

*Bridget's
Bargain*

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LOREE LOUGH



WHITAKER
HOUSE

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All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

BRIDGET'S BARGAIN

(Also included in *Tales of the Heart: 3-in-1 Collection*)

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Dedication

First, to my faithful readers, whose support and faith keep me writing.

*Second, to Larry, light of my life and stirrer
of my soul, for whom I'm happy to obey*

1 Corinthians 7:10: "Let not the wife depart from her husband."

*Special mention to my wonderful editor,
Courtney, and the ever-capable Lois.*

*Finally, to my once abused, now spoiled dog, who put aside his Frisbee
addiction long enough for me to write these stories!*

Chapter One

1866

Magnolia Grange, south of Richmond, Virginia

It's hard to believe you've been with us four years, Bridget." Winking one thick-lashed blue eye, the maid grinned. "Aye, Mr. Auburn." She blew a tendril of flaming red hair away from her eye and secured a gigantic white satin bow to the railing. "Time has passed like a runaway engine."

Fumbling with his collar, Chase chuckled. "You've always been a joy to have in the house, and your way with words is but one of the reasons."

Bridget slid the ribbon up and down until it exactly matched the height of the decoration on the other side of the porch. In response to the great gulp of air he took in, she straightened from her work. "Were you this nervous the first time you were a bridegroom, sir?"

He leaned a shoulder against the pillar nearest him. "To tell the truth, I don't recall." And, raising both brows imploringly, he pointed at the lopsided knot at his throat. "Would you mind...?"

She stepped up to the man who'd been more of a big brother than an employer to her these past years. "Wouldn't mind a bit." And to think that during her long sea voyage from Ireland to Virginia, she'd envisioned him a brute and a monster!

Standing on tiptoe, Bridget repaired the damage he'd done to his black string tie. "There, now," she said, brushing imaginary lint from his broad shoulders, "that's got it."

His hand trembling, he dug a gold watch from his pocket. "The guests will begin arriving soon. Is everything—?"

"All's well, Mr. Auburn, so I pray ye'll relax. Else ye'll need another bath!" Gathering her bow-making materials, Bridget hustled through the front door. From the other side of the screen, she said, "I've a few things to see to in the kitchen, and then I'll be lookin' in on yer bride-to-be." She started toward the parlor, then stopped and faced him again. "Mr. Auburn, sir?"

He stopped rubbing his temples to say, "Yes?"

"I set aside a pitcher of lemonade. Might be just the thing to calm your nerves. Now, why don't you settle down there while I fetch you a nice tall glass?"

As she made her way toward the kitchen, she heard the unmistakable squeak of the porch swing. "Hard to believe you ever thought that dear, sweet man capable of beating his servants bloody."

"What's that?"

Scissors, ribbons, needles, and thread flew into the air, then rained down upon her at the sound of the rich, masculine voice. "Goodness gracious, sakes alive!" she gasped, hands flattened to her chest. "You just shaved ten years off m'life!"

"Sorry," said the tall intruder. "Didn't mean to frighten you."

Rolling her eyes, Bridget stooped to retrieve the fallen articles. "No harm done, I suppose." Then, narrowing one eye, she sent him a half smile. "Provided you help me clean up the mess ye're responsible for."

Immediately, he was on his hands and knees, and once they'd untangled the ribbon, she put it all in the linen cupboard. "Don't recall seein' you around here before."

"Just arrived last evening." He nodded toward the barn. "I'm bunking in the loft. Chase...uh, Mr. Auburn is hoping I can improve the lineage of his quarter horses."

"Ah," she said, returning the sewing supplies to their proper shelf, "so you're the new stable hand we've all been hearing about." Dusting off her hands, she started up the stairs, stopping on the bottom step to give him a quick once-over. "Don't know why, but I thought you'd be older."

Leaning both burly arms on the newel post, he frowned slightly. "The proper title is 'stable *master*'."

"Is that a fact, Mr. Big-for-His-Britches?" Grinning good-naturedly, she added, "Tack whatever fancy name ye choose to the work. You're still the hired help, same as me, 'cept you're likely more at home with a muck shovel in your hand than a mop or broom."

