

WHAT
GOD
HATH
JOINED

ALSO BY PATTY FROESE NTIHEMUKA

The Hyacinth Chronicles

Hyacinth Doesn't Go to Jail and Hyacinth Doesn't Miss Christmas

The Hyacinth Chronicles 2

Hyacinth Doesn't Grow Up and Hyacinth Doesn't Drown

Martha and Mary

Mary: Call Me Blessed

The Woman at the Well



WHAT GOD HATH JOINED

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NTIHEMUKA



Pacific Press® Publishing Association

Nampa, Idaho

Oshawa, Ontario, Canada

www.pacificpress.com

Cover design by Steve Lanto
Cover resources from Lars Justinen
Inside design by Aaron Troia

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Ntihemuka, Patty Froese, 1978-
What God hath joined / Patty Froese Ntihemuka.
p. cm.
ISBN 13: 978-0-8163-2454-5 (pbk.)
ISBN 10: 0-8163-2454-9 (pbk.)

1. Marriage. I. Title.
PR9199.4.N825W57 2011
813'.6—dc22

2010047266

11 12 13 14 15 • 5 4 3 2 1

DEDICATED

to my husband and our beautiful boy

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	9
CHAPTER 2.....	17
CHAPTER 3.....	27
CHAPTER 4.....	34
CHAPTER 5.....	44
CHAPTER 6.....	54
CHAPTER 7.....	65
CHAPTER 8.....	75
CHAPTER 9.....	83
CHAPTER 10	93
CHAPTER 11.....	101
CHAPTER 12	108
CHAPTER 13	116
CHAPTER 14	123
CHAPTER 15	129
CHAPTER 16	136
CHAPTER 17	145
CHAPTER 18	155
CHAPTER 19	165
CHAPTER 20	171
CHAPTER 21	175
CHAPTER 22	183
EPILOGUE	189

CHAPTER 1

LEAH TIGHTENED HER GRIP ON her son's hand as he tried to wriggle his fingers free. A man at the front of the church had begun to play the first chords of the doxology on the reed organ, his back straight, his elbows raised high, and his fingers descending on the keys with a gusto that reminded Leah of a particularly savage chicken. She didn't know his name. They had been in this town for several months, and Leah was only now starting to feel like she knew some names.

Leah smoothed the gloves that were resting in her lap while listening to the familiar rustle of lace and muslin and the murmur of men's voices excusing themselves for trampling the hems of ladies' dresses. Would they stay long enough in Lincoln Falls for this little church to feel like home?

"Josiah." She said her son's name with a tinge of warning in her tone. Josiah looked up at her, his blond curls tumbling over his forehead and his bright blue eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Mama, it's hot!"

"Sit still." Leah pulled her gray skirt out of the way of a passing older woman of obvious higher standing. She was bearing down the aisle like a lace-encrusted locomotive, slow, stately, and unstoppable.

“Good day, Mrs. Taylor.” The old woman inclined her head coolly in Leah’s direction. Her small bonnet was perched on the back of her head, and the feather that stood straight up from the back quivered like a reprimanding finger.

“Good day, Mrs. Harbinger.” Leah gave Josiah’s hand a warning squeeze as she felt him inching away from her, leaning toward the aisle.

“I see you are still in your mourning dress.” Mrs. Harbinger looked down her long, thin nose, her lips pursed in disapproval.

“Yes, madam, I am.”

“From what I understand, Mrs. Taylor, you have been in mourning for significantly longer than a year. Certainly enough time has passed to allow you to be pretty again.”

“I’m not looking for a husband.”

“Every woman without a husband is in search of one. And while gray does suit your coloring, I’m afraid it is in bad taste to prolong your mourning on account of vanity, my dear.”

Leah didn’t trust herself to answer and so gave a tight smile instead.

“It’s hot,” Josiah whispered loudly, looking imploringly up at his mother.

“Ah, so young to be without a father.” Mrs. Harbinger lowered her gaze to include Leah’s son. “It must be very hard for you, young man.”

“Oh, it is,” Josiah said mournfully. “I’m very hot and very hungry.”

Mrs. Harbinger made a good-natured sound in the back of her throat and then reached out with her fan and gave Josiah a rap on the top of his head, seeming to mean it as a friendly gesture. Josiah winced and rubbed the spot.

“Is your father with Jesus now?” Mrs. Harbinger asked.

Josiah looked up at his mother in confusion. “I don’t think so,” he replied. “My mother said he’s gone to a different place.”

Mrs. Harbinger’s eyes widened, and she opened her mouth once, then shut it and blinked. “Mrs. Taylor!” she exclaimed.

“Mrs. Harbinger.” Leah gave a sweet smile, choosing to misunder-

stand the dowager's exclamation as a goodbye. "Good day to you."

