.s in rather spectacular fashion, Snape began to become truly worried about him.

'Are you unwell, Lucius?' he asked one day, just before the end of term, a couple of weeks after Arthur had returned to school to sit his own exams privately.

'Why do you ask that?' Lucius said, instead of answering him.

'You've changed, Lucius,' Snape replied, his concern growing as he wondered why he had let things go for so long; it wasn't as though he had exams of his own as an excuse.

'No, I haven't changed... I have just become what I was always going to be.'

'You took the Dark Mark?' Severus asked, berating himself for it coming out as an accusation instead of a question.

Lucius smiled somewhat cynically. 'Yes, Severus, I took the Dark Mark... but that wasn't really what I meant.' He seemed at a loss for words, struggling with his emotions in way that Severus had never seen before. 'I can't undo what I've done,' he said at last.

'Has this got something to do with Narcissa?' Snape asked, somehow knowing it wasn't, not really.

Lucius frowned, as though the question made no sense. 'Why should it have anything to do with Narcissa?'

'Has this got something to do with Arthur Weasley then?' Snape asked the question he had already guessed the answer to.

'It has everything to do with Arthur Weasley.'

'And are you going to tell me what it is?'

'No,' Lucius replied. 'I am going to ask you...' He trailed off, as though he didn't really know what he had been going to ask.

But Severus knew. 'My friendship is unconditional, Lucius,' he said at last, hoping they were the words the other boy needed to hear. 'I thought you knew that.'

Lucius nodded once and turned away, and Severus fancied he was more troubled than he had been. He had his own choices to face though, his own shelter to pick from the storm clouds that were gathering on the horizon of the world he knew.

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Ten years later.

The Dark Lord had fallen, and the years had passed, kinder to some than others, and to celebrate the Malfoys threw a spectacular party, inviting everyone who was anyone, and a few who weren't.

Lucius Malfoy looked across the wood-panelled entrance hall of Malfoy Manor to where the last of the guests were handing their cloaks to the elves. Something clutched in his chest as he saw the disdainful way in which his elves bowed much more deeply than they had to the rest of his guests. Lucius hadn't thought they would come, that she would come, and it took him all of his considerable Malfoy dignity not to cross the hall and scatter the offending elves like so many ninepins, for daring to sneer at their betters. Instead he looked away, not trusting himself to meet the eyes of the man he had wronged or the woman he had loved, still loved, after all these years.

She was fat now, rounded and plump, and her hair was like rusty springs poking out of an old mattress. She was dressed in what he saw were cheap evening clothes, all glitter and no gloss, what she would see as her finery, but to Lucius she would always be the same Molly Prewett. His thoughts drifted to long ago, to a night under an almost full moon when he had been but a boy, when he had believed he could have anything he desired, simply because he was Lucius Malfoy, anything but the thing he wanted most in life.

He hadn't understood; when he had embarked on his campaign of hate, and had ruined Arthur Weasley's family, and Molly's too, he hadn't understood. When Arthur had come to him some months after Abraxas had called in his family's loans, Lucius had thought at first that he wanted money, and for a brief time exalted in the thought of his own redemption. Weasley turned it to ashes though, by shaking Lucius's hand and telling him he hoped that he didn't feel awkward about the situation between their families, and that his father had told him that the sins of the fathers did not belong to the sons. But Lucius knew that wasn't quite true, not in his case anyway. And when Lucius had gone to Molly to offer salvation, to re-lend what he had persuaded his father to call in, and then even offered to gift it all back from his own money, if she went to him, he had finally understood that there were some things money simply could not buy: Molly's Prewett's love... and Arthur Weasley's respect.

Narcissa Malfoy looked across the entrance hall to where the last of the guests were handing their cloaks to the elves. She hadn't thought they'd come, hadn't thought they'd have the nerve to join her moneyed guests in their fine silks and velvets, braying their wine-soaked laughs at nothing, but they had, their shabby cloaks and too-tight evening clothes a somehow startling counterpoint to those around them. Molly had put on weight, her body ravaged by the succession of pregnancies, and... yes, she seemed to be pregnant again, as though even now she were showing Narcissa Malfoy that anything she could have, Molly could have more of, anything worth having anyway. Narcissa thought of Draco, her one child, the one on whom she pinned her last hopes for future happiness; he would be asleep in his nursery, already well on the way to indoctrination into the way of life he would accept as his due, his right for being born as Lucius Malfoy's son.

'For the love of Merlin,' Bellatrix sneered from Narcissa's side. 'Look at what the dogs have dragged in. One would have thought she might have had her hair dressed at least... or hired a dress that fitted her... as for him...'

'Yes, yes,' Narcissa replied, 'one would have thought so.' But her thoughts were far away, to a night under the stars when she had been but a girl, a spoilt girl, blinded by delusions of what she should expect in life, when she had considered herself above those who were in reality, in all the ways that mattered, her betters. As Arthur turned to wave across the hallowed hallway of Malfoy Manor, Narcissa fancied she caught sight of the youthful redheaded boy he had been, coming out from the shadows of the Forrest, clutching a bouquet of enchanted roses he had spent everything he had on... for her. She touched the emerald studded locket at her throat, the one Lucius had given her on her wedding day, the one that held a rose petal, still red, still enchanted, still holding the one thing that Molly Weasley had that Narcissa Malfoy wanted... Arthur Weasley's love.

Severus Snape looked across the entrance hall to where the last of the guests were handing their cloaks to the elves. He was surprised that the Weasleys had come, surprised that they had lowered themselves, although he doubted others would see it that way. He knew he didn't imagine that Lucius stiffened at his side as he caught sight of them too. So it was true, what he had always thought, but never mentioned, was true, he mused to himself; after all this time Lucius still loved Molly. Severus glanced across to where Narcissa and Bellatrix stood talking together, unsurprised to see Narcissa just nodding absently to what would be her sister's sneering. Severus could see Narcissa's thoughts were elsewhere too, and he wondered what the wizarding world would think if they ever knew their golden couple, the glittering Lord and Lady of Malfoy Manor, who wanted for nothing, could so envy the lowly Arthur and Molly Weasley.

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