For a moment, a look of embarrassment darkened his handsome face, but, to his credit, he shook it off. "It's honest work, and the horses are my full responsibility, so they might as well be my very own."

She scrutinized him carefully. "All right, then, so you've got the master's horses, but have ye the horse sense to go with 'em?" Halfway up the curving staircase, she leaned over the landing banister. "And what might your name be, Mr. I'm-So-Sure-of-Myself... just so I'm sure to address you properly next time we meet?"

"Lance," he said. "Lance York."

Bridget's smile disappeared. "You're—you're *English*?"

Another nod. "But only half." The frown above his gray eyes deepened. "Why do you look as though you've just smelled something unpleasant? Is there something wrong with being English?"

Only if you're a poor tenant farmer in County Donegal, Ireland, she thought, continuing up the stairs. Since they both worked for Mr. Auburn, she'd likely run into this fellow often, and she had no intention of behaving like one of those uppity town girls who were

so difficult to get along with. "Well," she said coolly, "I suppose we all have to be something, now, don't we?"

Her peripheral vision told her he hadn't budged as she reached the next landing. Bridget would not allow herself to look at him. *What, and give him the satisfaction of knowing an Englishman had humiliated yet another Irishman? Not in a million Sundays!*

Bridget hurried up the remaining stairs and set her mind on seeing what, if anything, Drewry might need, because in no time at all, she'd become Mrs. Chase Auburn. No doubt she'd be at least as fidgety as her bridegroom.

Funny, she thought, how folks tend to pair off at weddings. Most of the servants had spouses to accompany them to the shindig. All but Bridget and the hired hands' children. More's the pity the stableman has the blood of those thievin' English flowin' in his veins, she thought, 'cause he'd make a right handsome companion....



Bridget watched as the servants and hired hands of Magnolia Grange raced around, putting the finishing touches on the wedding preparations. How handsome they all looked dressed in their regal best, thanks to Chase Auburn's generosity.

She remembered the day, not so long ago, when he'd stood beside the big buckboard, ushering every member of his staff into the back of the vehicle, oblivious to their slack-jawed, wide-eyed protests. "Magnolia Grange has survived locusts and storms and the Civil War, so I hardly think our little trip into town will cause its ruination." Grabbing the reins, he'd added, "When we get to Richmond, every last one of you will choose a proper wedding outfit. And remember, money is no object."

The wagon wheels had ground along the gritty road, drowning out the shocked whispers of his hired help. "Been with that

boy since he was born," Matilda had said behind a wrinkled black hand, "an' I ain't never seen him smile so bright."

"I do believe he done lost his mind, Matty," Simon had said. "This is gonna cost a fortune."

"You just worry 'bout tending the fields," she'd shot back, "an' let Mistah Chase worry 'bout what he can afford."

In town, the maid, the housekeeper, the foreman, and the field hands had quickly discovered that every Richmond shopkeeper had been instructed to put the suits, gowns, shoes, and baubles chosen by Auburn employees on Chase's personal account. At first, they'd shied away from quality materials, picking through the bins for dresses of cotton and shirts of muslin. Until Chase had gotten wind of their frugality, that is.

"You'll not attend my wedding dressed like that!" he'd gently admonished them, snatching a pair of dungarees from Claib's hands. Holding some gabardine trousers in front of the tall, thin man, he'd said, "You've earned this." Then, looking at each employee in turn, he had said, "You've *all* earned this. Why, Magnolia Grange wouldn't be what it is without you!" With that, he'd disappeared into the bustling Richmond street.

Now, Bridget stepped into the full-skirted gown she'd chosen that day at Miss Dalia's Dress Shop. *Ma's cameo would have looked lovely at the throat*, she thought, buttoning its high, lace-trimmed collar. But the pin had long ago been handed over to the ruthless landlord Conyngham when he'd raised the rent yet again.

Slipping into slippers made from fabric the same shade of pink as the dress, Bridget recalled that in one of her mother's leather-bound volumes—before Conyngham had demanded those, too—she'd seen a pen-and-ink sketch of a ballerina. According to the book, ballet originated in Renaissance Italy, where, as the nobility began to see themselves as superior to the peasantry, they rejected

the robust and earthy steps of traditional dance. Emulating the slower, statelier movements of the ballerinas, they believed, accentuated their own elegance. Her arms forming a graceful circle over her head, the beautiful lady's torso had curved gently to the right. Her dark hair had been pulled back tightly from her face, and on her head had been a tiny, sparkling crown. Long, shapely legs had peeked out from beneath a gauzy, knee-length gown, and on her feet had been satin slippers.

