

A Little Wager

by

Lucy Wild

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## Prologue

He was hidden in the shadows, his outline the only thing visible when little Beth walked into the room. "It's time," he said, motioning towards the bed with a firm sweep of his arm.

"Already?" she asked, cursing the tremor that appeared in her voice. "But I'm not ready."

He didn't answer. He didn't need to. It was time. That was all there was to it. There would be no debate, no argument, no pleading for a little while longer. It was time.

She pushed the straps away from her shoulders, letting her dress slide down to the floor. It fell off her as if desperate to get away from what was about to happen. She felt the same. She could feel his eyes fixed on her, even without seeing them glint in the candlelight. What was he thinking when he looked at her naked for him? Was this just another test? It was a slim hope, but she clung onto it nonetheless. Perhaps she would be allowed to dress again without a single mark left on her skin this time?

She stood perfectly still, her hands behind her back, unconsciously protecting her posterior from what she suspected he was about to do.

His chair creaked as he shifted position, the only sound in the room other than her own laboured breathing. She felt dizzy with apprehension. Was he going to punish her again? Maybe that was it. It wasn't the ultimate step; it was just another punishment. She had broken yet another of his unknown rules. He wouldn't do it, he wouldn't. But then he leaned back, sinking into the shadows just as he was about to come into the light. From the darkness, his voice growled out towards her, "All fours, head down."

It was going to happen then. It was finally going to happen. How long had it been since he'd promised he wouldn't do this? There was no point fighting him, no point arguing anymore, she'd learned that lesson the hard way, learned to ignore her terror. Still, she did not feel anything but a black ball of fear climbing onto the bed with her. She knelt on all fours, her rear pushed upwards, her chin on the blankets, her knees apart. The seconds ticked by. There was no sound of him moving. Was he going to leave her like that? Humiliate her by walking away just as she presented herself for him?

The slightest sound of movement reached her ears and then nothing, only her own breathing. Where was he? Was he still in the chair? Was he behind her? Had he left? All of a sudden, a blanket was draped over her. Wrapped up in the blanket, the only exposed part of her was her posterior. The dark warmth of the covering cloth cocooned her, made her feel safer somehow, separated from the exposed portion of her body. The visible part of her was the most sinful. She was supposed to keep that part hidden to maintain her decorum, all the rules of decent society said so. Those rules didn't seem to apply anymore.

The air in the room was cold, her exposed skin like ice in contrast to the warmth of the rest of her, entwined as it was in her cocoon. The heat grew as her breathing became heavier. This was it. He was going to do it. She tried and failed

to control her pounding heart as she wondered why she had ever agreed to live with Sir Charles Doyle.

## Chapter One

The only thing on the wall of Elizabeth Wilkinson's room, other than the mould, was a verse of scripture in black and red thread on white hessian. It had been sewn by her mother. She looked up at it from her own sewing, reading the words she had read so often before. *O satisfy us early with thy mercy.* She had often wondered why her mother had chosen that particular verse, if indeed it had been her choice. Perhaps a schoolmaster had chosen it for her. She tried to picture her mother as a child, not an easy task given the years that had passed since her death.

It was hard enough to picture her at all, a hazy image was the best she could conjure up, one that faded more and more every year. Lizzie had no pictures of her mother, nothing to prove she had ever existed apart from her too few memories and that one verse sewn and framed long ago.

She returned to her own sewing, fingers freezing in the icy cold of her room. The pile of rags next to her bed had slowly dwindled over the last three days, sewn into the blanket she was creating. It had taken the last of her income to purchase the rags. She had to work fast, ignore the cold, ignore the gnawing hunger in her stomach, concentrate on running the needle along the edge of another patch, again and again and again.

Mr. Harris, the shopkeeper on the corner, had promised her three shillings for the blanket once it was done. There would be enough rags left to make a blanket for herself, if she were careful with the size. She needed a blanket for herself almost as much as she needed the money. Sleeping in her clothes with no bedding was hard enough in the autumn but with winter fast approaching, she did not fancy her chances, worrying that she might end up like Mrs. Miggins, frozen to death in her bed, had to be prised off the sheet, they said, talking about her in hushed tones as the old woman's body was carried out of the courtyard to be dumped in a pauper's grave.