With that, Leah swept out of the pew and into the aisle, Josiah still firmly in hand. She could hear Mrs. Harbinger's exclamations of shock and dismay, and she half expected the old woman to drop to the ground in a faint. She thought that would have been more likely to happen if there'd been some attractive young man nearby to step forward to catch her. But when Leah glanced back, she saw only some ladies and one older, stooped gentleman within reach of Mrs. Harbinger, so she expected that the fit of shock wouldn't result in a swoon after all. Swooning to the floor with nothing to cushion her fall but a narrow wooden pew was not recommended for a woman of advanced age. There were bones to consider.

The church was emptying quickly, the stuffy heat of the summer afternoon pushing the people outside into the fresh air and bright sunlight. The church tended to empty like a bucket with a hole in the bottom during the hot months, but when the first chilly winds began to blow, the hole was magically mended. This being summer, however, Josiah shot past his mother and clattered down the wooden stairs as she nodded politely to the ladies she passed until she emerged into the momentarily blinding sunlight.

Leah could see her father talking to a rather ferocious-looking old man to one side. It seemed that the gentleman had taken issue with part of Parson Wainwright's sermon. Leah stifled a chuckle and angled as far away from the pair as she could. Her father, his iron-gray hair tufting out the sides of his balding head, glanced up in time to give her a pleading look, but Leah knew better than to lend moral support at a time like that. A woman's opinion in matters of theology wasn't normally sought after no matter how well read that woman might be.

"Good day, madam."

Leah looked away from her father's ordeal to see that she was being addressed by a wealthy gentleman, young and distinguished looking. A glossy hat was perched at a fashionable angle on his head, and he was

fingering a soft leather hymnbook in one hand, his eyes resting on Leah with an almost playful interest. He was the embodiment of Mrs. Harbinger's prophecy, apparently, and Leah took him in with some foreboding. "Good day," she replied.

"I haven't had the pleasure of speaking with you." His lips twitched upward in a smile.

"No, sir." She looked back toward her father. "We haven't properly met. I'm Mrs. Taylor."

"Yes, I know exactly who you are. I am Anthony Wickes."

"Mr. Wickes." Leah inclined her head politely. She knew who Mr. Wickes was, of course. A man with a fortune as large as Anthony Wickes's didn't escape notice easily.

"Perhaps you will call me Anthony." He gave her a wink and a smile so smoothly practiced that she was certain it had proven successful on multiple occasions for him.

"No, Mr. Wickes, I don't think so. I am much more comfortable using your surname."

"Ah." He didn't add to the reply but stood looking at her expectantly.

"I must find my son," she said, scanning the grounds of the church, looking for that familiar little head of golden curls.

"Perhaps I could assist you."

"Please, don't bother yourself." Leah began moving away from Mr. Wickes and scanning the parishioners, who were talking in groups. The ladies' dresses, their Sunday best, were colorful and artfully arranged—a fashion show that Leah hadn't participated in for a long time. Her dress of slate gray was simple and modest, unadorned by lace trim or feathered pins. Her son was nowhere to be seen. She shaded her eyes with one gloved hand and then she spotted him, standing by the low fence that separated the graveyard from the rest of the church grounds.

"It's no bother." Mr. Wickes's smile changed from amused to insistent.

CHAPTER 1

It really is a bother, sir, Leah thought wryly to herself, but some things were best left unsaid.

“Josiah!” Leah called, hurrying in her son’s direction. Mr. Wickes seemed inclined to follow her, but then the thought of losing his dignity in a pursuit across the lawn seemed to change his mind. With a sigh of relief, Leah glanced over her shoulder to see him reluctantly turning his attention to the open-top carriage that had just arrived to fetch him home.

Josiah was leaning against the low fence that enclosed the cemetery, looking thoughtfully at the graves. He looked like a little gentleman thoughtfully observing his horses. As Leah approached, he looked up at her with a somber expression on his face.

“What are you looking at?” Leah asked.

“The graves. Is it true that my father is dead?”

“Let’s not talk about that.”

“But is he?”

“Your father is in a different place,” Leah replied. She brushed his hair away from his eyes with one gloved hand. “He can’t be with us ever again. We’re on our own with your grandfather, my little one. That’s all you need to know.”

“How far away is he?”

“Very far.”

“Does he miss me?” Josiah squinted as he looked up at her.

“Let’s go eat,” Leah said softly.

“Could I write him a letter and tell him about the tree I climb?”

“Let’s go . . .”

“Is he coming home again?”

Leah didn’t answer; instead, she gave Josiah a look of warning. He shrugged and trudged off in the direction of the parsonage, stamping his way through the grass.