Smiling at the memory, Bridget stood at the mirror. Gathering her cinnamony hair atop her head, she secured it with a wide ribbon that matched her shoes. Lifting her skirt, she stuck out her right foot and, looking about to see if she were truly alone, grinned as mischief danced in her eyes. How long had it been since she'd struck this particular ballerina pose? Five years? Six? Then, feeling both giddy and girlish, Bridget covered her face with both hands and giggled. *Ye'd better count yer blessin's that nobody can see you, Bridget McKenna, for they'd cart y'off to the loony bin, to be sure!*

The big grandfather clock in the hall began counting out the hour. *Goodness gracious me*, she thought, hurrying to the door, *how can it be midday already? And with only an hour till the weddin'!*

When Bridget entered Drewry's room, she found the bride standing in front of a big, oval mirror like the one in her own room, smiling as Matilda pinned a white poinsettia in her long, dark hair. "You do make a lovely bride," said the housekeeper. "Mistah Chase be one lucky fella, gettin' a wife as fetchin' as you."

Blushing, Drewry hugged the woman. "Thank you, Matilda. But I'm the lucky one."

"Not lucky," Bridget said, closing the door behind her. "Blessed."

The curious glances exchanged by the bride and housekeeper told Bridget that her interruption had stunned them. True, she'd never been overly chatty, but lately....

Several months ago, Mr. Auburn had walked into the kitchen as she'd been ciphering. When she'd admitted that she'd saved almost enough to send for her family, he'd promised to find work for her father and four siblings. And just this morning, a little more ciphering told Bridget that in six months, maybe eight, she'd finally have what she needed to bring them here from Ireland. If that didn't put her in a chatty mood, a wedding was sure to do it!

"You're so right," Drewry said, grasping Bridget's hand. "Luck had nothing to do with it. It was the good Lord who brought Chase and me together."

"And He'll *keep* you together, too."

"Seems our gal here know as much about the Good Book as anyone," Matilda said.

Bridget remembered another day, not long after her arrival at Magnolia Grange, when Mr. Auburn had invited her to join the family in prayer. "How many times must I tell you, Bridget McKenna," he'd thundered, "that it's not a sin to read the Scriptures!" He'd picked up the large, leather-bound Bible and opened it for the household's morning devotions. On the other side of the big, wooden table, Bridget had begun to weep. It had been Drewry, the children's nanny, who had passed her a lace-edged hanky.

"But Mr. Auburn, sir," she'd cried, "my ma taught us that readin' the Holy Scriptures is a sin and a crime. Learnin' like that... it's only for the clergy, who are blessed by God to understand what they read." Trembling, she'd hidden her face in Drewry's hanky. "Oh, please, sir...I don't want to go to hell!"

Softening his tone, Chase had said, "I hate to disagree with your sweet mother, but I'm afraid she was mistaken."

His comment had only served to cause a fresh torrent of tears, inspiring Drewry to scoot along the bench and drape an arm

around Bridget. "Mr. Auburn is right, Bridget," she'd said, her dark eyes shining and sweet voice soothing. "Our reading the Scriptures pleases God. Why else would He have given them to us?"

Bridget stopped crying and studied Drewry's face. "But...how d'ye know for sure that it's true, ma'am?"

"Because the Lord Jesus Himself said, '*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.*' You see, going to church on Sunday and hearing about Jesus is but one way of growing closer to the Lord. Reading His Word for ourselves, why, there's no better way!" And from that moment on, life at Magnolia Grange had changed for Bridget. Having access to the comfort of God's Word was a key that unlocked a world of hope.

"So, what you think, li'l Miss Bridget?" Matilda said. "You knows the Bible as good as anybody?"

"Hardly!" she said, laughing. "The more I learn," she admitted, "the more I realize how little I know." Then she wagged a finger at the bride. "Now, you'd best be gettin' yourself downstairs, Miss Drew. Pastor Tillman has arrived, and the guests are gatherin' in the chapel. It's a mighty pretty day for a wedding, 'specially for December!"