The blanket was two thirds done, it had taken too long to get that far. If only she could stop shivering, she'd have been able to work twice as fast. The wind put paid to that idea, a cold icy blast that refused to remain outside. It sought out the gaps in the window frame. The cracks in the pane, stuffed as they were with newspaper, did nothing to stop it. The wind forced its way into the room day after day, eager to tear the thread from her fingers, to suck the heat out of her very soul.

Another patch finished, lean down to the pile, pick up the next, don't stop to rest that aching back, there'll be time enough for that when it's finished. Harris is waiting and if someone else sells him a blanket first, well, don't think about that. Just keep going, keep sewing.

She could hear the Irish family next door through the thin walls. They'd only moved in a week ago but already they'd got a matchbox business on the go, how they'd managed it, she would never understand. Somehow they'd found a factory in need where no one else had and she could hear them in there now, the father cursing the two children to stop talking and work faster, didn't they want to own their own house someday?

Owning a house. It was almost enough to make her laugh. An impossible dream. Lizzie would be happy to rent somewhere that wasn't infested with bedbugs

and fleas. The only thing keeping the vermin in check was the cold, making them sluggish but not yet killing them off for the winter. Would she go first or would the rats? Would she end up like Mrs. Miggins, carried out under her own half-finished blanket, tossed into an unmarked grave and forgotten before the last sod of earth was even shovelled back into place over her?

It was cruel of the father, making his children dream of owning a house. When they realised it was never going to happen, surely that would hurt them more than being realistic? She could remember her own mother telling her that one day it would all be better. They'd tiptoed out of their lodgings in the middle of the night to avoid the rent man, moving from one slum to another, all they owned carried in a cloth bag between them. "It won't always be like this," her mother had whispered to her as they made their way from one backstreet to the next. "One day we'll own our own place and then no one will come knocking on the door for rent ever again." She'd coughed again as Lizzie looked up at her, a hacking, gurgling sound of lungs on their way out.

She was gone within a year, Lizzie left alone at far too young an age. She'd been alone ever since, surviving, just, on her wits and her skill at stay stitching. But with more and more people cramming into the streets from the countryside, the competition for work grew ever fiercer, the pay shrinking as the rents rose. The money she'd saved in the better months had all gone, everything in her room had gone apart from the bed, which belonged to the landlord, a few stubs of tallow candles, the framed verse which she would never sell, and the only thing that kept her from the workhouse, her needle and thread.

She'd gone without food to pay for the rags, gone without paying the rent either and by the sound of the approaching footsteps, that act of rolling the dice had not been forgotten.

The door to her room scraped open and in came the rent man, not smiling, notebook in hand. "You're behind," he said, loud enough for the whole building to hear. He tapped the notebook. "Know what it says here?"

Lizzie shook her head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Jenkins, if you'll let me explain." She didn't stop sewing; she couldn't afford the time.

"It says E Wilkinson. Know what it says next to it? Nothing. There's a blank space where it should say three shillings. This won't do. What do you think they'll say to me if I tell them there's a room let to a woman who won't pay? Remember what I told you last time you was late?" He took a step towards her, his hand falling on her shoulder. It was not a gentle touch. "I made you an offer, didn't I, Lizzie?"

"I'll have it for you by the end of the day, Mr. Jenkins. I just need to get this blanket finished."

"What's this?" he asked, kicking the pile of rags. "No money for the rent but money to buy this pretty little lot?"

"It's not like that. I've been promised three shillings for this," she held up the blanket, "when it's finished."

"I offered you six shillings, myself," he replied, his hand going back to her shoulder. "If you recall?"

"No thank you." Lizzie shrugged herself free. She would never stoop to that. She'd rather die. "You will have your money."

"By the end of today?"

"By the end of today."

"You won't go flitting, will you?"

“Of course not.”

“We’ll see, won’t we? I’ll keep hold of this, shall I, just in case?” He crossed the room to the fireplace, unhooking the framed verse from the rusty nail that held it in place. “I know it has,” he paused, a greasy smile spreading across his lips, “some sentimental value to you.”

“No,” Lizzie said, the sewing momentarily forgotten. “Please.”

“Until the end of the day,” he said, ignoring her and marching over to the door, passing out into the hallway without looking back.

Lizzie was distraught. The one thing she owned of her mother’s. The one connection to her, in his hands. What if he refused to give it back? What then? Stop it, don’t think of such things. Get this done.

She resumed sewing, working with renewed speed, thinking of nothing but the work. Even the roaring voice of the father in the next room faded away, all there was in the world were her hands and the rags, the blanket slowly coming together as the hours passed by.