Just like his father, Leah thought with a sad smile. And it was true; he was a spitting image of the man who had stolen her heart five years

before. Now, all she had left of her marriage was a little boy with too many questions.

* * * * *

The train station at Lincoln Falls was a simple, two-story affair. The bottom floor was dedicated to ticket sales and benches for waiting passengers, and the top floor contained offices and a few rooms where conductors could sleep between trains. The building looked much like a house with a gabled roof and a covered platform that stretched around the entire building, flanking the tracks. On the platform, a clock stood tall on a pedestal, declaring the official time.

A man stood motionless on the platform, surrounded by people milling about collecting their baggage. He was looking more or less in the direction of the clock, a small suitcase clutched in one hand and his rumpled overcoat draped over the other arm. He looked dusty and crumpled from travel, his hat scuffed and slightly dented, and there were rings under his eyes that looked as if they had been there for some time. But John Thomas Taylor was only mildly aware of his tattered appearance.

He looked at the clock. Two thirty on a Sunday afternoon. He turned around and walked slowly into the station, passing the ticket booth and the wrought-iron benches with glossy wooden slats that were arranged for customer convenience. His stomach rumbled, and he put his hand in his pocket, feeling the coins and the few bills that were there.

“Excuse me, please.” John approached the ticket booth. He pulled a small, tattered piece of paper from his pocket. “I’m looking for this address. Could you help me find it?”

The man behind the counter eyed John silently for a moment before reaching out to take the grubby piece of paper by one corner. He squinted, lifting it up into the light.

“Yes, that is Mrs. Gedge’s boardinghouse,” the man said, handing the paper back. “It’s on Trafalgar Street, just off of Main. Right downtown. You can’t miss it.”

John looked back toward the door, pausing uncertainly.

“How far is it?” John asked.

“You can hire a carriage. Won’t cost too much. It’s about a mile.”

John nodded his thanks and walked back outside. He passed the waiting runabouts with the stamping, impatient horses and shook his head in the negative to a boy who offered to take his bag. It looked like he’d be walking. He couldn’t afford to waste money on a ride when he wasn’t even positive that he’d have enough to pay the landlady for his room once he arrived.

“Need a lift, mister?” a driver called.

“No,” John’s voice sounded hollow in his own ears. He had started to walk on, but then he stopped and turned back.

“Change your mind?”

“I don’t need a lift, I need a job. Do you know of anyone who is hiring?”

“Not here.” The man clammed up, looking defensive.

“Not driving, of course,” John said. “Something else, maybe.”

The man gave a disinterested shrug. “They’re hiring laborers down at the construction site for the new hotel—if you have good references.”

References. Of course, that was what all employers wanted. They wanted proof that you were reputable. They wanted someone to tell them that you weren’t a liar, a cheat, or a thief. They wanted to be as sure as they could that you hadn’t spent time in prison.

John nodded. “Thanks.”

He could feel the stones through the soles of his shoes. But after being cooped up in a third-class carriage and rocking to a nauseating rhythm while sitting near several men who smelled worse than he did, the change provided by the sunlight and clear blue sky did a lot for his mood. Thank God for fresh air. Sometimes John thought that the new

advances in travel weren't worth the speed they provided. A locomotive was an amazing piece of machinery, but the smell of soot and the heaving sway of the cars made John think he'd avoid train rides for the rest of his life if he could help it.

Lincoln Falls hadn't been his first choice of destination, but Chicago, where he had hoped to find work, was farther than he could afford. And the ticket agent had told him, "Lincoln Falls is growing. They're building, and building means jobs. It's about as far as your money will take you, mister."

And work was the point, wasn't it? He needed work. He needed to make some money, and he preferred to do it where no one knew him or his history. He needed to figure out a way to put a life together for himself before he tried for the unthinkable.

John didn't know where he would start searching for her. He didn't know if he would ever find her, and if he did, whether she would even speak to him. But if he was going to have any chance of gaining her respect, he needed to have work and he needed to have money.

A carriage rattled past him, and John stepped quickly off the road, but as he did so, his foot landed squarely in the center of something soft and foul smelling. He swallowed the first words to come to mind and wiped his shoe on the grass. And then John Taylor began to walk again.

"I'm free!" he said to himself. "Thank God for that. It's a chance to start over."

The dull ache in his belly, the rocks that pounded his feet through the soles of his shoes, the pants that were too big, and the dung clinging to his left foot were nothing in comparison to the indignities—no, the atrocities—he had suffered in Auburn Prison. For now, he was deeply grateful that he wasn't walking in lockstep and that he could feel the fresh, warm summer air against his face. He'd take what he could get, and right now a walk toward Lincoln Falls, a walk toward a fresh start and a new life, was about as good as it got.