"I have God to thank for that, too," Drewry admitted, tugging at the long snug sleeves of her white velvet gown. With arms extended, she took a deep breath as Matilda fastened the tiny pearl buttons on each cuff. After fastening her mother's cameo at the high, stand-up collar, Drewry picked up the bouquet fashioned of red roses, white poinsettias, and greenery from Chase's hothouse, which he had delivered at dawn.

"You gonna carry that to the altar, Miss Drew?"

"I most certainly am, Matilda. Perhaps Chase and I will start a trend...bridegrooms delivering flowers to their brides, and brides carrying the bouquets to the altar." She punctuated her statement

with a merry giggle. "Well, I'm as ready as I'm ever going to be, so I suppose we should get this wedding started!"

With Matilda leading the way, the women walked down the wide, curving staircase and onto the porch. Bridget saw that Claib had parked the carriage out front. He'd polished its chassis until the enamel gleamed like a black mirror. The farmhand cut quite a dashing figure in his long-tailed morning suit, and Bridget planned to tell him so the minute they returned to the kitchen to serve the guests at the reception. Bending low at the waist, Claib swept a gloved hand in front of him. "Your carriage awaits, m'lady," he said, mimicking Pastor Tillman's English butler.

The sounds of laughter and chatter grew louder as the buggy neared the chapel. "They're here!" a woman shouted.

"Start the music!" hollered a man.

As the four-piece string ensemble began to play Beethoven's Ninth, Drewry stood beside her Uncle James at the back of the chapel. *Such a lovely bride*, Bridget thought. *And this little church in the woods is lovely, too.* The red holly berries trimming the roof winked merrily, and a soft garland filled the air with the fresh, clean scent of pine. Massive arrangements of red and white poinsettias, along with evergreen boughs, flanked the altar, where Mr. Auburn waited alone.

But not for long.

Bridget and Matilda, in their new store-bought frocks, stepped importantly down the aisle in time to the music and took their places in the Auburn family pew. Chase's daughter, Sally, stepped up in front of Drewry, one hand in her basket, prepared to sprinkle rose petals along the path that her new mother's high-topped white boots would take. Behind Sally, her brother, Sam, held the white satin pillow that cushioned the wedding band. Bridget smiled as he tugged at the collar of his shirt and smiled adoringly up at Drewry.

The children love her so, and so does Mr. Auburn, Bridget thought. And it's plain to see she loves them, too.

Just then, the throbbing strains of the “Wedding March” poured from the organ’s pipes, filling the chapel as Pastor Tillman took his place at the altar. Bridget watched Chase, resplendent in his black suit, as he focused on Drewry, the object of his hopes and dreams and promises soon to be fulfilled. “I love you,” he mouthed to her.

Bridget turned in her seat just in time to see the bride answer with a wink and a smile. *Will I ever know love like that?* she wondered, facing front again. Sighing, she felt her shoulders sag. *Not likely, since all I do is work, work, work and save, save, save....* A feeling of guilt washed over Bridget, and she chastised herself for allowing such self-centered thoughts to enter her head. She had much to be grateful for, and this was Drewry and Chase’s day, after all!

Still, the bride and groom’s for-our-eyes-only communication made her yearn for a love like theirs—a love that reached beyond the bounds of family, binding man to woman and woman to man, cloaking them in trust, friendship, and companionship forever.

A chilly wind blew through the chapel, making Bridget shiver. Hugging herself, she focused on the rough-hewn cross that hung above the altar and, closing her eyes, prayed silently. *Dear Lord, if it's in Your plan, I wouldn't mind havin' a bit of love like that, for I'm weary of being cold and alone.*



Drewry’s Uncle James and his lady friend, Joy, had arrived two days earlier. In many ways, the handsome couple reminded Bridget of Chase and Drewry.

Bridget and Joy had chatted while decorating the mansion. Joy, Bridget discovered, had been raised up north, near Baltimore.

"Why, there's a Baltimore, Ireland, too!" she'd said, excited at all she had in common with her new friend.