It was gone six by the time she finished. The last candle spluttered, almost as dead as her freezing fingers. She rose to her feet and stretched her aching back, her hands so numb from work and cold, they were almost blue. She lifted the blanket, holding it up at arm’s length. It was done. At last it was done. She hurried to the door, heading down the stairs and out into the courtyard. The wind hit her with such force that she was almost swept off her feet. The chill in her room was nothing next to the freezing temperature outside. Even the mud under her feet was frozen, the one blessing as, for once, she passed out onto the street without the filth of the slum oozing into her stockings through the multitude of cracks and holes in her shoes.

The candles were still ablaze in Harris’s window, a good sign. He hadn’t closed yet. She pushed open his door and stepped inside, glad to be out of the wind and the cold and into the warmth of the shop, fire glowing in the corner by the counter. Beside it was a high stool, Harris sat on it chopping a loaf of bread into slices, ready for sale. “Care for one?” he asked, pushing a slice over the counter top. “I’ll even butter it for you if you like.”

“I’ve the blanket you ordered,” Lizzie said, picking up the bread and biting a chunk out of it. The rest was gone in a second and she regretted it, the tiny morsel serving only to remind her how hungry she was, how much more her body needed. She draped the blanket over the counter, looking expectantly across at Harris who looked silently back at her, a frown crossing his features.

“Ah,” he said, getting to his feet and running his hands over the patches. “I meant to talk to you about that.”

“You meant to talk to me about what?”

“I had Miss Lambert in earlier and she had a new one in great shape and no need for it since her Brian’s back inside.”

“So?”

“So I won’t be needing this one, Lizzie. Sorry about that. Hope it wasn’t too much of a hassle to make.”

“But you promised me three shillings.”

“You promised me a blanket by yesterday. What am I to do?”

“But I couldn’t get the rags until Friday. Please, Mr. Harris, I need the money.”

“All right,” he said, folding the blanket in half. “It’s decent enough stitching, I suppose. Tell you what, I’ll give you two shillings for it. Might be able



to sell it on to someone for three. It's not worth any more than that, anyway. What do you reckon?"

"But I need three."

"But I don't need another blanket. Take it or leave it."

"But it's worth three."

"Go and sell it for three somewhere else then?" He went to turn away from her, looking utterly indifferent about her distress.

"All right," Lizzie said, surprised to hear the desperation in her voice, having done her best to keep it hidden from him. "I'll take it."

"Wonderful," he said, a smile spreading across his features. The blanket vanished behind the counter an instant later, as if it had never been there. "Here you are then." He reached into his pocket, bringing out a handful of coins. "One shilling, sixpence, threepence, ten, eleven. I took for the bread."

"Of course you did," Lizzie said, closing her fingers around the coins in case he changed his mind. She sighed. Two shillings wasn't enough; what difference did eleven pence instead of twelve make?

"Here," Harris said, pushing another slice across the counter. "Call it two for a penny."

Lizzie crammed the coins into her pocket and left the shop without another word. She had no doubt she'd been conned but what choice did she have? She'd never have sold the blanket by the end of the day. Who had three shillings to throw around apart from Harris? She crossed back through the courtyard, the wind pushing her along, almost tearing the bread from her hand. She was glad to get back indoors. It wasn't much of a house but at least it kept out the worst of the winter.

It was pitch black inside, so dark she almost fell across the child who sat in the corridor outside her room. "Is that you, Sarah?" she asked, groping blindly downwards. She felt hair, thin, greasy hair. "Mother at it again?"

She sank to her knees, huddling next to the tiny form of the girl, rough grunting sounds from the room behind her making her stomach turn. "Had anything to eat today?"

"No," a tiny voice replied. "Have you?"

Lizzie sighed, tearing the bread into quarters. "Here," she said, pressing three of the quarters into the child's hand. "Get that down you."

"Thanks, Lizzie," the little girl replied, shuffling closer to her.

"Come here," Lizzie said, putting an arm round Sarah. "Let's enjoy dinner together, shall we?"

They sat in the darkness, chewing quietly as the wind whistled along the corridor. The grunting faded away, soon replaced by loud snoring. "I can go back in now," Sarah said, getting to her feet. "Night, Lizzie."

"Goodnight, Sarah," Lizzie replied, waiting until Sarah was gone to let the tears flow silently down her cheeks. Outside the church clock struck the quarter as the flickering light of a candle began to ascend the stairs. The rent man was coming back.