Bridget hadn't had as many opportunities to talk with Drewry's uncle, so when she saw him during the reception, standing alone under the willow tree, she didn't know quite how to approach him. His grief was raw and real, that much was plain to see. And she knew precisely what had destroyed his previous high-spirited mood. For as she'd been gathering plates and cups nearby, she'd overheard the conversation....

James had dropped to one knee and taken Joy's hand in his, then looked deep into her eyes and whispered hoarsely, "Miss Naomi Joy McGuire, will you do me the honor of becoming my bride?"

So romantic! Bridget had thought. She'd been taught better than to eavesdrop, but if she'd made any attempt to move just then, she would have alerted them to her presence, and what if that destroyed the whole mood? Then Joy had blinked, swallowed hard, and stiffened her back. "I can't, James," she'd said. Then, snatching back her hand, she'd lifted the billowing blue satin of her skirt and raced across the lawn to the house.

Hours passed before Bridget returned to collect the last of the dishes and glasses scattered about by the guests. Yet he still stood alone where she'd last seen him. "Is there anything I can do for you, sir?"

Without looking up, James shook his head.

"Won't you come inside and let me brew you a cup of tea?"

But he only shook his head again.

"But sir, ye're pale as a ghost, and I can't in good conscience leave you here alone. I'll make a pest of myself, if I must, to get you inside, where it's warm." She gestured toward the yard. "Ye'll catch yer death if you stay out here."

When he gave no response, she linked her arm with his and led him to the house, chattering nonstop the whole way about the way Pastor Tillman had nearly choked on a wad of tobacco before pronouncing Drewry and Chase husband and wife; about the perfect weather, the delicious food, the pretty decorations...anything but the ceremony itself. "My name is Bridget, sir," she said as they approached the front porch. "Bridget McKenna."

The way he climbed the steps, Bridget couldn't help but picture the tin soldiers lined up on the shelf at McDoogle's Store back home. The poor man had found the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his days with, and her refusal had broken his spirit. Surely, Joy had a good reason for saying no, but that didn't stop Bridget from feeling sorry for him.

Once inside, she stopped at the parlor door. "Why not have a seat there by the fire? I'll fetch you a nice hot cup of tea."

"I think I'd rather just go to bed."

As she opened the door to his room, she said, "If you need anything, anything at all, just ring for me."

Though he nodded as he stepped into the room, Bridget had a feeling he wouldn't ring. In fact, something told her she might not see him at all before he returned to Baltimore. "Well," she muttered as he closed the door, "I don't suppose *all* matches are made in heaven...."

"Like Drewry and Chase, you mean?"

A tiny shriek escaped her lungs. "Land sakes, man," she said, recognizing Lance. "Ye'll be the death of me, sure!" Bridget regarded him with a wary eye. "Ye've got cat's paws for feet. How else can I explain how you slink around without making a sound?"

Chuckling, Lance pocketed both hands. "I wasn't slinking. You were so deep in thought, a herd of cattle could have thundered through here, and you wouldn't have noticed until the dust cleared."

Bridget raised an eyebrow. "Oh, I might've noticed a wee bit before then." Pointing at his feet, she said, "There'd have been the stink of the stuff you've tracked across my clean floor to bring me around." Planting both fists on her hips, she met his eyes. "Perhaps you have been raised as fine as those fancy airs you put on, Mr. York, for no self-respecting stable hand would enter the master's house without first puttin' his soles to the boot scrape by the servants' entrance!"



Lance glanced down at his boots and the telltale clumps of mud and horse manure that showed the path he'd taken since entering the foyer. Feeling strangely like an errant child caught sneaking cookies before dinner, he was about to inform her that although this was indeed a grand mansion, it sat upon fertile pastureland. Did she really expect everyone who entered to wipe his boots? And who did she think she was, anyway, scolding him as if he were an ordinary—

Yet the moment he looked into her eyes to deliver his rebuttal, Lance's ire abated. She was perhaps the loveliest creature he'd ever seen, tiny and feminine and just scrappy enough to be reckoned with. A mass of shining brick-red waves framed her heart-shaped face, and even after a long day of tending to and tidying up after wedding guests, her milky skin glowed with healthy radiance, making the pale freckles sprinkling her nose even more noticeable.

And those eyes! He'd seen her before, both up close and from a distance. Why hadn't he noticed how large and thickly lashed they were?

"So, there's another lesson yer ma obviously didn't teach you. First, you thoughtlessly mess up the floors, and then, you stare like a simpleton."

Lance blinked, then frowned in response to her anger. "What? I—I wasn't—"

"You were, and you still are," she interrupted him, crossing her arms over her chest as she lifted her chin.

If he didn't know better, he'd say she was daring him to disagree!

Lance had no earthly idea where the thought came from, but, suddenly, he wanted nothing more than to grasp the narrow shoulders she'd thrown back in defiance and kiss her square on those full, pink lips. *Sweet Jesus*, he prayed, *keep me true to my vow...*

Newly resolved and strengthened, he straightened to his full five-foot eleven-inch height. "I didn't mean to track dirt into the house," he said at last. "If you like, I'll help you clean it up. And you have my word, it won't happen again."

Grinning, she wiggled her perfectly arched brows. "Oh, that won't be necessary." Then, "I suppose I could have been a mite gentler with you, now, couldn't I?" On the heels of a deep breath, Bridget added, "It's been a long, hard day, not that that's a good excuse for my harshness." With one hand up to silence his denial, she continued, "I set aside a bit of cake and lemonade. Will you let me get it for you, as a peace offerin'?"

Truth was, he'd stuffed himself at the reception and had no idea where he'd put another bite of food, so his answer surprised him. "Only if you'll share it with me."

She turned on her heel and, wiggling a finger over her shoulder, said, "Then follow me, English."

He did, too, like a pup on his boy's heels. As they made their way down the stairs, she said, "What you said earlier..."

Lance fell into step beside her. "In response to your 'not all matches are made in heaven' comment?"

Rounding the corner into the kitchen, she nodded. "How'd you know that's what I meant?"

He straddled a stool and leaned both elbows on the table. No woman had ever willingly served him before, unless he counted roadside tavern maids. Lance rather enjoyed watching Bridget bustling about, preparing the snack that had been *her* idea. "I overheard what went on between Drewry's uncle and his lady friend, too," he said. His smile became a frown. "Sad, the way she treated the bloke."

Bridget laid a neatly folded napkin near his left elbow and unceremoniously plopped a silver fork atop it. "Now, let's not be too quick to judge, English. We have no way of knowing why she said what she did."

By the time she set the tall goblet of lemonade near the tines of his fork, he was all but scowling. "It's been my experience," he began, "that women don't need a reason to be cruel." He sat up straighter and feigned a dainty pose. "You're such a *darling* man," he sighed in a high-pitched falsetto. "Is that your heart?" he asked, pointing a dainty finger at his imaginary tablemate's chest. Then, his hand formed an ugly claw as he pretended to tear into the invisible man's rib cage. "I've got it!" he all but shouted, pretending to stuff it into his mouth.

Bridget stood gawking with one hand on her hip and then wrinkled her nose. "After ye've learned to wipe yer feet," she said, sliding the cake plate in front of him, "we'll have a go at teachin' you how to make interesting table conversation." After taking a sip of her own lemonade, she sat down across from him. "A body could only guess from that sorry demonstration that you've been wounded a time or two by love."

"Not really," he said around a bite of frosting. "And I'm sorry for the outburst."

Smiling, she pressed a hand to his forearm. "You can apologize for scarin' the soul from m'body, for dirtyin' my floor." Leaning

closer, Bridget narrowed her eyes. "But don't ever let me hear you say you're sorry for what you *feel*, English."

Resting his elbow on the table, Lance let the empty fork dangle from his hand. "What have you got against the English, if you don't mind my asking?" Slicing off another hunk of cake, he added, "Keep in mind, I'm English only on my father's side...."

Sighing, Bridget sat back. "Have you ever been to Ireland?"

Lance shook his head.

"And what do you know about the way your people dealt with the Irish during the famine?"

In place of an answer, Lance only shrugged.

She folded her hands on the tabletop. "Now, I'll warn ye, 'tisn't a pretty story." Winking, she looked from side to side, as if in search of a spy. "And there's a good chance you'll dislike your folks as much as I do when I've finished." Pausing, she said, "You sure you want me to go on?"

"I'm sure," he said with a grin.

And for the next hour, she held him spellbound with her tale.